

Inspecting for Ofsted

A personal reflection

Martin McArthur

Abstract

Since its inception in 1993, Ofsted has been charged with maintaining standards in schools in England. But how has this worked out? A former inspector gives his account of the journey from the inside. His point of view can be summarised from a conversation he had with a senior Ofsted inspector on his first Inspection:

‘You’re still on their side. The side of the teachers.’

‘No. I’m not and I’m not on your side either. (Pointing to the pupils.) I’m on their side.’

Keywords: Ofsted; inspection; Bradford; Chris Woodhead; Tim Brighouse.

The Inspection Act of 1993 introduced a new framework for inspection to the public and, as head of the new inspecting body, Christopher Woodhead. The framework was well intentioned, and replaced the summative Her Majesty’s Inspectors reports on standards in education which appeared occasionally. I experienced a visit by an HMI while I was in a secondary school in Macclesfield. It was a gentle and soothing experience, the man in question revered as an almost god-like figure by the teachers.

In 1990, I became the head of English at Thornleigh College in Bolton and in 1994 we underwent one of the first Ofsted school inspections. The whole school was well prepared for the week-long experience. The team of inspectors were well trained and knowledgeable but pushed for time, as evidenced by their reluctance to engage with any departmental documents or written policies which we had spent months compiling. We got a favourable verdict, having improved results in English from 55 per cent A*-C to 77 per cent. The previous total represented serious underachievement in my view.

In 1996, I joined Bradford education as their English inspector. I trained and qualified as an Ofsted inspector in the same year, and between 1996 and 2001 took part in perhaps thirty-nine inspections in secondary, primary, middle and special schools. It was noticeable that the vast majority of my Ofsted colleagues had never themselves been inspected in school, though all inspection teams were graded from the start by Ofsted central. The Bradford team was very good and its senior members – two in particular – excellent role models. But while it proved a necessary and valuable money-raiser for the authority, it meant that most of Bradford’s subject advisers were absent for weeks at a time. Bad for Bradford. In addition, Chris Woodhead – the chief inspector – made it clear that the purpose of inspection was to find fault with schools rather than

to 'improve' them, and this I consistently disagreed with. The person who was most frequently my boss always referred to me as 'M – improvement through inspection'. Schools I had inspected sent me thank-you letters.

I held on strongly to the view that I was 'an independent inspector' and beholden to no one in my expertise and judgement of the quality of English lessons. However, I was not naive enough to believe that this was the general view taken either by government or by Woodhead. Political interference was rife from the start. The first Ofsted framework involved five-day inspections and specific instructions as to where to focus scrutiny. Thus was Chris Woodhead provided with a rich databank from which to draw his own conclusions, most notoriously when he extrapolated from lesson observations to pronounce that there were 15,000 unsatisfactory teachers in English schools.

The initial Ofsted framework had seven grades, ranging from excellent to very poor. Later these were reduced to four, with the grade of outstanding replacing that of excellent. Many inspectors played safe and stuck with the middle grades. A significant reason for this was the design of the lesson observation form, which too often led inspectors to conflate achievement (progress) and attainment (absolute assessed ability level).

In the four given sections – context, teaching, attainment and progress – you had to square the quality of teaching with the 'known' attainment of the school or cohort. So if you saw a 'brilliant' lesson but the school was not 'brilliant' you must be deceiving yourself. The roots of such an approach go all the way back to Lowe's comment on 'payment by results' in 1861, that if it's not cheap it will be efficient. By way of illustration, I recall how one of my later bosses called me aside in 2003 after being part of the 'independent schools' inspection process. I didn't like him, but I respected his ability and expertise. He had witnessed a series of dull and uninspiring science lessons and at the end of the week read out his overall judgement on the quality of teaching in science: unsatisfactory. But the lead Inspector censored him and said he must change it to the top grade because the results were so good.

High standards

In this and many other ways, inspection via the Ofsted framework only cemented inequality and unfairness. However, the early inspections were at least thorough. These days an inspection is likely to last only a day and a half, be undertaken by one or two individuals and be based on a pre-evaluation via a 'dashboard' which is openly published for all to see. The approach has reverted to one which positions a school compared to the national average. This weasel concept keeps many in the land of underachievement. Of course, those two words 'attainment' and 'achievement' are frequently confused or misused. Essentially, the first describes how good you are at the particular skill of

‘passing examinations’ while the second is used for progress made, or – as was the case when tables of free school meals percentages were used as a proxy for poverty and disadvantage – as an indicator of how hard it might be to achieve the higher attainment measures. This approach was abandoned. It did not support the increasing insistence on high standards for all.

Insistence on high standards did not always hold true for Ofsted teams. I witnessed Ofsted team members who proudly confessed that, to save time, they copied their archived judgements from previous inspections. (‘I’m doing thirty inspections this year’.) On one occasion I was part of a team inspecting a well-known Yorkshire school. At the final meeting, having given A grades to the English department and noted that maths and science attainment was even higher, I had to correct my colleagues’ grading of both subjects from B to A. Not all inspectors were well informed, or even capable of accurate judgement. One colleague remarked to me concerning his fellow judges: ‘you could count in seconds the time they would survive in the classroom’. I used a simple criterion for lesson grading: ‘How happy would I be for my child to be in this lesson?’

