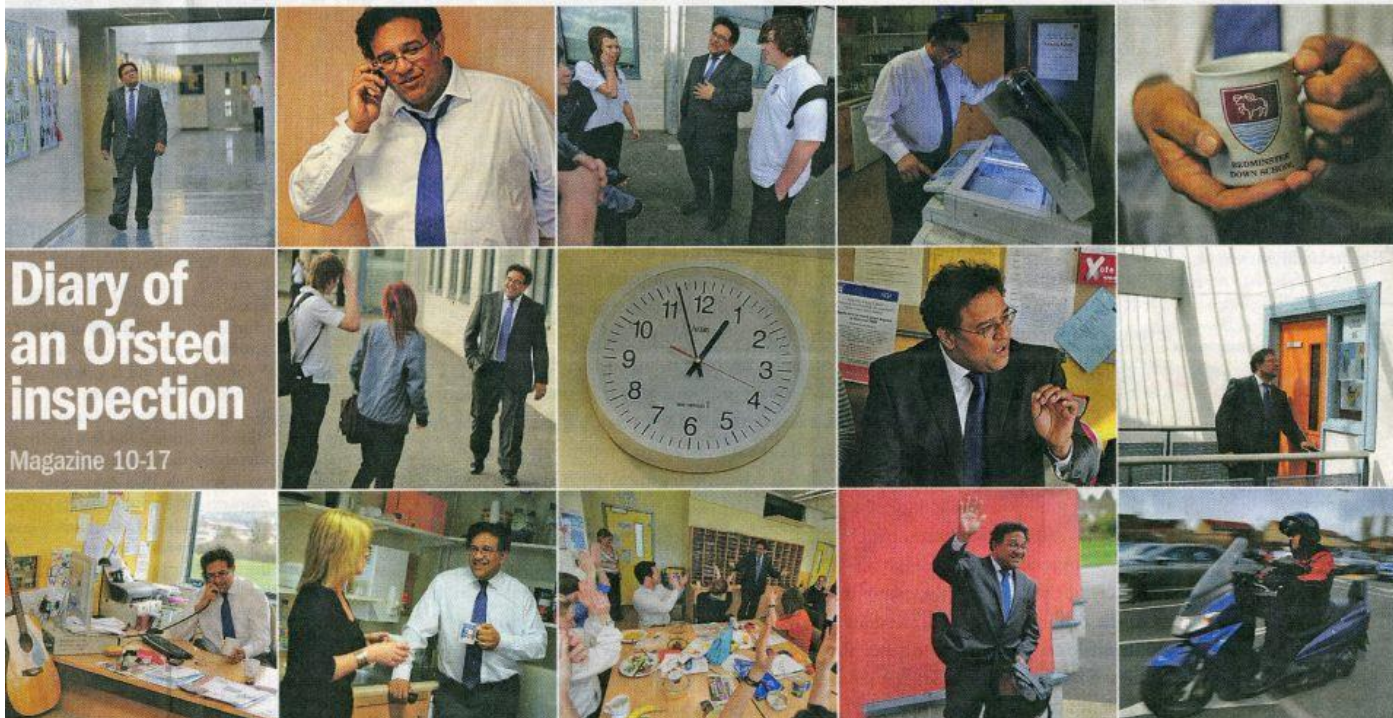




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Diary of an Ofsted inspection

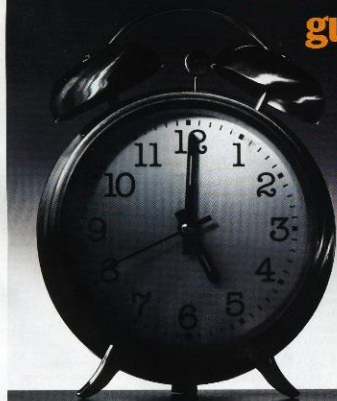
Magazine 10-17

magazine

23 April 2010

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Diary of an Ofsted inspection



● Sparklebox and the sex scandal ● The teacher gifts worth thousands

Cover story

7.35: arrive at school. The is already half full. I bet th get into the inspection rep

As head of a National Challenge school, Marius Frank knew a bad Ofsted visit could be disastrous. This is his diary of a nail-biting 72 hours. Photos by Jim Wileman



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Monday

10.53am I get a call on my mobile. "It's them," hisses my PA, "Phil [my deputy] is talking to them now." I take a deep breath. I'm not going to enjoy the next 72 hours.

