

## Do Ofsted Inspections Negatively Impact School Leaders' Authenticity?

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### Abstract

This paper poses the question: does the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) negatively impact school leaders' authenticity? It draws on a range of literature to critically analyse the authentic leadership approach through the lens of increased scrutiny from Ofsted. The perspectives of both OFSTED and teaching unions were explored to understand the extent to which Ofsted had an influence on the decisions of policy makers in UK primary schools. It found OFSTED did impact those in leadership and was perceived as a constant hum of pressure, with schools altering their values to suit theirs. This led to further exploration of how leaders were able to drive this change, finding a pivotal link between authentic leadership and emotional intelligence. Some leaders however used these skills, and Ofsted as a shared enemy, to impact staff in a negative manner, challenging the idea of authentic leaders always being ethical leaders.

**Keywords:** Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), authentic leadership, teaching unions, emotional intelligence, ethical leadership

### Introduction

As ancient Greek philosophers suggested, being authentic is 'to thine own self be true'. This idea has been developed further through the twentieth century with positive adjectives such as: genuine, real and trustworthy, being associated with the idea of authenticity (Luthans and Avolio, 2003). In agreement with ancient Greek philosophers' ideas on authenticity, Harter (2002) purports authenticity is owning both one's personal experiences, which includes the 'real' them and acting according to their true self, meaning they express what they really think and believe.

Being authentic applies as much in leadership as it does in life. In drastically changing work environments, where many societal organisational challenges are faced, authentic leaders have the strength of character to positively address these challenges (Gardner *et al.*, 2011). As Luthans and Avolio (2003) state:

*"The authentic leader is confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, transparent, ethical, future orientated...the authentic leader is true to him/herself."* (p.243)

Furthermore, an authentic leader has the capacity for self-awareness and a willingness to regulate their behaviours based on their values. Authentic leadership as a model may appeal to those leaders in education who see their role as a vocation, as vocations are value-driven (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008; Klenke, 2007). Shamir and Eilem (2005) confer, defining an authentic leader as one who is value-driven.

Within this paper, the authentic leadership approach will be analysed through the lens of increased scrutiny from England's education inspectorate, Ofsted. Perryman *et al.* (2018) purport the influence of Ofsted's inspection agenda is evident in schools with leaders often conforming to their expectations, in terms of policy decisions. The National Education Union (2022) agree, stating that teachers and leaders work under a shadow cast by Ofsted, suggesting that "it is not fit for purpose" and

should be abolished. In contrast, Ofsted argue they are a force for improvement, with lead inspector Amanda Spielman (2019) recognising that Ofsted is only one part of the system of accountability and not the whole. Spielman (2019) purports that the inspectorate should play a positive part in this system with school leaders feeling energised as a result of an inspection.

### **Authentic Leaders - Emotional Intelligence**

School leaders handle contrasting opinions on how best to serve their school, from various stakeholders, somehow aligning their own values to expectations placed upon them. In order to be authentic, within this challenging context, it is beneficial for leaders to have a deep understanding of their self-concept, which includes clearly defining their views, being motivated by them and behaving in a way that reflects them. This demonstrates the importance of authentic school leaders having a deep understanding of themselves and their emotions (Shamir and Eilam, 2005). Therefore, if school leaders are to be authentic, they must develop their emotional intelligence, as this gives individuals a greater capacity to reason about emotion, alongside reflectively regulating these emotions. This is important for leaders because these skills can influence their subordinate's emotion, emotional regulation and motivation (Mayer *et al.*, 2004). Some argue that the research in this area is limited (Bono *et al.*, 2007), yet it is important to recognise that leaders may need these capabilities, as schools become more political, with increasing expectations from stakeholders. This is partly due to the marketisation of the education system and the competitive demands put on school leaders, such as higher academic results and performance standards, all of which cannot be achieved without motivated staff. Therefore, in today's school context, leaders need a social astuteness (Taliadorou and Pashiardis, 2014), Luthans *et al.* (1988) agree that aspiring leaders need more than just their intelligence and hard work to be successful, additionally needing other important factors such as: an ability to position themselves socially, savviness and social astuteness. This suggests that effective leadership is heavily dependent on interpersonal skills (Cascia, 1995), particularly among those who are authentic leaders. Emotional intelligence will be beneficial, as a key component of interpersonal skills, positively affecting the quality of interactions between leaders and subordinates. Furthermore, Taliadorou and Pashiardis (2014) argue emotional intelligence is a required leadership trait for school leaders in this new more competitive context (Taliadorou and Pashiardis, 2014).

