

Ofsted
National Complaints Team
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By post and email: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk

11 December 2014

Dear Sir/Madam,

**Grindon Hall Christian School
Inspection on 26 and 27 November 2014**

I write to lodge a formal complaint in relation to the inspection by Ofsted of Grindon Hall on 26 and 27 November 2014. This inspection was initially conducted under section 8 of the Education Act 2005 but later converted into a section 5 inspection.

Background

Grindon Hall is designated as a school with a Christian character. Previously a private school, Grindon Hall reopened as a free school in September 2012.

The school had its first Ofsted inspection as a free school in March 2014. The report judged us to be 'Good' in Achievement, Quality of Teaching and Behaviour and Safety but 'Requires Improvement' in the area of Leadership and Management.

The HMI Monitoring Visit took place on 19 September and in his resulting letter HMI Owston wrote "Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection". For this reason, I am alarmed that Mr Owston was assigned to lead the unannounced inspection on 26 November. Although I have no problem with Mr Owston personally, I consider his appointment as lead inspector to raise some issues around conflict of interest with yourselves; it certainly does with me. Please could you give me your comments on this.

At the start of the inspection on 26 November, Mr Owston told me that the inspection had been personally authorized by the Secretary of State because of Grindon Hall's links with another school. However, I was never told which school, what the link was or the relevance of any link. Indeed, the tenor of the inspection was negative and hostile at every stage, as if the data collected had to fit a pre-determined outcome.

Although we are unaware of the complaint which triggered the inspection, the primary focus of the inspection was the school's commitment to 'British values'.

Inappropriate questioning of pupils

The focus of my complaint relates to the questioning of pupils by the inspection team. Clearly, the inspectors were within their rights to talk to pupils. However, in the days after the inspection, several parents complained to me about what they saw as intrusive and deeply personal questioning of their children in the group sessions.

As a result of receiving complaints, I made enquiries as to what questions had been asked of pupils. The reports I received back shocked me and I feel I owe it to the parents concerned to raise my concerns with you by way of a formal complaint.

Year 2/3/4

It has been reported back to me that children aged 6- 9 were asked whether they *knew* anything about Diwali and whether they were familiar with the Torah.

Year 5/6

Children aged 10 and 11 were asked:

- Is there anyone in your school that's a tom boy? Do they get called names?
- Is there anyone in the school who has two mums or dads?
- Do you celebrate other religious festivals e.g. Passover/Eid?

The inspectors seemed unaware that girls could interpret a question about "tom boys" as a comment on their own appearance. One parent was very angry about this.

In the feedback with the HMI, it was suggested that a response from one child to the effect of querying how it is possible to have two mums was viewed as indicating a lack of awareness of lesbian relationships. Actually, I understand the child concerned was merely thinking in biological terms.

In addition, I have also heard reports of primary school children being asked if they knew of any boys or girls who thought they were in the 'wrong body'. Another parent has complained to me in writing that her ten year old daughter was asked if she knew what lesbians "did". Pupils were embarrassed and surprised to be asked questions about sexuality.

The offer of a one to one meeting with an inspector (who was a complete stranger to them) in order to discuss personal matters of sexuality was also viewed with alarm by some parents.

Year 7

Children aged 11 and 12 were asked:

- Are you taught other religions?

- What is evolution? Do you believe in this or God?
- Thumbs up, middle or down for how much you know about Koran and Bible.

Two students said they felt the inspectors were attacking Christianity. Indeed, many of the questions seem to betray an underlying disrespect for the Christian faith.

Parents expressed their upset and shock at the nature of the questions. One mother describes her daughter as having been “disturbed”, “upset” and “stressed out”. It is clear that many of the questions asked are viewed by parents as wholly inappropriate, particularly given the age of the children involved.

Pupils have recounted many positive comments that they had made, but hardly any were fed back to me by the inspectors. Instead, anything even slightly negative was fed back to us in some detail.

Three sixth form students have prepared written reports of the inspection as follows:

“Regarding the OFSTED inspector who questioned us, I felt she was directing the conversation towards racism, homophobia and extremist views. When we answered that these were obviously not tolerated in our school, she rephrased the questions and went on to ask whether we felt at a disadvantage because of only being taught about Christianity. The direct tone of her questioning made it feel slightly interrogative, and as though she was manipulating the conversation to make us say something to discredit the manner of teaching in school.”

“The inspector seemed very negative and did not seem happy with many responses we gave. Most of the questions that were asked were related to bullying/homophobia/racism/extremism and she was very interested in CU and Crunch Club. She seemed to have the view that since we are a Christian school we don’t respect other religions and views.”

“During the interview, the inspector always seemed to be leading us towards answers that portrayed the school as discriminatory, asking questions repeatedly but in different words, for example, are we taught to respect other religions? Are we allowed to follow other religions? Is respect given to all religions? It felt like she wanted a certain answer from us and wouldn’t be satisfied until she got that answer. I know this sounds petty as I tell it, but it was the way she said it rather than what she actually said, it always felt like she was pushing for a racist answer...She also was very interested in the Christian union and crunch club and wanted to know in a fair amount of detail, it’s organisation, structure and content. Furthermore, she continually interrupted me, at least four times, she simply cut me off halfway through my answer.”

Complaint

The various complaints raised by parents and one pupil give rise to concerns about safeguarding. I am also concerned that the manner and content of questioning of pupils crossed the line into harassment.

I am further concerned that the questioning of pupils by Ofsted crossed a line into areas which fall outside its authority. Under the ‘British values’ requirements, our

school is under a duty to promote respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. However, I am alarmed that the questions asked of pupils sought to test the pupils' religious *knowledge*. As a school with a designated Christian character, Grindon Hall is subject to a separate prescribed inspection of religious education. Ofsted should not be trespassing into an area which has long been subject, under the law, to a parallel inspection.

I am also concerned by the suggestion in the questions that Grindon Hall should be promoting other faiths. This was implicit in the reference to *celebrate* different religious festivals. As a school with a Christian foundation, it is not a matter for Ofsted whether the school celebrates other faiths.

On 27 November, after the inspection team had left Grindon Hall, the Department for Education published guidance to schools entitled *Improving the spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development of pupils: supplementary information, Departmental advice for independent schools, academies and free schools*. The guidance states that

- “It is not necessary for schools or individuals to ‘promote’ teachings, beliefs or opinions that conflict with their own.”
- The changes to British values do not “undermine religious freedoms. The standard does not mean, for example, that schools must promote alternative lifestyles or same sex marriage. Rather, it requires respect for other people”.

Although I have not seen any guidance issued by the DfE to Ofsted, I would expect it to be consistent with the guidance issued to schools. I am therefore very concerned that in its commitment to enforcing the recent changes to British values, Ofsted is in fact acting beyond its authority.

I should be grateful if you would kindly give proper consideration to my complaint.

Yours faithfully,

Chris Gray
Principal