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# 'Children and Teachers All Felt He Was a Friend': the early years of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools, 1837-70

ALAN PARR

ABSTRACT In the 1830s, England began to see the introduction of schools targeted at the whole population, and soon the first inspectors were appointed. Although they came from privileged backgrounds themselves, the earliest members of the Inspectorate were remarkably quick to recognise and address the challenges faced by teachers in elementary schools. Inspectors were welcomed for the advice and support they offered, so much so that – in what was to become a familiar story – they were attacked and subverted by politicians and officials. This article offers a fresh and vivid insight into the nature of school inspection at that time, and the inspectors who carried it out.

## The First 25 Years

It seems to be pretty well known that, right from the very start, Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMIs) were elderly and overbearing. The trouble with that is that when you look into it, you find this does HMIs a great injustice. To start with, they were not elderly – the typical new HMI was under 35. And while some inspectors may have been pompous and high-handed, this was by no means generally true – for example, Inspector Bellairs conducted inspections with 'gentleness, patience and good humour' (Dunford, 1976, p. 65).

From its inception, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools quickly became a highly professional body, supportive of teachers and schools, and as time went on, inspectors were more and more likely to find that this put them at loggerheads with the Education Department and the politicians – who pioneered many of the techniques of subversion and disinformation used to this day.

Compared to other countries – for example, Austria, the Netherlands, Prussia, France and indeed Scotland – England had a lot of catching up to do. Effectively, widespread elementary education in England did not begin until 1833, when the government offered the first grants towards the setting up of schools. The initial grant – to cover the entire country – was £20,000. The Committee of Council on Education (the precursor of the Education Department) was formed in 1839, and the grant was increased by 50%, but, even so, £30,000 was less than half the £70,000 allocated for the Royal Stables at the same time (Holman, 2013, p. 70).

The first inspectors had been appointed in 1837. Inspectors were required to collect information and, above all, to be supportive:

> afford them your assistance in all efforts for improvement in which they may desire your aid; but that you are in no respect to interfere with the instruction, management or discipline of the school, or to press upon them any suggestions which they may be disinclined to receive. (Dunford, 1976, p. 65)

Previous experience in education was not a consideration and, in many cases, the new inspectors were appointed through the influence of friends or relatives in high places. What they did need to have was a high social standing, good academic record at university and acceptability to the church authorities. Even so, inspectors were impressively rapid to understand the problems of the schools, their teachers and their pupils. Perhaps surprisingly given their privileged background, they had a high awareness of social issues – one of the very first wrote such strong reports that he was hurriedly redeployed elsewhere (see Dunford, 1976, p. 6). In the first 20 years, they sought to make schools safer and healthier places; they looked towards the better training of teachers; and they worked to give children a longer and more profitable time at school.

The government grant ensured more and more schools opened, staffed by teachers who themselves had little educational background and no professional training whatsoever. Consequently, inspectors, with their knowledge of practice in other schools and their advice about successful techniques, were often welcomed with open arms.

Given the low starting point, some of their achievements are hugely impressive. A teacher wrote of Joseph Fletcher, who was an inspector until his death in 1852: 'No-one could be the subject of his day's inspection without becoming wiser and better ... His departure was often regretted with tears. Children and teachers all felt he was a friend' (Dunford, 1976, p. 200). Fletcher and his colleagues may have been called inspectors, but in practice they were much more advisers and supporters. They observed successful teaching ideas and techniques, and took them to other schools; buildings, apparatus, teachers and methods were all improved in this way. Because the inspector was of similar social standing to the school managers, he was able to recommend improvements in a way the teacher could not. HMIs encouraged managers to provide adequate accommodation for teachers, and John Allen (one of the first

HMIs to be appointed) wrote in the early 1840s: 'If the village schoolmaster is worse paid than the village carpenter or blacksmith, what hope is there of finding any but the most incompetent person ... ?' (Horn, 1978, p. 221).

What I find most noteworthy of all is that, in little more than a decade, inspectors came to judge schools using criteria which even today many critics would reject as too progressive. In 1848, inspectors used the school at King's Somborne in Hampshire as the example for all to follow: 'dealing with reason rather than facts, and things rather than words' (Dunford, 1976, p. 128).

## The Coming of the Revised Code

In the next few years, the education system continued to expand rapidly and, in 1860, the government realised with some dismay that its initial £20,000 had rocketed to £700,000 (Harwood, 1969, p. 3). Probably none of us would be surprised to learn what the government chose to do. Deploying an impressive range of misinformation techniques, it took fright; set up a committee (the Newcastle Commission); made sure that the membership of that committee was very largely the people who would come up with the recommendations it wanted; appointed just six HMIs as members of the committee (who were seen to be dangerously independent in their thinking, and who were considerably outnumbered by the ten assistant commissioners parachuted in from outside); and introduced spurious statistics, but nevertheless hinted that the reports of the inspectors themselves were not to be trusted.

