

Ofsted and the abandonment of education: perspectives from Bristol

September 2025

Claire Neaves
Repair-Ed

02	Acknowledgements
03	Introduction
04	Organised abandonment
05	Teachers are forced to function as agents of Ofsted to abandon educational futures
06	This has a devastating impact on the experience of children
07	School leaders don't necessarily believe in Ofsted, and in some cases want to actively resist
08	The stakes are high, so the game must be played
09	This leads to abandonment
11	Reimagining Just Futures of Education
12	References
13	Project information and resources

Table of Contents

The contents of this report originally formed part of Repair-Ed's keynote at the 'Ofsted and educational in/justice' symposium at Manchester Metropolitan University on 10th June 2025.

*An abridged version can be found on the project website:
www.repair-ed.uk*

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Dr. Ian Cushing for inviting the Repair-Ed team to present our work at MMU's symposium and the Repair-Ed team: Dr. Vivian Látinwò-Ọlájídé, Professor Arathi Sriprakash, Dr Alice Willatt and Dr Annabel Wilson.

To cite this report:

Neaves, C. (2025). *Ofsted and the abandonment of education: perspectives from Bristol*. University of Oxford. Report.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25446/oxford.30126691>

The Reparative Futures of Education^[1] (Repair-Ed) project is working with ten primary schools and their surrounding communities in Bristol, in the South-West of England, to understand past and present structural injustices in school systems and explore what reparative action for these injustices could look like.

Bristol has been described as a ‘divided city’ (CoDE 2017) due to stark inequalities in educational outcomes for racially minoritised people. This takes place in a context with a complex educational picture – a mixture of local authority schools, academy chains and private schools lead to schools being relatively segregated along class lines.

Fieldwork for the Repair-Ed project is conducted in each school over a period of three weeks, involving classroom observations and staff interviews, as well as parent focus groups. Alongside this school-based research, our place-based research involves walking interviews with former pupils of schools in the area and interviews with community knowledge holders – those who are deeply embedded and hold rich knowledge about their communities, such as school governors, youth workers, faith leaders and community organisers.

A dialogic strand of the project seeks to engage the public in memories of schooling and imagining what the future of education could look like in the city. Additionally, three Repair-Ed PhD students are working creatively with pupils to document their experiences and hopes. Our interactive living archive, the People’s History of Schooling^[2], brings together a selection of our data with which the public and schools can engage to explore histories of schooling in Bristol.

Whilst the Repair-Ed project’s primary focus is not school inspection, it is a topic that frequently surfaced within the research to date. School leaders, teachers, parents and community members have brought up Ofsted^[3] and we were pleased to have the opportunity to present some of this data at the ‘Ofsted and educational in/justice’ symposium at Manchester Metropolitan University in June 2025. In preparing our presentation, we drew data from interviews with ten headteachers and from four^[4] schools in different Bristol wards. This report summarises our presentation.

Our data echoes some of the findings of existing critiques of Ofsted (see Bradbury et. al 2025, Calvert et al. 2025, Kilian et al. 2025, Perryman et. al 2011, 2023). We seek to add to that collection of work by sharing key themes from our research. In particular, in this summary we read the experiences and testimonies of school staff through the lens of ‘organised abandonment’ in education.

[1] <https://www.repair-ed.uk>

[2] <https://repair-ed.humap.site/map>

[3] <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted>

[4] Fieldwork had not yet been conducted in the remaining six schools at the time of writing

Organised abandonment is a concept that originated in management studies to describe how organisations jettison or let go of systems or processes that no longer serve their interests (Bhandar 2022). The concept has since been expanded by critical scholars. For example, David Harvey explains how capitalist systems require the ‘abandonment’ of certain groups in order to extract value for the accumulation of advantage by others (Harvey 2018). Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes powerfully about how organised abandonment is the intentional disinvestment in communities. The concept draws attention to the inherently racialised character of capitalist oppression and the relentless enforcement of inequality (Gilmore 2007, 2022). Gilmore’s idea of organised abandonment has implications for education. For example, it tunes us into how and why unequal resourcing in education occurs, and how and why hierarchies of value, success and aspiration are created and sustained. Gilmore’s notion of organised abandonment shifts the focus from individual blame and using this lens allows us to see that schooling injustices are not merely the result of bad policies but are embedded in more complex systems of inequality.

