

SUCCESS- IS THIS *IT*?

My school was one of the first in the country to be inspected under the new Ofsted arrangements for the inspection of schools. This entailed a team of inspectors spending a few days in school in order to inspect and publicly report on the standards of teaching and learning in schools all across the country. I can still remember the day I received the large brown envelope containing the news: I was opening the day's post just before rehearsing with the entire school for the Christmas play. Anyone connected with Primary schools will know what a stressful time of the year this can be as teachers turn into playwrights, scenery designers and builders, directors and producers, entertainers and goodness knows what else. For me, personally, it was easily the most difficult term - suffice to say, I would have preferred to hear about Ofsted at any other time in the school year (if at all!) As a result, I decided not to tell my staff the news until all the term's events were over and they had had a chance to rest a bit. So I had to keep the news to myself for several weeks. This was difficult in itself but to make matters worse I found myself suddenly feeling SOLELY AND PERSONALLY responsible for everything in the school. One minute I would be writing up plans for what seemed like everything (was this policy up to date? What about that scheme of work? etc etc.); the next I was walking around the school re-doing displays or endlessly tidying them e.g. And at the same time I would be worrying about the Christmas party or play. I could not believe how stressful I found the whole thing. Wherever I looked I saw things to do- hours and hours of work!

Not for the first time, testing got me back on an even keel. First, I felt that things in the school were basically good- and that was both a relief and an encouragement, too. Then I received a really practical piece of advice which was to prove really valuable both for the school and for my own peace of mind: I was to take an hour a week completely away from the school and simply think about, and plan, what we, as a staff, should do for this inspection! I immediately saw this as a very good idea- away from the distractions of school life I knew I would be able to get far more work done. So I did this faithfully in the lead up to the Inspection and, I guess, in this way the whole of the school was reviewed in varying amounts of detail and depth. In this way the whole thing was more manageable and practical, although it

was not until later that I realised this was stressful enough for my staff. One said to me after the Inspection: “We did not much like it when you had your hour. We never knew what you were going to come up with next!” We had one particular shaky moment when a member of staff came back from a Course run by “an Ofsted Inspector.” She was worried that, because his expectations of schools were so high, if we got him on our inspecting team, then, as she said: “we had had it!”

Then the letter arrived telling us the name of our Lead Inspector and guess who it was? Of course, the very man! When I announced this as gently as I could to the member of staff concerned, she simply burst out crying! I tested everything I could think of: “How should I be with the Inspectors...and when I was teaching in front of them etc” When the inspection week came I felt as prepared as I could be. Everyone was extremely nervous- you never really know how children, especially young children, are going to react at any time, let alone one so strange as this. I had two inspectors observing me teach at times; at other times one would leave the classroom as another walked in! And this was the same for all members of staff. Everyone was interviewed about the school, including the caretaker, secretary, dinner ladies, even “helping mums” in the classrooms. We felt it was the most intense and stressful week imaginable.

The Inspection was to be a highlight of my teaching life, no less. Never before had my colleagues and I been praised so publicly. As Head, of course, I was singled out for praise. One morning, just after the Inspection, I walked into the staff-room and found – for only the second time in my career- a huge bottle of Champagne and a bouquet of flowers waiting for all the staff – the Chair Of Governors had come in early to surprise us! There was a special note for me which made me feel wonderful. Eventually the Inspector’s Report was published and it made very happy reading for us. The school was described as:

“A successful and effective school with overall high standards provided by effective leadership and management”

“Children were well cared for and the school effectively promoted the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of its pupils”

“Across the subjects the pupils in many cases were achieving beyond national expectations”

“The staff are hard working, professional and well liked by the children”

“The school is happy and busy with a real family atmosphere. It is the centre of village life”

In the weeks after the Inspection I even felt a bit like a celebrity! I was asked to help other schools prepare for their inspections; I gave talks to groups of Heads and others about the experience and I was generally recognised at all the Heads meetings I attended for sometime afterward. When I gave these talks etc I could not help but think of how my testing was now spreading beyond my own school! If only I could have acknowledged where I got all these ideas from- alas, I could just not see an appropriate way to do that!

Yes, after this Inspection, I felt both successful and proud of my school and all the people connected to it. Professionally (and a HUGE THANK YOU TO THE LATIHAN for this) I was being publicly declared to be...**A SUCCESS!**