

Blog post

Ofsted: Moving towards research in education

Timothy Lynch, School Leader, British Schools Overseas (BSO) • Wendy Goff, Associate Professor at Swinburne University of Technology • 18 Jun 2024

In this blog post we reflect on the circumstances leading to the tragic death of Headteacher Ruth Perry and consider what the implications for Ofsted are going forward.

Following on from Lynch's research (2019), we propose that Ofsted continues on its journey towards evidence-informed practice which began in 2017 – introduced under the then new Ofsted chief inspector, Amanda Spielman. Furthermore, we propose that all Ofsted inspectors are required to be qualified in Educational Research; that is, master's or doctoral degree.

The Ofsted inspection contributed to the death of Headteacher Ruth Perry. The [coroner's report](#) warns that there could be more deaths of this nature unless there is change: 'In my opinion there is a risk that future deaths could occur unless action is taken' (Courts and Tribunal Judiciary, 2023, p. 2). It is proposed that change is required, to prevent the suffering of teachers and school leaders. This involves, as the title of this blog post suggests, a shift in terms of greater Ofsted awareness of the research landscape as well as practical school teaching experience. As it stands, all inspectors are only required to have [Qualified Teaching Status \(QTS\)](#).

'Change is required to prevent the suffering of teachers and school leaders [which will] involve a shift in terms of greater Ofsted awareness of the research landscape as well as practical school teaching experience.'

Seven matters of concern were identified specifically for Ofsted and the Department for Education (DfE) in the coroner's report. The second of these concerns states: 'There is almost complete absence of Ofsted training or published policy' (2023, p. 2) for inspectors looking for signs of distress in school leaders or how to deal with such concerns, pausing an inspection or having meetings

during the inspection process. The third concern states: 'Parts of the Ofsted inspection were conducted in a manner which lacked fairness, respect and sensitivity' (2023, p. 2). This third concern begs the question: How was the Ofsted inspection regulated? If Ofsted were

governed by ethical approval in the same way as educational researchers are, then its processes would be better shaped to manage inspections fairly and respectfully.

[Research ethics committees \(RECs\)](#) enable a healthy research culture. They review research proposals, ensure high ethical standards and protect research participants, while also promoting research integrity. Ofsted does not have a REC and while it does have a [policy paper](#), it clearly states that 'it does not apply to anyone collecting data who has a direct legal requirement to do so, for example as part of inspection and regulation of services in Ofsted's remit'. In the absence of a REC, subsequently there is a missing layer of essential support and quality assurance in Ofsted's inspections of schools. This missing layer is directly aligned to the coroner's concerns. Hence, more significance is afforded to inspectors needing deep research knowledge.

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The inquest findings – that the Ofsted inspection contributed to the death of Ruth Perry and that there is a risk of future deaths – are to some degree supported by research and literature. Frank Coffield concluded in a [BERA Blog post](#) that Ofsted has done 'more harm than good. Its methods, although changed every

few years during the 25 years of Ofsted's existence, were invalid, unreliable and unjust' (Coffield, 2017). Digging beneath the surface of Ruth Perry's coroner's report suggests that the education community will not improve until Ofsted changes its approach to education. This requires deep change, far more than surface-level quick fix [mental health training](#).

The need for a change in approach was argued by [Professor Julia Waters](#), Ruth Perry's sister:

'What we have been pushing for, is there needs to be really radical change, systemic change, cultural change at Ofsted – and this training is just the start.'

Fully implemented innovation or reform 'require an understanding of the process, a way of thinking that cannot be captured in any list of steps to be followed' (Fullan, 2001, p. 71). Accordingly, Ofsted requires greater knowledge of educational research, ideally with inspectors who also have teaching experience. Concerns about school inspector training, experience and qualifications were raised in a previous [BERA Blog post](#) and have been at the core of Ofsted's issues for an extended period of time (Lynch, 2023).

Ofsted's tradition of issues identified by Coffield (2017), are supplemented more recently with the death of Ruth Perry and the subsequent findings of the coroner's report. Perhaps this tragedy may have been avoided if there was a REC and all inspectors could evidence

research knowledge and experience. As recommended by the coroner, it is vital that action is taken. For the essential reform to be achieved by Ofsted, then radical, systemic and cultural change is necessary. Hence, Ofsted must continue its journey towards evidence-informed practice, which began in 2017. Specifically, the next steps for Ofsted include developing a REC and a requirement that inspectors are qualified in Educational Research, namely a master's or doctoral degree.

Themes: Policy • Primary education • Secondary education **Communities:** Educational Leadership • Educational Research and Educational Policy-making

About the authors



Timothy Lynch, Dr

School Leader, British Schools Overseas (BSO)

Dr Timothy Lynch is a school leader in a British School Overseas (BSO), UNESCO Inclusive Policy Lab (IPL) expert for education, the International Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Dance and Sport (IAHPEDS) Governor of Oceania and senior fellow of the Higher Education Academy (UK Professional Standards Framework). An active teacher, school leader and researcher, he has published widely in the field of education, including his two research books: *Physical Education and Wellbeing* (Springer) and *The Future of Health, Wellbeing and Physical Education* (Springer). Tim has 21 years' teaching experience as a classroom teacher and school leader and eight years' experience working full-time as a teacher/researcher in higher education. He has taught and researched in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe and Australia.



Wendy Goff

Associate Professor at Swinburne University of Technology

Wendy Goff is an associate professor at Swinburne University of Technology. Her research examines the dynamics of adult relationships and partnerships, and their influence and impact on children's learning, health, wellbeing and overall development. She uses different vehicles to study adults and their interactions, and she has disseminated her findings through presentations and publications on both national and international platforms.

British Educational Research Association • Elizabeth Meehan Suite, Regent House • 1-6 Pratt Mews • London NW1 0AD

0204 570 4265 • enquiries@bera.ac.uk

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