

Suicides reveal impact of government attacks on Britain's education system

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Pamela Relf was the longest serving teacher at Middlefield Primary in St. Neots, Cambridgeshire. She had nearly four decades experience as a teacher. On January 4, the first day of the new term, she failed to turn up for work. She drove instead to a nature reserve near her home, parked her car and walked into the River Ouse. The freezing water made her heart stop. Her body was found seven weeks later. In a note Ms. Relf had left behind, addressed to the coroner, she wrote: "I am finding the stress of my job too much. The pace of work and the long days are more than I can do."

Officers of the government's schools inspection service, Ofsted, had just visited Middlefield School for a weeklong assessment. Such inspections are nerve wracking for all concerned, as a bad report can have disastrous implications for a school and its staff. With schools competing for pupil intake, a poor report can lead to declining rolls and, consequently, declining funds. Schools and individual teachers can both be singled out as "failing".

In the case of Middlefield, the inspectors judged that the school lacked leadership and, although not judged failing, it was said to have serious weaknesses. In particular, the inspectors criticised test results for seven-year-olds. Although having just transferred to teaching this age group, Ms. Relf was criticised because her lessons "lacked pace". The primary school teacher had survived Hodgkin's disease and travelled widely, teaching in Australia and Tehran. She lived for teaching and could no longer cope with what was being done to her beloved profession.

Ms. Relf's death was reported just weeks after the suicide of 29-year-old James Pattern, a teacher at Corpus Christi, a Roman Catholic school in the Midlands. Once again, the suicide followed an Ofsted

inspection critical of the school and Mr. Pattern.

Last week, an inquest recorded a verdict of "death by misadventure" on Daniel Overfield, a 12-year-old boy who had hung himself after receiving a critical school report. Last November, his mother found Daniel, a pupil at Corpus Christi Roman Catholic School in Leeds, hanging from his bunk bed by his dressing gown cord. He was a bright boy, but had been in trouble at school and was put on daily report. His mother told the inquest that Daniel's art teacher had written that he had the "attention span of a goldfish" on his report, which had upset him greatly. The coroner said that his verdict was meant to indicate that the 12-year-old's action may have been more of a plea for help that went too far, rather than a deliberate attempt to take his own life.

These three terrible incidents have common social roots. They are the outcome of two decades of attacks on public education by the former Conservative government, which have been continued and deepened under Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair. Since Labour took office in 1997, schools have had to confront the highest levels of state intervention ever experienced within the public education sector.

Measures introduced supposedly aimed at "lifting standards" include the routine testing of pupils as young as five and publishing the results in "league tables". Labour is now seeking to introduce "performance related pay", which ties teachers' salaries to pupils' test and exam results. This ignores the systematic running down and under-funding of schools and the growth of poverty and social inequality; all of which have a negative impact in the classroom and for which Labour has no progressive remedy.

Ofsted inspections are carried through under Labour's slogan of "naming and shaming" those schools and teachers the system deems to be failing. The ideological

spearhead of this is an attempt to whip up public opinion against teachers—many of whom oppose these changes—for being “conservative” and concerned only with their jobs. Those who oppose government directives, or simply voice disagreements, are derided as representatives of a “privileged middle class” indifferent to the fate of inner-city schools, even though many of them work there.

Levels of stress and depression amongst teachers and students have shot up. Patrick Nash, Chief Executive of the Teacher Support Network, said that a help line for teachers opened last September has received more than 300 calls from individuals driven to despair by Ofsted inspections. A further 5,000 have rung in to complain of overwork and stress. More than half of England's teachers have indicated that they will leave the profession within a decade, according to a survey commissioned by the *Guardian* newspaper.

Last week's Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) conference discussed a report warning of an increase in pupil suicides due to the pressures resulting from what the union termed “factory farming” teaching. Some 35 children aged 14 and below committed suicide in Britain in 1997, the last year for which figures are available. The report raised that cramped classrooms and pressure to pass compulsory tests could contribute to conditions leading to the same child suicide rate as Japan, where a total of 192 students aged 16 and under committed suicide last year, a 44 percent rise on the previous year. Childline, the telephone advice service, said that 783 children had called last year over examination worries. Half were 16-year-olds taking GCSE examinations, but one in seven was under 13 years old.

The recent suicides also pose critical questions in relation to the role of the teaching unions. The ATL conference tabled an emergency motion regretting the death of Pamela Relf “as a result of Ofsted-induced stress”. The motion said the “case was the tip of the iceberg as far as Ofsted's harm to teachers is concerned” and called for urgent research into the “victims of Ofsted”. The National Union of Teachers (NUT), however, said that it was impossible to draw any general conclusions from the case. “Our research reveals that most schools are satisfied with the way inspections are carried out, rogue inspectors are dealt with swiftly by Ofsted”, a spokeswoman said.

The trade union bureaucracy bears a large measure of responsibility for enabling such stressful and depressing conditions to have developed in schools. They have run roughshod over teacher's opposition to government measures on testing and privatisation. Whilst they will on occasion point to the increase in poverty as a factor in schools' problems, this is generally only to demand that greater order and discipline be imposed.



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