12.32pm I speak on the telephone to the lead inspector for the first time. He sounds really friendly and affable. Damn. He is going to be difficult to hate. He arranges to telephone me tomorrow afternoon, the eve of the inspection, to discuss the pre-inspection briefing, giving us no time whatsoever to respond to any key issues. Unless, that is, you have anticipated them – or you don't sleep.

6.35pm Despite feeling sick, tense and anxious, I decide not to change my plans and drive out into the countryside to play the guitar at our local primary school's Year 6 camp. I have some mini-burgers and cheap fish fingers and, out of respect to my hosts, avoid the massive untouched pile of salad. Somewhat surprisingly, I don't feel sick any more because this is what teaching is all about.

Tuesday

3.48am I wake up alert, heart pounding. It's been a bit like this since I first saw the new Ofsted framework back in June. I have watched with satisfaction how my school has grown from strength to strength since I took up the post of headteacher in January 2000. Until National Challenge and "the new gold standard" came along, I was actually looking forward to the next Ofsted inspection. Not now.

Computer and kettle are powered up for a three-hour working breakfast.

Marius Frank arrives at school to face the inspectors: 'I'm not going to enjoy the next 72 hours'



7.35am Arrive at school. The car park is already half full: I bet that won't get into the inspection report.

In the 90 minutes before school starts, I chew the fat with colleagues. For some of us, this will be the sixth Ofsted or formal HMI visit in nine years. We've had some close calls, but the school has never been in special measures and has never been given notice to improve. Some kind of accolade, I suppose, for a city school. We prepare for tomorrow.

1.38pm I have committed heresy. I was out on lunchtime duty when the lead inspector called. We are doomed for sure.

1.48pm I call, apologise, and we get down to work. We quickly agree that the school is rated 4 for attainment (the lowest it could possibly be) and move on. As head of a National Challenge school, you get used to getting a cricket bat and smashing

My mouth goes dry. There is nowhere to go if attainment is a 4 (inadequate) and pupil progress is a 3 (satisfactory). You can be shot at the starting gate

it over your own head as hard as you can. But standards are standards. Even though in 2008, 30 per cent got five A*-C GCSEs, including English and maths, comfortably the best result in the school's history. The Herculean journey is acknowledged. But the rating stays a 4.

I pull out my joker: in terms of pupil progress, 30 per cent was just above our Fisher Family Trust [FFT] D estimate (representing progress in line with the top 25 per cent of schools in the country).

Although we flatlined in 2009, we were still above FFT D. Another blow with the cricket bat, this time from him: "No", he says emphatically, "I am calling pupil progress at the moment as satisfactory, or shall we say satisfactory-plus."

My mouth goes dry. There is nowhere to go if attainment is a 4 (inadequate) and pupil progress is a 3 (satisfactory). You can be shot at the starting gate: notice to improve or, even worse, special measures.

4.35pm Supportive emails are flying in from other headteachers and principals. I am not alone in my hatred of the new



framework. A colleague in charge of a high-performing church school whose sixth form welcomes many of our students is outraged on our behalf. "Your students are among the best we have," she writes. "Just call if you want me to come over and meet with them – I'll be there in 20 minutes." Another headteacher of a National Challenge school simply writes "Just f*cking do it!", his cunning use of an apostrophe enabling the email to get through the local authority's profanity filter. This kind of support cannot be measured, and makes you stronger.

7.50pm Arrive home, quick pit stop in the kitchen, then back to the PC to get the data nailed and draw up a schedule of meetings for Day 1. It's going to be a long night.

Wednesday

3.26am Wake up alert, heart pounding. I lie there, thinking. I feel I am on guard duty over my school, my teachers and my kids. My body is preparing for battle, and I'm glad I have kept up regular attendance at the gym. On the way to school on my motorbike, I am nearly killed three times. This is less than usual.

7.05am Get to school. The car park is pretty full already. I still have the guitar in my office from Monday, so I return it to the music department. On the way there, I burst into the staffroom and blast out the opening bars of *Eye of the Tiger*. If the school tannoy system had been working everyone would have had an earful.

7.58am The Ofsted team arrives and strides down the drive. The inspectors look humanoid, which is a good sign. I have met some HMIs more closely related to the Terminator than Adam and Eve.

8.10am My first face-to-face with the lead inspector: I sense that both of us are up for straight talking and constructive dialogue. We go through the programme for the day and the inspection is underway.

9.30am A quick walk around the school and all seems well. It feels good: I am growing in confidence.

10.40am Breaktime. The lead inspector is obviously an ex-head. You can see him twitch as he passes litter, resisting that innate urge to pick it up. He leaves it to me.

