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■ The School

It was as far back as November 1992 that we were informed that the school was to be inspected. Mixed feelings ensued, mostly of threat, anxiety, urgency and insecurity. You might say that the situation was somewhat stressful.

In the weeks that followed, much speculation was centred around the identity of the inspection team and the timing of the inspection. Finding that we were to be singled out as the only school in Gloucestershire to be inspected by a private consortium rather than the county team only added to our apprehension.

We had been told that the provisional date for the inspection was to be September/October 1993, but in the event it took place in December. Whilst some staff were relieved to have a little extra time to prepare for the penultimate week of the autumn term, for others the anxiety was simply exacerbated. I say prepare because the maintenance, decoration, documentation, cleaning and clearing almost defies belief. Certainly the physical structure of the establishment was improved and the inspection week was contemplated as an extended open day, showing the school off to its best advantage. Rarely have the display boards been covered so profusely!

There was no shortage of advice, recommendations and directives disseminated to the staff via SMT. Indeed, there was a danger of becoming over-prepared, and the mountains of documentation and literature became both confusing and superfluous.

In the event, a team of 14 inspectors was in school for the best part of a week. It was unlikely that teachers would be visited on the first day, so the inspector for technology was to cover design & technology and information technology on the Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, leaving the last day for reporting and writing up.

All relevant documentation had been sent to the Registered Inspector a few weeks before the visit, including faculty and department handbooks outlining policies and

administrative details and schemes of work, syllabuses and details of initiatives and competitions.

The subject inspector was a very agreeable and pleasant member of the team and he immediately engendered confidence and understanding. During the three days, he spent whole lessons and parts of lessons with all staff between two and five times each. His presence was unthreatening and although he was unable to provide any immediate feedback after lessons, he was neither indifferent nor distant.

The inspector spent one lesson with the head of the faculty to clear up any loose ends and request further information which was not already provided in the documentation. He was very understanding about our attempt to comply with the National Curriculum but was concerned mostly with the actual teaching and learning that went on within the area.

There was a spirit of unity amongst the staff and a desire to succeed on behalf of this area of the curriculum since the inspection deals with departments and not individuals. The week of the inspection itself was almost a relief compared with the anticipation of the week before, and much less stressful. Staff were relieved to find that the inspector did not ask to inspect teachers' planners, nor to look in every cupboard, but assumed a passive role in the workshop and was friendly to the children. It was noted that the pupils were keen to show themselves at their best and there was also a feeling of unity between staff and pupils.

Staff in the department were eager to discover the inspector's impression of themselves and their teaching, but usually only the head of department, accompanied by a member of SMT, was able to attend the feedback session from the subject inspector and Registered Inspector. Fortunately the head of department made copious notes during the meeting, and relayed them to the rest of the department the next day. The full report (on one page of A4), which is available to the public, was not as detailed as the actual feedback session, and the shortened version which is sent to all parents comprises only four sentences.

The last week of the autumn term passed very quickly and almost unnoticed by the staff, who were by this stage both relieved and exhausted.

There were issues which the staff were afraid would be highlighted by the inspector (our

An Inspector Calls

Across the land, secondary schools are being inspected, and the inspection of primary schools starts in September. Here, in two linked articles two schools describe the experience.

interpretation and implementation of the National Curriculum, for example) and which were not specifically recognised. Similarly, there were situations apparent to the staff (such as health and safety issues relating to the size of groups for a practical subject, and problems of role conflict) which they wanted highlighted and were not. I am fortunate that the D&T staff work very well together and, despite feeling cautiously confident, there is always the fear that there is something we are not doing properly or for which we might be criticised. Conversely, it is almost impossible for an inspector to be aware of the complexities of any school, but the fact that some rather obvious problems were missed has clouded the authenticity and holistic impact of the report.

