

Critical corner

We need to ask searching questions about the role and appropriateness of Ofsted 'inspecting' our early years settings, says **Richard House...**

I'm by no means alone in having major concerns about the role of Ofsted in inspecting our early years provision. Whilst it is of specific relevance to maintained nursery schools and nursery classes in primary schools only, the publication of the new *Ofsted Subsidiary guidance supporting the inspection of maintained schools and academies from September 2012* (see tinyurl.com/tnofstedguidance) seems to be a good moment to discuss these issues. My own concern goes back many years, to the time when it was first decided that Ofsted – the Office for *Standards in Education*, note – was to thenceforth be responsible for inspecting nurseries, playgroups, childminders, etc. The very idea that an organisation responsible for 'standards in education' should be making assessments about the quality of pre-school provision (including childminding) seemed, and seems, to me to be totally inappropriate. I see this as just one more example of the 'too much, too soon' ideology, which an increasing number of practitioners are now challenging, thankfully, swamping early childhood experience; and the long-term negative impact of this on our young children is inestimable.

The notion of 'educating' implies a proactive teacher imparting the knowledge to the child that that teacher (often as an agent of the state, via its centralised National Curriculum) deems that the child should

know. Yet it seems that policy-makers are the very last to get the crucial message that very young children learn most effectively through free imaginative play and freely imitating good adult role models – and not through adults 'educating' them. Nor is this a matter of mere semantics; the language we use has a deep (often unconscious) impact on our attitudes and practices, and it's certainly no coincidence that the 'too much, too soon' mentality has grown apace over the past decade, culminating in a 'schoolifying' agenda now dominating the coalition government's revised EYFS discourse – and this for *four*-year-olds, when in most of continental Europe, formal schooling doesn't start until children are at least five, and often six.

About a decade ago, I heard a number of anecdotal (but, I'm sure, accurate) reports that Steiner Kindergartens were being downgraded and criticised in Ofsted reports for their lack of literacy and numeracy learning, even though the Steiner pedagogy explicitly states that such learning should not begin until the child is six, because (Steinerians believe) such early learning is developmentally inappropriate and therefore damaging. But despite the best of intentions at the time – mea culpa! – I didn't get around to doing the necessary formal research into this crucial issue.

Yet the time is surely coming when it will be essential that we conduct such research into the Ofsted regime. To be blunt, I think it's vital that wronged practitioners and settings are

prepared to have rows with ignorant inspectors if necessary, and even be prepared to make a media 'stink' if they think their setting has been 'done over' in an unfair, ill-informed way. Of course, this requires self-confidence and assertiveness amongst setting leaders – the very qualities of independent thought that a revised EYFS (containing well over 200 'you musts...') is designed to squash. Yet I've heard stories of setting managers/leaders having stand-up rows with the Ofsted inspector, and/or with the inspectorate, over their inspections – and, crucially, coming out winning the argument!

So, my final *cri de coeur* is that economics, fashionable ideology and institutional convenience must never triumph over principled pedagogy – early childhood experience is far, far too important for that. It's essential that early years practitioners can challenge an inspection regime that really needs to be reined back and put in its rightful place when it gets things wrong. And more radically still – is there any stomach out there for a new movement to campaign for a new organisation that will offer settings constructive support and enabling feedback, rather than didactic and infantilising 'inspection reports' that dispense 'grades'? Can we create an accountability system that is effective, and which empowers rather than cows and infantilises practitioners? I know these are big questions, but I think it's essential for the future quality of our work that we start to address them.



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about the author

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