12.40pm The lead inspector and I have a mini-conference. He needs me to know

'I speak on the telephone to the lead inspector for the first time. He sounds really friendly and affable. Damn. He is going to be difficult to hate'



that things are not going well. He is seeing too much satisfactory teaching and learning and not enough good. This puts things in the balance. I know it, and he knows it. We are hovering between satisfactory and a "category".

He notes that lessons are well planned, but he makes it clear that they are not seeing enough opportunities for children to demonstrate independent learning.

He is, however, extremely complimentary about the behaviour of the children. I describe the journey we have been on over the past five years, how we have fought hard to get pupils to own the behaviour agenda. He seems impressed.

2.35pm I cannot resist another walk around the school. What I see is what I usually see: calm atmosphere, pupils purposefully engaged, teachers at their task. We have come a long way in 10 years. Supply teachers actually enjoy working here, and want to come back. I bet that won't get into the report.

3.15pm The school day ends and first reports are coming in from the teachers who have been observed. The complimentary feedback they are getting doesn't tally with the lack of good teaching that is being reported to me by HMI. I am confused.

4.30pm I am invited to sit in on the Ofsted team's first group discussion on its findings from Day 1. It is a change to the framework, my being there. If things are going well, you can sit there preening yourself. For schools in challenging circumstances, it can be a 90-minute slow-motion car crash.

My suspicions are confirmed: the team is not seeing enough good teaching and learning. Many of the other ratings are looking favourable, but everything will hang on the limiting grade of overall school effectiveness.

What is also clear (and they are keen to point it out) is that they are seeing bundles of really good practice in nearly all other areas of school life, practice that →



in other circumstances could easily be rated as outstanding. But if the collision between standards and pupil progress indicates inadequate, nothing else can be better than satisfactory. I am not really listening. I can't stop thinking about the consequences of a satisfactory rating for pupil progress.

6.04pm The Ofsted team leaves for the day, and my leadership team goes to work. There is considerable indignation and bullishness, with many keen to highlight episodes that have gone unobserved completely, or missed in a 20-minute observation of the wrong part of the lesson. The PE department is particularly angry, as no one from the Ofsted team has dared venture out of the building yet. I tell them that I will show the inspectors how to operate the external doors (just push).

We decide to compile a short list of tips for staff to highlight good practice, especially when being observed. I ask colleagues to email me with their thoughts and we leave school around 8pm.



9.55pm On the PC again, and the emails are flying in. I start to compile the tips, but in truth I need to sleep. I go to bed around 11pm with the task barely started.

Thursday

4.10am Wake up alert, heart pounding. PC, kettle, edit and compile list of tips and email it to the leadership team to distribute to staff. Prepare for my 8am meeting with lead inspector.

On the way to school, I remember my feelings when reading the new framework. As a public service manager, responsible for a £5 million annual budget, a £14 million new build, 100 staff and 1,000 pupils and their families, I have no problem with being held rigorously accountable for what is under my control. But the Ofsted framework also holds me accountable for the forces at work in the community I have chosen to serve. Call me picky, but this doesn't seem fair.

I still have the guitar in my office, so I return it to the music department. On the way, I burst into the staffroom and blast out the opening bars of 'Eye of the Tiger'

8.03am My morning meeting with the lead inspector. I decide to challenge him on his interpretation of school progress. He admits that a school with high standards on entry and performing like us (at FFT D) has every chance of getting an outstanding rating. Yet here we are, potentially looking at a "category". I decide there is no point in having a discussion with him about "fairness". Day 2 of the inspection is upon us.

8.32am Eight minutes before whole-staff briefing. I meet the leadership team. We need staff to be aware of the critical nature of the next four hours. But, equally, we do not want to spook people into teaching with a monkey on their back, ripping up their plans, changing things at the last minute. The key is around independent learning. I make a weak joke about using the president's speech at the end of the sci-fi film *Independence Day* to rally the troops. Within a minute someone has been on the web and I have a copy of it in my hands.

8.40am Staff briefing: we give out the sheet of top tips and stress the need to make learning more visible and less controlled. I then read out the speech:

We will not go quietly into the night.

We will not vanish without a fight.

We're going to live on.

We're going to survive.

Today, we celebrate our Independent Learning Day!

There are claps and cheers. The mood is lighter, less intense. My staff pour into the corridor in good spirits and determined to shine. I sense we have turned a corner.

10.54am After a very quick meeting with his team, the lead inspector confirms that things seem to be going better. We discuss the key recommendations that will appear in the report. We talk about the issue of independent learning and outstanding teaching. He describes another ➔

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school where more than 20 members of staff are on masters programmes and further learning packages. I say I have 15 staff on Merlot, 10 on Valium and one on performance enhancing Viagra. No smile.

