

13 September 2011

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Miriam Rosen
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Dear Simon

Annual report on the quality of inspections and reports by the School Inspection Service 2010/2011

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your inspectors for their courtesy, cooperation and professionalism during the year. This has enabled Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) to complete their monitoring of inspections and reports by the School Inspection Service (SIS) efficiently. I should also be grateful if you would extend my thanks to those schools which we have visited. I have pleasure in sending you the following summary of Ofsted's findings from our monitoring work this year. A copy of this letter will also be sent to the Department for Education and will be published on Ofsted's website.

Introduction

The SIS is recognised by the Secretary of State as an approved body for the purpose of inspecting, under section 162A (1)(b) of the Education Act 2002, as amended, registered independent schools which are affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust or members of the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship of Schools. There are 62 schools in the inspectorate's remit, of which 38 are affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust and 24 are members of the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship of Schools.

The Focus Learning Trust is a national organisation which brings together schools that are owned and maintained by local assemblies of a religious group known as the Brethren or Exclusive Brethren. The schools are small day schools that currently cater for pupils of both primary and secondary age.

Schools in the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship provide education for pupils of primary and/or secondary age. Many also accept younger children in the Early Years Foundation Stage. The school curriculum reflects the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner which relates education closely to a child's stage of development, for example the age at which a child is felt to be ready to learn to read and write. Accordingly, in Steiner Waldorf schools, an individual approach is taken to the delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage to reflect any exemptions that have been granted to schools regarding the learning and development requirements. The SIS takes account of such exemptions when inspecting the schools.

The SIS maintains its independence from the Focus Learning Trust, the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship and their member schools.

The framework for the inspection of schools affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust and the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship of Schools requires systematic inspection and reporting of the registration standards as set out in the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2010. Ofsted monitors the work of the SIS at the request of the Department for Education. This is Ofsted's fifth annual report on the work of the SIS.

In the academic year 2010–2011, the SIS inspected 18 schools. Monitoring activities focused on a small sample of school inspections and reports, which included both Steiner and Focus schools. HMI monitored three inspections and reviewed four reports. This represents around one in six of the inspections that were conducted by the SIS in the academic year 2010–2011 and around one in four of the reports published. This is a broadly similar proportion to last year.

A formal meeting took place each term between Ofsted and the SIS. In the spring term this meeting included preliminary discussion on the inspectorate's policies for quality assurance and for the recruitment and training of inspectors.

Arrangements for inspection

The SIS gives schools four days' notice of inspection. Schools are invited to provide an evaluation of their own performance, for which a detailed form is available. Parents' and pupils' views of the school are canvassed via questionnaires. The inspections are supported well by appropriate inspection instruments and a handbook of guidance for inspectors, for whom regular training is provided.

The inspectorate is staffed by a chief inspector and a team of inspectors, nearly all of whom are former HMI.

A specific strength of the inspectorate is that all inspections are staffed by teams of professional inspectors who are deployed according to their particular areas of expertise, such as special educational needs, post-16 education, the primary phase, the Early Years Foundation Stage and school management. School inspection teams are led by reporting inspectors who have significant relevant experience, including a good understanding of Steiner Waldorf philosophy and substantial experience of inspecting these and Focus schools.

Inspection teams are complemented by a lay inspector, either from the Brethren community or the Steiner Waldorf community, as appropriate. The lay inspector is nominated by the appropriate community for the purposes of inspecting areas such as the financial management of the school and its distinctive ethos. The lay inspector is trained and approved by the inspectorate. To ensure the integrity and objectivity of an inspection, all lay inspectors are required to formally declare any connection they may have or have had with any particular schools. The inclusion of a lay inspector from the community is a strong feature of the inspectorate's framework as these colleagues often provide helpful background for the inspection team, and bring additional insight to the inspection of leadership and management and the effective promotion of a school's distinctive ethos. This information is helpful for parents, and makes a positive contribution to inspectors' professional development.

The inspectorate states that it conducts the required recruitment checks on its inspectors. The inspectorate has recently introduced a written policy regarding the deployment of professional inspectors, which requires them to sign a declaration of non-connectivity with the school they are inspecting. This is an important development in formalising the inspectorate's already established procedures for ensuring impartiality.

The quality of inspections

HMI judged all three of the inspections that were monitored to be of good quality. Inspections were led by highly experienced inspectors who had a strong understanding of philosophy and practice within both the Steiner Waldorf and the Brethren schools. This ensured that inspection judgements were secure, well-founded and credible. The inclusion of a lay inspector in inspection teams added considerable value to the inspections by bringing up-to-date background knowledge of current practice in their type of school. Lay inspectors played a full part in the inspection teams.

Headteachers commented that inspectors were firm but fair and that their findings were useful in helping their school to improve. They praised the professionalism of inspectors and felt reassured that the inspectors understood their school's distinctive approach to education.

They told us they appreciated the excellent communication from the inspectorate prior to the inspection, which enabled them to understand the process and so helped to allay their fears about the inspection process.

Inspections were thoroughly prepared and very well organised. Reporting inspectors made good use of the self-evaluation information provided by the school and engaged fully with staff and pupils to seek their views. They used this information effectively when identifying suitable areas to explore during the inspection and when reporting on them subsequently. Supporting inspectors were clear about their roles and responsibilities.

Inspectors' judgements were accurate and backed up by a good range of evidence. The inspectorate's grade descriptors for judging the quality of lessons helped to ensure that inspectors were consistent in their judgements. Inspectors checked the regulations for independent schools thoroughly, showing good understanding of the requirements of the framework for inspection. Due regard was given to checking a school's procedures for safeguarding pupils' welfare, health and safety.

Where relevant to a school, the inspection of the Early Years Foundation Stage was woven prudently into the inspection of the school as a whole. In schools in the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship, inspectors considered carefully how best to judge the pupils' achievement within the school's context.

The quality of reports

HMI monitored four of the inspection reports that were published during 2010–2011. All met the required standard and were judged to be good. All the reports monitored were clear about regulatory matters. The inspection reports were helpful to schools as they aim to bring about improvement.

Reports were well written and any regulatory failures were set out unambiguously. Reporting on the Early Years Foundation Stage has improved: inspectors' findings for this age group were clearly and concisely written, paying due regard to any exemptions the school had obtained from parts of the requirements. However, it would be helpful for parents to be given an overall judgement on the effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage in a school operating in a Steiner Waldorf Fellowship setting. This would allow them to compare provision for children across different schools.

The reports captured the distinctive nature of each school well. They were often enlivened by good examples that illustrated a school's strengths and showed the positive benefits of the school's provision for its pupils.

Inspectors' judgements were consistent throughout reports and were clearly stated and explained well for parents and other readers. The inspectorate has improved the summary sections of reports which are generally better balanced than before, and give a more accurate first impression of inspectors' findings. However, there is room for further development, particularly in emphasising in the summary the extent of the weaknesses which inspectors found. In one otherwise good report the full extent of the implications of regulatory failings only became clear to the reader once the full report had been read.

Issues for the inspectorate's consideration and action

The work of the SIS, as before, is of good quality. The inspectorate continues to build on its strengths and has addressed the previous issues raised by our monitoring. The inspectorate may wish to enhance the quality of its work still further by refining guidance and discussing with inspectors how best to ensure that important regulatory failures are given due weight in the main findings of a report.

I hope that these observations are useful to you and your inspectors. I know that you constantly strive to bring about continuous improvement both in your inspection service and in the schools that you inspect.

*Yours sincerely ,
Miriam Rosen*

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