Although not officially recognised and purely a theory, it is felt that a lot of staff are suffering from post-inspection depression. This is not because the final report was disappointing — quite the opposite. As in having to take an examination, staff have reflected on their performance and questioned more closely what and how they teach, and for some teachers the lack of feedback or debriefing has caused either anxiety or despondency.

Certainly, with hindsight too much preparation was carried out. Most of the anxiety and apprehension was unjustified and a lot of the documentation was unnecessary. However, many improvements were implemented both prior to the inspector's visit and as a result of it, and teachers have been able to evaluate their performance in the light of this experience.

It is reassuring as well as comforting to be acknowledged as a good faculty, and despite all the other current issues and initiatives, at least we have one less thing to worry about for another four years.

Lloyd Evans

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We were first told of the inspection by the Headmaster on a very wet and gloomy training day, and it seemed to match the mood of the staff as they said, 'Why us?'. Little was known about the methods involved in this new inspection except for the information contained in the inevitable 'ring binder' which, although very detailed, still left us very unsure of what to expect. The school managed to find the 'expert' who conducted a further training day but this left us feeling, if anything, more worried by the details required and the system employed. We had to start somewhere, however, and departmental meetings enabled us to prepare and collate the work we needed to present. In addition, in the week before the inspection, I attended a seminar by Omry Bailey at the Design & Technology Exhibition where he provided notes and information I only wish I had received at the very beginning of our preparation.

As the date drew nearer so the demands came from the Deputy Heads for the evidence required by the inspectors: schemes of work for Key Stages 3 & 4 Design Technology, all CDT and Home Economics subjects as well as our A level subjects. In addition to these, other documents containing our health and safety notes and homework policies were also provided. We were very pleased with the detail of our final efforts but these raised the photocopying bill considerably along with the question from some staff as to who on earth was going to read all that information and remember it; now we know.

In the morning of the inspection I arrived at school early, but everyone else had had the same idea and the car park filled rapidly. We all wondered where he was going to start first and although there was no sign of him in the morning meeting, by the start of the first lesson there he was, 'lining up' before the pupils arrived; I remember being very pleased not to be the first person chosen. The grapevine then worked very quickly: it seemed that no sooner had he left the first lesson than everyone knew what had happened and the questions he had asked. Staff were generally nervous but happy with what to expect, as they believed they had prepared well for what was required. We were also hopeful of the final conclusions, having doubled the GCSE A–C grades over the last

three years, and had increasing numbers of students choosing our subjects right up to A level.

The subject inspector, being a member of the 'core' team, remained in school all week, but only attended lessons over a three-day period and stayed for no longer than half an hour in each room. We were asked for details of assessment and recording procedures and capitation allowances in order to complete some details of the report. There were no problems during this period — only the nervous attacks caused by our technician mischievously opening the doors of the rooms and pretending to be one of the inspectors!

Feedback arrived by the fourth evening, and if we felt under pressure, spare a thought for the inspectors: in order to record and detail all the evidence, they were working a minimum of twelve hours a day and were then required to explain their findings to what could be a hostile head of department and deputy head in this meeting. Over twelve pages of conclusions were presented and I at least remembered to take notes as these were the most detailed comments I received on the department. The final report on each subject area is only four hundred words.

By Friday evening everyone was ready to collapse, inspection over for another four years — and at least we now know what to expect. The week went well and the final report was very positive both for the department and the school: it highlighted areas that needed further development and praised our work in others — and yes, he had read all the notes in some detail. Not all staff agreed with the points raised but we must realise that the inspectors only see a 'snapshot' of what is actually going on in the school and therefore their conclusions derive from the evidence provided. It is up to you to sell the positive aspects of your department's teaching.

Finally, on a personal note, I was very pleased with the overall procedure, given the government's guidelines. Comments were, I believe, very fairly made, and it was interesting to see how an 'outsider' viewed the department. My advice to others awaiting inspection is to prepare well, have confidence in the work you are doing — and relax: the inspectors are only human. Remember, it may not be as bad as you think — honestly!

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