### **Ofsted's Impact on Authentic Leadership**

In relation to Ofsted and implementing their framework into their school context, leaders' authenticity can be questioned, as they potentially implement policies to staff, stakeholders and governors that are not aligned to their own values and convictions. Anecdotally, teachers recall a time when the senior management team decided upon a policy change to appease Ofsted's framework and clearly have some reservations about the change. It could be suggested that this is because many leaders feel Ofsted looming over them, particularly because of their short notice inspections (Perryman *et al.*, 2018). Page (2017) purports their presence has developed from the 'big stick' to a 'constant hum' in the background of a school context. Teaching unions agree, arguing Ofsted inspections are punitive as opposed to supportive (National Education Union, 2022). In contrast, Ofsted (2021) states that they are a force for improvement, referencing teacher workload and staff burden in their latest framework, using the word unnecessary to further support their intention:

- *They respond and adapt teaching without unnecessarily elaborate or differentiated approaches*

- *Use assessment well – they understand the limitations and do not use it in a way that creates **unnecessary** burden for staff or learners*
- *Teachers create an environment that allows the learner to focus on learning. The resources and materials that teachers select in a way that does not create **unnecessary** workload for staff (bolded for emphasis)*

Spielman (2019) reinforces this approach, emphasising that Ofsted are to play a positive and productive part in the education system, stating:

*“School leaders should have productive professional development conversations with inspectors that leave them feeling energised about how to improve their school.”*

Spielman's comments suggest that unions and leaders' feelings towards Ofsted are unwarranted and pressures may be coming from other factors within a school context. Despite Ofsted advocating for a more positive outlook on inspection and understanding their part in this, a school's Ofsted result can impact greatly on school leaders' success. In a marketized education system, consisting of league tables and Ofsted reports, Perryman *et al.* (2018) purport that Ofsted's power is growing, particularly through the increased use of short notice inspections. Poorly prepared schools could receive a poor Ofsted grading, which in turn could lead to admission numbers falling as a high percentage of parents use Ofsted reports to inform their choice of school (National Audit Office (NAO) (2018)). Therefore, headteachers have to be 'Ofsted-ready' at all times, leading to a perpetual state of inspection anxiety as they strive for good or outstanding practise. They are aware their position may no longer be tenable, if this is not achieved (Ball *et al.*, 2011). This fear could be a justifiable reason why school leaders move away from their 'authentic' self and align with the inspectorate's values. The National Education Union (NEU) (2022) argue that Ofsted are unfair, giving poor Ofsted judgements to those schools who are making excellent value-added progress, based upon the location of their school. Those in areas of high deprivation suffer from this bias, further contradicting Spielman's notion on the purpose of Ofsted and putting the reliability of their inspections into question. Further research conducted by the National Audit Office (2018), concluded that:

*“Ofsted does not know whether its school inspections are having the intended impact: To raise the standards of education and improve the quality of children's and young people's lives.”*

Boustead (2021) states that Ofsted inspections are crude snapshots and do little to consider the local context. Furthermore, suggesting Ofsted themselves recognise the unreliability of their inspections, as inspectors are not experienced in all areas of the curriculum/age phases. Spielman (2019) acknowledges this, explaining that Ofsted are part of the system but not the whole purporting local authorities, in which primary schools are attached to, shift the focus to a school's performative measures. Furthermore, Ofsted see the problematic nature of grading a school purely on these measures, as conclusions cannot always be made/nor should be made due to assessment data in isolation. As a result of their latest framework, a school that achieves good assessment results could receive a poor Ofsted grade and vice versa. This means those schools with poor results, who may be in areas of high deprivation, can achieve a good Ofsted rating because as Spielman states, “the substance of what they are doing and the integrity with which they are doing it are there.” This directly addresses teaching unions concerns, suggesting school leaders are allowed and even encouraged to be authentic within their individual school contexts.