We suggest Ofsted is implicated in these processes of organised abandonment in education, not least because of the frequency with which it was invoked by participants in our research to explain educational inequalities. Ofsted only recognises success under narrow criteria, often in ways which do not take into account the needs and challenges in school communities. Applying Gilmore’s argument that injustices are produced systematically, we see that the inspection process misidentifies the source of educational inequality by focusing on the individual actions of teachers and schools. Instead of addressing the structural conditions that shape educational outcomes and futures, the Ofsted framework requires schools to function and perform in particular ways. In this report we show how Ofsted narrows the ‘accepted’ curriculum, curtailing teachers’ creativity and placing them under heightened stress and increased workload. School leaders are forced to abandon their principles and their knowledge of what their communities need in favour of succeeding under Ofsted’s framework, because the stakes are too high not to do so. Ofsted is the architect of a system which necessitates compliance, even where this runs counter to what pupils and parents need. Thus, inequality is reinforced by abandoning schools and school leaders who cannot – or refuse to – meet accountability standards and in the process, Ofsted abandons the possibility of a responsive and creative vision of education. Therefore, we argue that Ofsted is implicated in the intentional disinvestment, and thus abandonment, of many school-communities. In this report, we seek to illustrate the impact of this on teachers and pupils.

Teachers are forced to function as agents of Ofsted to abandon educational futures

05

Ofsted causes abandonment by curtailing teachers' creative freedoms in two ways. It does so directly, by narrowing the 'accepted' curriculum:

*"Yeah ... you gotta just stick to this plan and you can't deviate from the plan 'cos **Ofsted have said, "you're not doing it right"** and it just feels very... **stilted**. And structure is good ... I know that, and you can't just go off timetable and do what you want 'cause then that causes chaos, I know ... I get this, but it's almost like **nobody has the place to just explore anything.**"*

It also does this indirectly, by causing stress and increased workload around inspections, which curtails imagination:

*"Schools are so **worried about Ofsted** and they're so worried about not getting the results ... we aren't engaging their curiosity. [...] But yeah ... I think it's sad that you can't have schools that, you know, do fantastic art weeks anymore and things like that for **fear of not getting through the curriculum.**"*

In our interviews, many teachers brought up a lack of freedom, which mirrored our experiences of observing during fieldwork in schools.

This abandonment of a creative and responsive curriculum has a devastating impact on the experience of children.

This has a devastating impact on the experience of children

06

Teachers expressed how a narrowed curriculum has a profound impact on their pupils:

*“And now they’re ... **obliterated by boredom and discipline**, you know. Like, where’s the wild spirit of this child gone?”*

Bristol has many academies, and at the time of writing, academies do not have to follow the National Curriculum^[5]. In secondary schools, whilst we would not advocate ‘teaching to the test’, we can see why schools have curricula linked to the GCSE exams. However, at the end of Key Stage 2 (the end of Primary school), assessments are in English and Maths. Therefore, you’d expect to see schools, especially academies, exercise a lot more freedom, with creativity, local content and cultural responsiveness in their foundation curricula. In our fieldwork however, we saw the same topics being taught across schools. One teacher reflected:

*“It’s all gone now. And now it’s just cold, hard logic, you know. **Taking a lot of the magic and experience out of it**. Which to me ...It’s **depressing**, isn’t it? [...] we have to tick all the boxes because we can’t risk... [...] At the moment, it’s just like ... **get that Ofsted rating up**, isn’t it? And if someone tells us to jump, we will.”*

There is an accepted wisdom about the way things need to be, to ‘get things right’. We aren’t placing the blame on teachers and school leaders for this, as we believe that the high-stakes accountability that schools are placed under leaves them with little choice.

Whilst school leaders are implicated in the abandonment of freedom and creativity, our data suggests that not all school leaders believe in the narrow model of success required by Ofsted. Many try to actively resist.

