

# It Doesn't Have to Be Like This

And to much fanfare, we herald the arrival of yet another Ofsted framework. Like most of its many older siblings, it claims to be better than its predecessors—it's the 5G of the inspection world. Proposals have been made, a thorough consultation has been undertaken, the organisation has listened and smoothed off the rough edges, and inspectors have been trained and put through pilot inspections. At the usual warp speed, a new Ofsted framework is good to go from September, but should it?

The fact that Ofsted has revised its frameworks so regularly is evidence alone that maybe it is time that Ofsted was put out of its misery—after all, it is rare that schools are given such repeated opportunities to get it right over such a prolonged period of time, but there are enough major issues within education—most notably teacher recruitment and retention—to suggest that after twenty-five years or so, the very existence of Ofsted needs to be rigorously questioned. Unfortunately, such a question was a notable omission from their recent consultation. Is this not further evidence that Ofsted continues to have a self-adulating attitude, seeing itself as an irrefutable force for good?

Claiming to be independent and impartial, they believe that their work is evidence-led, fair, valid and reliable. They also believe that they are reducing their inspection burdens and that they contribute directly to improvement. At best, all these claims remain highly questionable. Is it independent and impartial if the Chief Inspector for Schools speaks at the Wonder Years Knowledge Curriculum Conference organised by Parents and Teachers for Excellence in January, which was then publicised in its entirety on the Government's website? Doesn't this advocate the favoured ideology—EBacc, knowledge-rich—and cause anxiety in schools that are adopting a more innovative approach, one that is more responsive, meaningful and engaging for its students? Is it evidence-led, fair, valid and reliable when there is such disparity between the grades awarded to grammar schools compared to secondary moderns or schools serving middle class as opposed to socially disadvantaged communities? Are they relieving inspection burdens if, much to the chagrin of the Director of Ofsted, a plethora of consultants are now peddling 'snake oil' courses, preparing leadership teams in schools, the key features of which are then funnelled down to colleagues via over-utilised Inset days and the distribution and implementation of action/improvement plans? How can Ofsted be a force for improvement when they have driven some of the perverse behaviours in schools—narrowing of the curriculum/off-rolling/teaching to the test—that they now actively admonish? Can they not see the irony in it all?

Assuming all of this will be ignored and that Ofsted will stagger along, at the core of the new framework will be renewed focus on curriculum. Quite how a school inspection organisation has been able to get away with focusing on anything else over the years is staggering, but let's applaud the fact that they have finally found the target. Their curriculum focus has some new informing buzzwords. The first form the three 3Is - Intent, Implementation and Impact. Ofsted sees Intent as the aims of any curriculum, including the knowledge and skills that need to be developed at each key stage. Will they really consider the specific aims of each school? Is a common inspection framework set up to inspect one school that has resilience, perseverance and discovery amongst its aims and another that has respect, imagination and excellence? These all mean different things to different people and will be interpreted by inspectors in a diverse manner.

Key to the judging the implementation of curriculum is a new term, 'deep dive', which has been introduced to demonstrate an in-depth look into the curriculum. According to the framework it will involve a detailed look into approximately six subjects—we can all make an educated guess as to which subjects will be more prevalent—and will include numerous lesson observations, book scrutinies, and discussions with leaders, teachers and students. Is this possible within one-and-a-half days and with inspectors often operating outside of their areas of specialism and with other areas of school life to inspect? Is it not more like snorkelling in the shallows with a misted-up mask than a deep dive?

Finally, we move to the all-important impact. Despite frequent assertions that it is about more than just results in terminal examinations, it won't be. Inspectors will continue to draw on solely performance data prior to the inspection and this will drive assumptions—assumptions, that will be very hard to shift.

Yet another massive opportunity has been missed. History tells us that this framework will have all the issues that were evident in the previous ones, and probably a few more. More harm than good will be done as a result. We can expect the newer, shinier educational 6G before too long as a result. It doesn't have to be like this.

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