In spite of this, the NEU (2022) believe Ofsted grades do have an impact on admissions and quality first teaching, stating that teachers believe working in highly deprived areas will have an impact on their careers, resulting in:

*“Poor children, who most need qualified and experienced teachers if they are to fulfil their potential, are least likely to get them (teachers).”*

It is inevitable that this can impact on leaders' authenticity, as the pressure increases to adhere to Ofsted's values in order to achieve a good grading, as a participant in Perryman *et al.* (2018) research reported:

*"What tends to happen is if it's not valued by Ofsted or by, you know, I don't know, say if it's important to the headmaster, then it'll just sort of disappear altogether. If it is valued by Ofsted, or somebody else, we'll then have one of these sort of insane periods where suddenly, you know, you'll be put under enormous pressure to make sure you're doing lesson observations."* (p.18)

Gustaffson *et al.* (2015) confers, stating schools must adapt their ways of working to come in line with the inspectorate, presenting a challenge to school leaders in lower-performing schools, who may prioritise being inclusive. Keddie (2013) purports that higher-performing schools will not face these same challenges as they can adopt the inspectorate's policies without changing their core performance-based values. Thus, effecting the authenticity of school leaders from lower-performing schools. Evans further (2001) supports this idea stating:

*"At the same time as heads are being trained for leadership and vision and a mission for the school, they are simultaneously in receipt of education policies that are extremely instrumental and interrupt their own agency as head!"* (p.151)

It is suggested that some leaders are using their own agency and enforcing policy change, using their emotional intelligence in a negative manner. As Taliadorou and Pashiardis (2014) state, when defining how a leader demonstrates emotional intelligence:

*"(they) Combine social effectiveness skills with a capacity to adjust their behaviour to different and changing situational demands in a manner that appears to be sincere, inspires support and trust, and effectively influences and controls the response of others."* (p.1)

Therefore, leaders may be using Ofsted to pursue policies, using their emotional intelligence to appear sincere. They position the change as something that has come from an external and common enemy, namely Ofsted (Perryman *et al.*, 2018). Ball (1997) agrees, suggesting senior leaders within schools position themselves as ciphers for outside pressure, blaming all the workload and meticulous inspection onto Ofsted. This is effective because they use empathy, a key aspect of emotional intelligence, to influence and control the response of their subordinates (Kellet *et al.*, 2006). Despite the theory of emotional intelligence being untested and largely anecdotal, theorists argue these skills do allow leaders to influence subordinates' emotion, emotional regulation and motivation (Taliadorou and Pashiardis, 2014). Sy *et al.* (2006) further supports this, purporting that evidence has concluded that leaders can raise or lower subordinates' moods.

An authentic leader, above all else needs to be transparent with their intentions, linking their espoused values, actions and behaviours (Luthans and Avolio, 2003). This would suggest that those leaders who are overly directed by Ofsted and align their values to the Ofsted framework are not authentic leaders, unless all their values align perfectly. However, authentic leaders are those who are transparent and many school leaders do express their hesitations about policy changes that are driven by Ofsted and the shared fear. In addition, as Luthans and Avolio (2003) state, the authentic leader is confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, transparent, moral/ethical, future orientated and gives priority to developing associates to be leader. Furthermore, A leader can be all of these things, despite being heavily directed by Ofsted. This provides the limitation of authentic leadership as there is a difference between the idea of an authentic person and an authentic leader, often with the model putting emphasis on

the person (Crawford *et al.*, 2020). In this case, school leaders are authentic leaders, if they continue to be transparent about why they are driving policy change. This would appear contradictory to 'being authentic', as those individuals are driven by their values and convictions and express exactly what they think and believe (Harter, 2002). In the current educational climate, in which Ofsted plays a part in a more competitive market, it is difficult for a school leader to be an authentic 'person', as their values are compromised, with much of their success being reflected by their Ofsted rating. Nonetheless, Walumbwa *et al.*, (2008:94) argues that school leaders can still be authentic leaders, defined as "*a pattern leadership behaviour that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate.*" This demonstrates the need for more research to distinguish the differences between the authentic leader/person and the impact both have on influencing subordinates' behaviours, emotions and motivation (Crawford *et al.*, 2020).