[5] <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum>

School leaders don't necessarily believe in Ofsted, and in some cases want to actively resist

07

Many school leaders we interviewed talked about how Ofsted was not the driving force for decision making in their schools, or the way in which they would judge whether they were successful. This headteacher prefers to focus on parent and pupil views:

*“we’ve done well in some of those real binary measures like Ofsted and things like that but ... the **things that are more important to me** are that we’re doing better with our past pupils ... all wanting to come back and spend time here, our families are really positive about the school, we’ve got a really good pupil voice”*

Some headteachers were explicit about Ofsted gradings not matching with what they knew of their own and other’s schools, with this headteacher sharing that they knew that despite the Ofsted ‘good’, they were not meeting all pupils’ needs:

*“when I came here and it’s a **good school** [in terms of] Ofsted and that was down to a few things I know, but only white middle class children achieved and were secondary-ready and ... I just keep banging on about it with the staff and saying **it’s not good enough, it’s not. So, all children should achieve.**”*

We also interviewed headteachers who wanted to do things differently and not teach to Ofsted’s narrow expectations:

*“**we should be better than this**, we should be looking at our children, we should be looking at what they need, then we should be finding the things that enable us to do that.”*

Alongside the desire to not be implicated in the abandonment of school communities, our data suggests that complicity is enforced through the high stakes of the accountability agenda.

The stakes are high, so the game must be played 08

Despite an acknowledgment that Ofsted doesn't measure the things which matter, and a desire to do things differently, headteachers also outlined the very real material effects of not succeeding on Ofsted's terms. They described the risks in terms of funding, reputation and community:

*"If Ofsted came and happened to give you an inadequate rating, which hopefully won't happen, then half the cohort leave because of that and therefore .. **you have half the funding that you had the year before**"*

*"...it got the RI in Ofsted, it then went in the Bristol Post... And then **that got shared all over socials** and the parents are coming in saying this is one of the worst schools in Bristol."*

*"[The] RI judgment that this school got was really unhelpful, because, and I think I've said this before, because the community lost trust in the school, and **once the community loses trust**, your, **your job is exponentially harder** than if the community trusts what [you're] doing."*

When schools do not succeed on Ofsted's terms, they are often left without support – more frequent inspections place greater pressure on schools and their leaders, exacerbating the issues outlined so far in this report. Inequality is reinforced: where value cannot be extracted, abandonment deepens.

This leads to abandonment

09

If the role of Ofsted is to improve schools, then it must be acknowledged that they only perform a fraction of this work. Ofsted inspect schools for a day or two and leave schools dealing with the practical, financial and reputational impacts of their judgement – abandoning schools to their fates.

School improvement partners may be brought into a school they barely know, to perform a quick fix, as this former local authority partner shared:

*“So, you’d often get put into a school, help it to turn around, get a successful monitoring visit with HMI or maybe even a reinspection...once you get something which justifies your time and enables people to see that that school is on an upward trajectory again, **you’re kind of moved out.**”*

Quick judgements, requiring rapid improvement and then withdrawal leads to instability within schools, as seen here in Bristol:

*“having worked for Bristol for a long time you know, the political landscape has changed significantly and schools, lots of the secondary schools have been **in and out of** you know, **categories with Ofsted**”*

When considering the concept of organised abandonment as the intentional disinvestment in particular communities and areas, we can consider how school leaders working in high areas of deprivation feel. This headteacher described a deliberate withholding of support:

*“There’s an inequality in this country that can’t be addressed until schools like [ours] and schools that serve these demographics are **allowed to be outstanding**”*

The pressures of Ofsted also lead school leaders to abandon their principles around what a just education looks like for their students, one with creative freedom and a focus on success for all children, in favour of a narrow vision of success which finds favour with the inspectorate:

*“I’ve been in the job long enough to kind of like not spend my entire life thinking about what Ofsted think about what I’m doing but there’s a lot of young leaders who are out there now and that’s **their entire purpose in life ... to get ... Ofsted ticked.**”*

However, this usually won’t serve the majority of pupils or their parents, as we’ve seen in some of our focus groups. One Black parent governor in a focus group described her concerns that an all-white Ofsted team were not able to see and value the strengths of a diverse school:

*“Recently we had an Ofsted evaluation at the, at the school. And again, it ... really shocked me and something that I couldn’t miss, the fact that out of the three inspectors that came ... there was **no non-white representation**. That’s not who should be judging... who we should have going to the school when we say that the educational system values diversity and inclusion. **Ofsted inspectors, you need to have that representation.** Because you need to have someone who is able to bring that lens. Otherwise, there are so many aspects that are missing there.”^[6]*

For parents, high-stakes accountability and Ofsted do not feature in their hopes for educational success – echoing teachers and headteachers who told us that Ofsted was not why they did the job. Instead, parents wish for a focus on children, on partnership and on developing schools to truly serve their communities.