As a consultant and school improvement partner (SIP) from 2009 onwards I did have a lot of experience of schools grappling with the minimal two-day approach. If you were in the ‘above-average’ bracket you got a ‘light-touch’ inspection and if once judged ‘outstanding’ were able to avoid further scrutiny for five more years.

A good HMI (secondary only) knew how to finesse awkward situations and could be confident they would not be challenged. In my experience, Ofsted’s appeals system is analogous to the deportation appeals sent to Priti Patel. If they had escaped other work (in comparison to SIP work, for example, payments to Ofsted teams grew worse and worse) some felt happy to play safe and consign schools to poor outcomes. Such consigning became de rigueur after Gove’s appointment as secretary of state for education, in order to swell the academisation programme. This phase involved using Ofsted to ‘condemn’ schools below the expected performance criteria and then offering a one-track solution: become an academy or get absorbed into a multi-academy trust.

Previously, HMI both despised and openly mocked Woodhead. I heard this for myself during a four-day course in Lincolnshire run by HMI to train Ofsted trainers to deliver courses. In 1997, when Blair won a huge majority, many of us expected Woodhead’s five-year term to be a one-off. Blair and Blunkett had other ideas, including as regarded the inspection of local education authorities (LEAs). In 2000, I was part of the first official inspection of an LEA in Bradford. By now Woodhead had written a slim and vitriolic book called *Class War* in which he had rubbished the idea that class size matters for educational purposes. His book also contained a chapter calling for the abolition of LEAs.

Characteristically, when Labour floated the idea of LEA inspections, Tim Brighouse had confidently offered Birmingham as a guinea-pig for the trail run. You know the rest

of the story, but from the inside there was a more than interesting episode.

It had been reported to me by a longstanding Birmingham head that Brighthouse asked the lead HMI if he could promise the report would be his own work, and that it would not be rewritten by Woodhead. The HMI replied that he would indeed be the author, and if this were not the case he himself would not read out the conclusions to Brighthouse and his staff. At the appointed time he ostentatiously handed the report to a colleague to read. The subsequent dispute between Brighthouse and Woodhead is on the record.

Serco

In our case in Bradford the pre-inspection context report (PICSI) was completed by one HMI and was reasonably positive. I was at the time also lead officer for ethnic minority attainment and leading on the national strategy for literacy. When complete, the report referred to my team as ‘the jewel in the crown’, but overall the authority was put into special measures. The report, ‘written’ by a younger replacement HMI, had the hand of Woodhead all over it. The authority was in line with the national average in only one of the four main sections. In the report this section received a mere five words: Key Stage 1 is sound.

Nearly 40 per cent of Bradford’s primary-school population trace their ancestry back to poor Pakistani-heritage villages in Mirpur where illiteracy was rife. Even so, Bradford’s first schools – schools into which, planning for the future, we had put most of our resources – were ‘sound’. But our imminent change from first, middle and secondary to the two-tier system to better mirror the new standard assessment tests (SATs) regime at Key Stage 3 counted for nought. Other countries, such as Scotland and Sweden, did not treat Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 SATs as gold-standard measures of attainment and progress, but on these measures, Bradford was a failing authority.

Of the twenty-six adviser/inspectors in 2000, only myself and two others were still in post in 2002. However, our director of education retained his post – uniquely – but he did exhort us all not to question the Ofsted judgements and thus be ‘in denial.’ Later he was convicted for financial mismanagement elsewhere. So Bradford got Serco. Only the very poorly informed can be unaware of this company’s record, but Serco was almost unknown back then. It took only a brief encounter to realise: a) it was clueless, b) it was ruthless, and c) it was weak if you had the backing of head teachers, which I did. To give just one example of the pervasive lack of educational know-how in the company, Serco set English attainment-targets for KS2 in which boys outperformed girls. To have achieved this would have been a first not only for England but for the world. Serco was only interested in shareholders. Labour politicians were fooled for too long, but the DES became increasingly disillusioned, and I had several frank ‘off the record’ conversations as the ‘plan’ began to unravel.

Perhaps the political dimensions to all of this are illuminated by two incidents. First, when Woodhead presented his target of 76 per cent level 4 attainment at KS2 (a figure which HMI had worked on) politicians intervened and said 'let's round it up and make it 80 per cent!' (The figure eventually reached by the given date was 76 per cent, so Labour could not claim any credit.) And second, at an early meeting about the inspection strategy the speaker announced that the education secretary had promised to resign if the target was not met by the deadline in four years' time. I whispered to a colleague that none of the previous holders of the post had lasted more than eighteen months.

Final word. The actual experience of privatisation was not all bad. In LEAs, elected councillors of both main parties often had ideas way beyond what was possible to carry out. They were tight-fisted with money meant for kids, but not for funding the Lord Mayor's show. By contrast, Serco gave senior managers both scope and responsibility for managing budgets and were not worried about coffee bills. Their bottom line was the shareholders' dividends from the huge contract awarded over ten years, which totalled £340 million.

As for Ofsted, it did not raise standards nor improve education, any more than an MOT improves how good your car is. Mechanics do that for cars, and teachers do it for education. But when supported by an intelligent improvement agenda, such as the London challenge, and when that improvement is led by an expert such as Tim Brighouse, schools can really progress and pupils can, and do, learn and feel better about themselves. The school improvement partner programme enabled this to happen.

In 2010, Gove put paid to progress, and I got out soon after.

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