### **Authentic Leadership - Ethical Leadership**

It is recognised that an authentic leader is ethical (Luthans and Avolio, 2003) and being ethical, in terms of being honest, having integrity and being trustworthy correlate with subordinated perceived leader effectiveness (Brown and Treviño, 2006). Although, there is a difference between a moral person and moral manager. Brown and Treviño (2006) state that moral people, within the ethical leadership model, represent observers' perceptions of the leader's personal traits, character and altruistic motivation. Alternatively, moral managers are proactive in their efforts to influence followers ethical and unethical behaviour by: communicating an ethics and values message, intentionally role modelling ethical behaviour and by using a reward system in which they hold followers accountable for their behaviour and reward/discipline appropriately. Leaders are not demonstrating ethical leadership if they are concerned about Ofsted for the grading and the effect it will have on their leadership position/future career prospects. This type of leader may have some authentic leadership traits such as: confidence, optimism, resilience, future orientated (Luthans and Avolio, 2003), they may even be a moral person, however, the key component of ethical leadership is care and concern for others (Brown and Treviño, 2006). Working towards a good Ofsted grading leads to many leaders disregarding the well-being of the wider school community, either driving through initiatives that are detrimental to children's learning experience, for example greater emphasis on exams and teaching to the test as opposed to foundation subjects, or, driving through initiatives that are detrimental to teacher's job satisfaction and mental health (Stones and Glazzard, 2020). Further evidence supports this, with teacher retention rates are at an all-time low, particularly with early career teachers (40%), who are leaving the profession within 10 years (NEU, 2022). Stones and Glazzard (2020) confer, stating that leaders and teachers alike in England suffer from "*workload-related stress and burnout*", with many suffering from depression as a direct result.

As Bass (1985) suggests, even transformational leaders who care about subordinates' development and authentic, can be unethical based on their motivations. Again, these leaders use their emotional intelligence, in a negative way, to adapt to the situational demands placed upon them and present themselves in a way which appears to be sincere and inspires support and trust (Taliadorou and Pashiardis, 2014). These leaders are affected by the competitive nature of the education system, in which various stakeholders are increasing their expectations for headteachers to achieve higher results (Taliadorou and Pashiardis, 2014). Nonetheless, a leader who builds an ethos around being authentic will be better prepared to handle a range of situations, such as Ofsted inspections, because they deal with morally intense situations every day. Brown and Treviño (2006) state:

*“The magnitude of consequences is particularly important for ethical leadership because ethical leaders consider the consequences that their potential actions will have on others...Observers will pay attention to the decision-maker to see how he or she handles the situation. This will impact if others see them as ethical or not” (p.602).*

Although authentic leadership is a “root construct that could incorporate charismatic, transformational, integrity and/or ethical leadership” (Luthans and Avolio, 2003:4), these types of leaderships are distinct from each other (Luthans and Avolio, 2003). Authentic leaders are capable of judging ethical issues, such as the importance of their school receiving a good Ofsted rating versus the wellbeing of their staff, from multiple perspectives and aligning their decisions with their own values and convictions (Brown and Treviño, 2006).

Within the wider teaching profession, Ofsted have been regarded as a vast black cloud causing stress, pressure and additional workload for both teachers and leaders alike (NEU, 2022; Page, 2017). However, Ofsted (2021) may argue that this assessment is unfair as they have updated their framework to alleviate unnecessary pressure for teachers, focusing on quality first teaching and learning, in which:

*“Teachers create an environment that allows the learner to focus on learning. The resources and materials that teachers select in a way that does not create unnecessary workload for staff.”*

This change of focus extends to leaders, encompassing leaders’ evaluation: Clear and ambitious vision – strong shared values, improving staff’s subject knowledge, learners complete their programme of study, engaging effectively with the community, protect staff from bullying or harassment and safeguarding (Ofsted, 2021). Now, Ofsted are judging the quality of education with less emphasis on data because as Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman (2019) argues:

*“The problem with this proliferation of data, though, is that often it is asked to do too much... In England, we are not too proud to admit that Ofsted has helped reinforce this culture by having a judgement specifically linked to outcomes data.”*

Furthermore, Spielman states a school with lower assessment results can achieve a good Ofsted rating if the leadership are working with integrity. Ofsted are actively encouraging leaders in education to be authentic, re-directing focus in the framework, to allow school leaders to have both integrity and a clear shared vision (Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Shamir and Eilam, 2005). Furthermore, leadership assessment has a focus towards safeguarding, the protection of staff and active engagement with the community, demonstrating key components of the ethical leadership model (Brown and Treviño, 2006). In contrast, following the updated framework being reviewed by unions, they believe Ofsted should be replaced by a school accountability system which is supportive, effective and fair (NEU, 2022). Thus far, the National Education Union has not cited any research from beyond 2019, when the framework was introduced, and there is a lack of research to demonstrate the impact of the latest framework, so we will have to wait to see if this shift in focus will achieve Ofsted’s desired positive outcome.