When the Newcastle Commission reported, there was no surprise that the government welcomed its recommendation – Payment by Results, a system which effectively tied the grant received by the school to the performance of pupils in the three basic subjects of reading, writing and arithmetic. Equally unsurprising was that inspectors themselves were strongly opposed to Payment by Results and the predictable straitjacket it placed on teaching. HMIs were greatly in favour of retaining, or at least modifying, the existing system based on advice and support, but their suggestions were ignored.

It was not only HMIs who were appalled by the rigidity of the proposals. Across the country, the initial reaction was almost universally hostile – a wave of objections came from churches, communities, educational experts, school managers and teachers, and statistical societies (which pointed out how unreliable the report figures were). When the detailed proposals – the Revised Code – appeared (conveniently delayed until the very last day of the parliamentary session of 1861), elementary education entered the era of Payment by Results. Schools' income would be determined very largely by the numbers of children who could reach specific standards in the three subjects of reading, writing and arithmetic. The Commission's view was clear: 'Till something like a *real examination* is introduced ... good elementary teaching will never be given' (Maclure, 1965, p. 73, my emphasis). Teacher magazines and schoolmaster associations deplored the Code, and perhaps half of the individual

inspectors (particularly those with the most experience) were also against it, but their arguments were largely dismissed.

When the Code came into practice in 1862, the role of HMIs therefore changed focus dramatically; they were no longer advisers and now became examiners, who visited annually to test each pupil. Since the first government grant in 1833, there had been 25 years of rapid progress in which HMIs had played a prominent part. Now, the Newcastle Commission dramatically reduced their influence and status. Not surprisingly, the inspectors saw the Code as an attack on themselves and their way of operating; well over half of them signed a letter describing themselves as a 'body of public servants who feel themselves to have been unjustly aspersed' (Dunford, 1976, p. 50). Rightly or wrongly, by accident or design, the Revised Code marked the first, but certainly not the last, step in the marginalising of HMIs.

## The Revised Code in Operation

The name most associated with the creation of the Revised Code is that of Robert Lowe, the vice-president of the Committee of Council on Education. He made sure that the Code was driven by his desire for competitiveness and economy, and it was said that the Code made him one of the most hated politicians of the century. Lowe worked hand in glove with Ralph Lingen, whose focus on rigid economy matched his own. (Lingen subsequently became permanent secretary of the Treasury, a role which famously required incumbents to say 'No' so disagreeably that nobody would dare ask a second time.) Certainly, Payment by Results achieved one of Lowe and Lingen's main objectives, and the education budget was slashed by hundreds of thousands of pounds.

Financial cuts began not just before the Code became law, but even before it was published. Lowe believed that teaching was little more than instruction: 'We pay for instruction; if the child has been properly instructed, he will know the things we require; if he does not know them, the work has not been properly done' (Holman, 2013, p. 171). Lowe's code was designed as 'an amount of knowledge which could be ascertained thoroughly by examination' (Harwood, 1969, p. 10).

Lowe would not be the last politician to work on the belief that children's attainment could be found simply and accurately, and with little more difficulty than was needed to measure their height. Most inspectors saw this as simplistic and stood their ground. For 20 years, they had used their skill and professional judgement to advance education as a whole, and they had little sympathy with Lowe's view that learning could be assessed by a purely mechanical process. Inspector after inspector criticised the Revised Code. The most famous of all, Matthew Arnold, warned that the Code would result in mechanical instruction. J.G. Fitch – who, uniquely, had taught in an elementary school – pointed out that not only did the Code force teachers to narrow the curriculum, but publishers were being quick to spot opportunities:

> I find an increasing eagerness on the part of the teachers to get hold of text books which are 'specially adapted to the requirements of the Revised Code' and which claim as their chief merit that they do not go a step beyond those requirements. (Harwood, 1969, p. 65)

J.D. Morrell used words that still resonate today: 'Formerly we were occupied chiefly in examining processes; now we are occupied almost entirely in testing results ... Every educator who is worth the name knows his best results are those that cannot be measured at all' (Dunford, 1976, p. 74).

Other inspectors – including Messrs Fearon, Nutt, Bellairs and Mitchell – also expressed their concerns, and a further consequence of the Code was that grants for developing pupil teachers were withdrawn. Pupil teachers – essentially apprentice teachers who learned their trade while still being pupils themselves – had been one of the great successes of the previous 25 years. The pupil teaching route made a huge contribution to raising the quality of teaching in schools and offered a professional career path for females as well as males. However, after the introduction of the Code, their numbers fell by more than half.

In fact, the measured results of the Code were even more meaningless than the inspectors feared. As long as an inspection generated sufficient numbers, the administrators were satisfied; not the slightest effort was made to ensure comparability of standards. Some inspectors would deliberately inspect to a more lenient standard until teachers became more familiar with the Code's procedures. One inspector might allow a child to make three mistakes in their writing, another just two or even only one. The variability was not just in standard, but also in the actual procedure and nature of the inspection. One inspector might take a full day; another might inspect a school in just a couple of hours.