Here, we return to the central question of the Repair-Ed project: what does a just future of education look like?

[6] See Cushing and Snell 2023 for an analysis of Ofsted’s raciolinguistic ideologies

Schools are not currently meeting the needs of all pupils and schools must be accountable – but rather than to a body which has abandoned schools and therefore pupils, schools must be accountable to their pupils, their parents and their communities.

It is arguable that Ofsted does not serve the system and therefore is not improving schools in the way they need to improve. As the Beyond Ofsted inquiry concluded, ‘Ofsted is no longer trusted and significant change is needed’ (Perryman et al 2023, p10). Each time Ofsted has come up in our data, it has been to talk about the pressure it puts on the system and its teachers, or to state that it is at odds with the best interests of pupils and the wishes of parents and school staff.

If Ofsted is to remain, it must serve differently, in a way which benefits pupils, school staff and communities. All our research participants expressed visions for the future centered on equity, fairness and all children being able to succeed. What Bristol wants is a fair and equitable system, with children’s best interests at its heart. For Ofsted to recognise and contribute to such a system, it must prioritise care over control and value people over metrics.^[7]

We believe a fairer system can only be achieved through finding better mechanisms to address the deep-rooted structural injustices on which schooling systems are built. We call for redress and repair to be at the centre of educational policy and practice.

To keep up to date with Repair-Ed’s work around educational injustice and reparative futures, please see page 13.

[7] At the time of publishing, the new inspection framework had just been released, which does not allay the concerns raised in this report. See <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/ofsted-report-cards-the-8-big-changes-you-need-to-know/> for detail of the new report cards.

Bhandar, B. (2022) *Organised State Abandonment: The meaning of Grenfell*. Online: <https://thesociologicalreview.org/magazine/october-2022/verticality/organised-state-abandonment/> [accessed 7th July 2025]

Bradbury, A., Perryman, J., Calvert, G & Kilian, K. (2025): Primary teachers' experiences of Ofsted inspections: 'driving the joy out of education', *Journal of Education Policy*, DOI: 10.1080/02680939.2025.2474941

Calvert, G., Perryman, J., Bradbury, A. & Kilian, K. (2025): Turning school inspections toxic: insights from an inquiry into Ofsted in England, *Journal of Education Policy*, DOI: 10.1080/02680939.2025.2498892

CoDE, (2017) *Bristol: a city divided?* Online: <https://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/code/briefings/localethnicinequalities/CoDE-Briefing-Bristol.pdf> [Accessed 7/7/2025]

Cushing, I. and Snell, J. (2023) 'The (white) ears of Ofsted: A raciolinguistic perspective on the listening practices of the schools inspectorate', *Language in Society*, 52(3), pp. 363–386. doi:10.1017/S0047404522000094

Gilmore, R. W. (2007). *Golden gulag: Prisons, surplus, crisis, and opposition in globalizing California* (Vol. 21). Univ of California Press.

Gilmore, R.W. (2022) *Organized Abandonment* – talk by Ruth Wilson Gilmore. The Forge. 8 December 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-A5G0B8AAs>

Harvey, D. (2018). *The Limits to Capital*. Verso

Kilian, K., Perryman, J., Bradbury, A. & Calvert, G. (2025): Fearing the 'Clipboard Police': Exploring How Marginalised Schools Experience Ofsted Inspections in an Era of Precarity, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/00071005.2025.2489952

Perryman, J., Ball, S., Maguire, M. & Braun, A (2011) Life in the Pressure Cooker – School League Tables and English and Mathematics Teachers' Responses to Accountability in a Results-Driven Era, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 59:2, 179-195, DOI: 10.1080/00071005.2011.578568

Perryman, J., Bradbury, A., Calvert, G. and Kilian, K. (2023) *Beyond Ofsted Inquiry, Final Report of the Inquiry*. NEU.

Project information and resources

Website:

www.repair-ed.uk

Information about the project, blogs from the team and guests, resources and publications.

A People's History of Schooling:

www.repair-ed.uk/stories

Our living archive, where you can listen to and read testimonies about schooling in Bristol.

Podcast:

<https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/dialogues-educational-justice-brought-you-repair-ed-project>

Our podcast, Dialogues on Educational Justice features discussions with a variety of guests on education in Bristol and beyond, asking them for their views on educational injustice and their ideas for a just education system.

Website



Archive



Podcast



Notes