To conclude, authentic leadership is the model expected within school leaders as teaching is vocational, meaning it is value-driven (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008; Klenke, 2007). Knowing one’s own values and convictions is a key component of being an authentic leader alongside confidence, optimism, hopefulness, resilience and transparency (Luthans and Avolio, 2003). In order to be an authentic school leader, individuals need emotional intelligence, including having good interpersonal skills (Cascia, 1995) and being able to use empathy (Kellett *et al.*, 2006). This type of intelligence, although

argued as largely untested and anecdotal (Taliadorou and Pashiardis, 2014), allows for leaders to influence subordinates' emotions, behaviours and motivations (Mayer et al., 2004).

Ofsted, England's school inspectorate, challenge a leader's emotional intelligence, as well as their authenticity, using their inspection regime. Their short notice inspections have led to a climate of fear within the education system, resulting in some headteachers having to change their values to align with the inspectorate (Perryman *et al.*, 2018). Leaders feel this is necessary because Ofsted's grading informs many parents' choices for schools (NAO, 2018), however, the National Education Union (2022) state that these judgements are unfair and biased, disadvantaging those schools in areas of high deprivation. Contrary to this, Ofsted's chief inspector, Spielman (2019) suggests that their rating is no longer heavily influenced by assessment results, with lower-performing schools being able to receive an outstanding Ofsted rating because "the substance of what they are doing and the integrity with which they are doing it are there."

Furthermore, leaders are using emotional intelligence in a negative manner to manipulate subordinates', using the guise of the external enemy, namely Ofsted (Perryman *et al.*, 2018; Ball, 1997). This is a clear example of unauthentic leadership within a school context, although leaders can be authentic leaders even if they are heavily directed by Ofsted's values, provided they are fully transparent, modelling a pattern of behaviour that promotes positive psychological capacities and an ethical climate (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008). Crawford *et al.* (2020) confers highlighting a limitation of the theory, as the focus tends to lean to leaders' personal rather than leadership traits. Furthermore, they conclude that further research is needed on this model to see the difference between the two and the impact they make.

Being ethical is a crucial component of being an authentic leader (Luthans and Avolio, 2003), yet leaders can be authentic yet unethical if their motivations are selfish, such as a good Ofsted grading for career development (Bass, 1985). Being an unethical leader can be detrimental to teaching staff's wellbeing; nonetheless some headteachers may feel like they need to do this because of the competitive nature of the education system, where various stakeholders are increasing the pressure for higher assessment results (Taliadorou and Pashiardis, 2014). This often coincides with Ofsted and the impact of their grading, leading to more pressure being applied, sometimes in an unethical manner. The result is teachers leaving the profession in high numbers and those remaining, including leaders, getting burnt out or depressed (Stones and Glazzard, 2020). Those leaders who are truly ethical in their practise, by building an ethos around caring for others, will be much better prepared for the ethical challenge of Ofsted as they are used to judging ethical issues from multiple perspectives and aligning their decisions with their own values (Brown and Treviño, 2006).

## Conclusion

It is evident that Ofsted has had some negative impact on the authenticity of leaders in schools. However, in their latest framework, Ofsted (2021) advocate for authentic leaders, as they shift their focus on their judgement of leaders to the following: Clear and ambitious vision – strong shared values, improving staff's subject knowledge, learners complete their programme of study, engaging effectively with the community, protecting staff from bullying or harassment and safeguarding. Furthermore, despite unions shifting much of the blame for a negative shift in profession to Ofsted and demanding a new school accountability system (NEU, 2022), we must recognise that not all leaders' authenticity has been/is affected by Ofsted. You can be an authentic leader if you are transparent with subordinates about policy changes and care deeply for their wellbeing and the impact these changes will have. In fact, it can be argued that those

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leaders who have adopted the authentic leadership model will be much better equipped to deal with the constant hum of Ofsted in a positive and productive manner.

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