Matthew Arnold had been an inspector since 1851 and had seen the position of HMIs change dramatically. They had become examiners rather than inspectors and, in doing so, had lost most of their opportunities to work creatively with schools. I have got considerable sympathy with Arnold and those who thought like him. My own role went through just this change of focus a century after he died in 1888.

## Relations with the Department

Basically, inspectors wanted to improve and develop education, and this aim frequently brought them into conflict with their masters at the Education Department. On the other hand, the Department's concern was with administrative affairs – there was little interest in consulting inspectors for their views on educational policy. In the struggle, it was the Department which held all the cards. Even the Department clerks had a career structure and pay scales better than HMIs, and they could haul the inspectors over the coals for sending in their reports in the wrong number of packages, or if their complex diaries

showed even the slightest inaccuracy. In fact, the Department had a continuing and deliberate policy of limiting the power of HMIs, and its leaders were not very subtle about it – Lowe and Lingen talked of the 'subordination of the Inspectorate' (Dunford, 1976, p. 250). The Revised Code meant that inspector conferences were quickly discontinued when their opinions regularly embarrassed the Department. Most inspectors gritted their teeth at the constraints and continued to do their best for schools, but at least one – probably Harry Longueville Jones – opposed the Code so strenuously that he was dismissed.

## Workload

It is not surprising that inspectors tended to be in their thirties and forties; their workload was exhausting enough just to read about. Even before the Revised Code was introduced, they were expected to visit 5 schools a week for 35 weeks of the year, producing highly detailed reports, and since there were relatively few of them, they might have to travel considerable distances. One inspector covered more than a thousand miles in just three weeks.

The Revised Code increased the workload further. It was not simply a matter of inspecting every teacher and every pupil. The inspector had the major say in deciding the suitability of candidates for becoming pupil teachers, assessing their curricular and religious knowledge, and for each pupil teacher observing a lesson they taught. The building, the management and the registers all needed to be checked and approved. For each visit, the Department expected every minute detail of the extensive paperwork to be completed correctly.

Somehow, many inspectors still managed to find the time to encourage the growth of teacher associations – sometimes in the face of sour negativity from the Department. Teachers were giving their own time to attend summer schools at least as early as 1841, and inspectors were enthusiastic in supporting their associations and would often participate in meetings. For example, it was an HMI who created elaborate information regarding the teaching of experimental science in elementary schools (the first concrete example I have come across of such curriculum development).

To lighten the inspectors' load, assistant inspectors were appointed. They were young and successful teachers who had come through the pupil-teacher and college route. In practice, their classroom expertise was of little value; effectively, they operated as inspectors' clerks and they were often seen by those in the schools as turncoats who had settled for an easy life, not least because they received a pension on retirement, when teachers themselves had lost this benefit under the Revised Code. Nevertheless, they did perform much of the mountain of marking generated in each visit, and in this they did at least do something to reduce the burden on the inspectors themselves.

## Conclusion

A well-known picture of an inspector is in Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford*: 'an elderly clergyman ... an exasperated roar ... looked at the rows of children as if he hated them and the mistress as if he despised her' (Thompson, 1991, p. 113). However, all the evidence suggests that there were plenty of inspectors and inspections for which this picture is highly inaccurate. Inspectors sought to make education better and safer for children and for teachers, and brought a warmth and insight that most of the politicians lacked. (One noticeably positive politician was James Kay-Shuttleworth, who in 1839 had been appointed the first secretary of the Committee of Council for Education, and had been the driving force behind so much of the development of the 1840s.)

Perhaps the most scathing indictment of the Revised Code was given by John Kerr, who inspected in both England and Scotland. He said of the Code:

> violent and educationally barbarous ... England had little of a proud past in elementary education that could serve as a foundation for a solid superstructure, but even that little was absolutely ignored. In the Revised Code reading, writing, and arithmetic ... stood severely alone ... There was no suggestion about intelligence, composition, grammar, geography, or history. Teachers were ... practically forced by the pecuniary conditions of the Code to aim at, and be satisfied with reaching, a sordid minimum of attainment ... in which there was not necessarily a ray of intelligence. (Kerr, 1902, pp. 56-57)

The Revised Code dominated the 1860s and its effects were still being felt at the end of the century. Nevertheless, something of a new era began with the Liberal Member of Parliament William Forster's First Elementary Education Act of 1870. Perhaps I will explore more at a later date and in a further article, but I have put a year or more into the early years of the Inspectorate and that seems quite enough to be going on with.

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**ALAN PARR** is approaching his sixtieth year of teaching and indeed is still in the classroom every week. He has been a deputy head, local authority adviser, inspector for primary mathematics and assessment consultant for the Department for Education. In recent years, he has spent much time exploring the logbooks of Victorian elementary schools. He blogs at http://established1962.wordpress.com/ *Correspondence*: arparr@gmx.com