However, he is relaxed, and it is clear that only a monumental cock-up in the next couple of hours could swing us over the edge. I realise where this inspection is going. We are going to get through on a caveat.

11.39am The inspectors finally make it to the gym and the head of PE returns to her office satisfied they will see some excellent practice. However, a few minutes later, she hears the gym door slam, and someone muttering "Fuck!... Fuck!... Fuck!..." She is fearful, but then realises it is only one of our lads with Tourette's going for his mid-morning medication.

12.55pm The Ofsted team has taken to its room and is starting the process of compiling its notes and judgments. I am glad the inspectors have warmed to the school. They appear to be acknowledging the incredible human journey we are on and that we have no limits on our ambition. But what if a school like ours is inspected by a pedant who clutches at each word in the framework with the fervour of an Old Testament prophet? It doesn't bear thinking about.

3.00pm The past few hours have taken an age to pass. The Ofsted team files into my office to walk me through my second car crash in two days.

The lead inspector begins his feedback and says: "Thank you for this, thank you for that". Inside I think: "Oh for God's sake get on with it... put me out of my misery... here it comes... YES! YES! YES!"

Satisfactory for how well pupils achieve. Despite the team judging pupil progress to be satisfactory and attainment low, we are to be an exceptional case: we are improving securely and quickly.

I continue to hear and write notes, but I am not listening. The critical moment has passed. It is hard to describe my feelings.

At the end, the lead inspector asks me what it was like to be in on the inspection team's discussions. I say it was like having a prostate examination in a shopping mall. They laugh in a humanoid way.

4.33pm The inspectors retire to pack up their belongings, before the final (shorter) presentation to the leadership team, local authority representatives and governors.

The mood among staff at the end of the inspection is of jubilation and relief



The lead inspector asks me what it was like to be in on the inspection team's discussions. I say it was like having a prostate examination in a shopping mall

My team has been waiting and can tell from the expression on my face that all is well. I scuttle out to find a quiet corner to phone my wife. I find myself crouched down behind the photocopier in the empty school office, crying as I leave a

Raising the bar?

Changes to Ofsted's inspection framework introduced last September have drawn howls of outrage and seen a doubling in the number of schools judged "inadequate".

The *TES* reported last month that the first six months of the new system had seen the proportion of schools put in special measures or given notice to improve increase from 4 per cent to 7.5 per cent. The number judged

message. Last time I was like this was when my first child was born 16 years ago.

4.40pm A final meeting and everyone is looking relaxed, both teams, both leaders. Once we pass through the limiting grades, and the satisfactory for overall effectiveness, we hit a purple patch of "goods". We get more "goods" than three years ago.

Two things are said that I will definitely use in future publicity. First, it is noted that behaviour was good or better in 100 per cent of key stage 4 lessons observed. How brilliant is that? Second, one of the team says we have the talent in the school to move from good to outstanding. Utterly brilliant.

5.55pm I ride home, blinking back more

outstanding had fallen from 19 to 9.2 per cent.

The new framework puts a greater emphasis on raw exam results, regardless of school intake. Schools with "low" exam results will be unable to achieve an overall outstanding or good rating except in "the most exceptional circumstances".

Ofsted says the new-style inspections are an attempt to "raise the bar".

Nick Morrison



tears, and trying to get what we've just been through into perspective. Ofsted sees itself as the guardian of standards. But who looks after our passion, principles and values? We are being force-fed a processed diet of national strategy after national strategy to improve the health of our education system. But it feels devoid of the moral fibre that keeps us going.

We should be neither demonising nor glorifying the role of Ofsted in the big educational picture, especially when a school is taking the fight to the community it serves. We are in the front line; they are not. Should we not think of them as Kitchener's auditors: checking the top button of our tunic is done up and our boots nicely polished before we go over the top?

Towards the end of Day 2, the lead inspector asked how long I had been head here. I said "10 years." He recounted how he had visited a school similar to mine, serving a similarly deprived community. The school was calm and purposeful and value-added measures were through the roof. I thought, oh boy, here comes the lecture. He went on to say that he asked the head how he managed to do this. The head's reply was



that it had taken 15 years.

We both smiled. We actually weren't that different, the lead inspector and me. We both had a burning passion to improve the life chances of young people today. We both realised it wasn't always easy to do. And we both realised that Rome wasn't built between no-notice inspections.

● *Marius Frank is headteacher of Bedminster Down School, Bristol*

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