

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS  
IJS - 17 INSPECTING THE INSPECTORATE 2:

HMI JACK FEATHERSTONE EXAMINES  
CURRICULUM MATERIALS PREPARED  
BY AN INTEGRATED STUDIES COURSE  
IN THE HUMANITIES DURING A VISIT  
TO A COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL.

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

IJS - 17 INSPECTING THE INSPECTORATE 2:  
ON THE ROAD WITH THE HMIS

44 Canfield Gardens,  
London, N.W.6.  
England  
21st May, 1972

Mr. Richard Nolte  
Executive Director  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, N.Y. 10017  
USA

Dear Mr. Nolte:

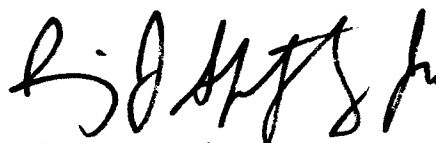
This newsletter is the second in a series of newsletters in which I examine the operation of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools in England and Wales.

In this section of the continuing essay about HMIs, I report my experiences while accompanying a number of HMIs on their rounds. I concentrate on the activities of one HMI in particular, whose experiences I use to illustrate the work of the others.

I remind you that the pagination of the newsletter follows the numbering of the continuing essay as a whole.

Let us now examine what it is like to be on the road with the HMIs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'I. J. Spitzberg, Jr.', with a stylized, cursive script.

Irving J. Spitzberg, Jr.

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

III. ON THE ROAD WITH THE HMIS

The HMI is usually a man in his late 40's or early 50's who went to a grammar school (selective state school) or public school (selective private school), then Oxbridge or one of the older red-bricks, and who taught in a grammar school. He entered the Inspectorate when he was in his early 40s.<sup>1</sup> "He" is likely to be a man, although there were 142 women HMIs in 1968 and perhaps a few more now.

But this portrait of the HMI tells us very little about the HMI as he actually goes about his job. To provide a life-like picture I shall now focus on my selected encounters with a number of inspectors on their jobs during the months of January, 1972. During that month I spent a number of days travelling with HMIs in London, the Midlands, and the North of England. In academic and professional backgrounds, they ranged from a non-graduate former head of a secondary modern school in the North to a Ph.D. in educational psychology who had been an engineer. In spite of the diversity of the Inspectors I met, there was much more in common among them than different, as one might expect in a self-selecting and yet highly selective and competitive elite.

Perhaps the most appropriate picture of the Inspectors I met was given by the Senior Chief Inspector to the Parliamentary Select Committee when he described the sort of person the HMIs looked for when appointing new recruits:

I suppose the first quality we look for is modesty and a capacity to advise and even, perhaps, persuade without ever appearing to cajole - and certainly not to steamroller anyone. A candidate who came to us and said he wanted to join because he wished to spread the message more widely would meet with a certain amount of suspicion on our part. We want people to be enthusiastic but not missionaries, persuaders and advisers without thinking they have a message from heaven or a particular gospel which it is important for the world to know.<sup>2</sup>

Without exception among the HMIs I have met, the Inspectorate got what the Senior Chief Inspector said he wanted in this description, for better and for worse.

Not only does the Inspectorate recruit the sort of man described above, but also everything about the early years of the HMI's life on the road is designed to encourage a special attitude. There is only limited formal training for HMIs; a few special conferences for the recruits and the ongoing series of meetings and conferences in

1. See evidence from the Department of Education and Science, Esp. SC p.6 for entry ages.

2. SC p9, s5

which all HMIs join. However, there is a "mentoring" process: each new HMI is assigned to a mentor -- an experienced HMI -- for a year. The new recruit follows the master around and observes how an HMI operates. Also, the mentor arranges for him to spend time with other HMIs. The training is in fact a formalized process of socialization. To be more precise than usually possible with this particular bit of sociological jargon, it appears that the HMI is exposed to the whole range of problems faced by an HMI with the watchful tutelage of an experienced colleague. By both example and explicit criticism, the senior HMI helps his pupil learn how HMIs are expected to behave.

Also, early on in his career, the HMI is expected to carry out the generalist functions for which he has had no previous experience and no formal training whatsoever: for example, the grammar school history teacher is confronted with a problem involving the teaching of primary school maths in a central city school in a working class neighborhood. And no matter how evangelical the initial recruit is -- and my bet is that HMI recruits are only rarely firebrands to begin with, given the selection criteria posited by the Senior Chief Inspector -- the number and range of new demands made upon him are likely to be a sobering experience. And an experience which he must endure for one year as a probationer without an appointment with tenure. Civil service tenure and confirmation of the appointment by the Queen in Council occur only at the end of the year's probation.

Although I met no revolutionaries or even enthusiastic reformers, I can still report a positive impression of each of the HMIs as individuals and all of them as a group: Never have I met a group of men of such uniformly high intellectual caliber, strong social concern, sound professional competence; nor have I met a group of nicer guys (I only met men). Having said this I must also clearly indicate that as a group all of the HMIs met the constraints of the expectations voiced by the Senior Chief Inspector, and, as I shall say again in greater detail, at a very high price to the vigour of the Inspectorate and to the life of the British education system.

In order to provide a more detailed and dynamic picture of the HMI, it will be helpful to concentrate on my day with one of the HMIs in particular and then to elaborate on his experiences with comparisons drawn from my time with other Inspectors. I choose as the subject for this detailed report HMI Jack Featherstone, not because he is a typical HMI -- that he definitely is not -- but because in spite of his personal atypicality, his mode of operation is itself quite similar to that of all of those I observed. And also because he is such an intrinsically interesting person.<sup>3</sup>

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3. I might add that each Inspector I met had an intriguing personal biography.

Jack Featherstone came to the Inspectorate after a successful and modestly famous career as the headmaster of an experimental secondary modern school in Whitworth near Rochdale in the North of England<sup>4</sup>. During the early sixties, Mr. Featherstone ran his school with mixed ability groupings of students, integrated disciplines, non-academic "life-centered" courses, and no uniforms for students. All of these together added up to a revolutionary approach to the secondary education of the lower 80% of the pupil population in England. Today in England schools with some or all of these approaches are growing in number; particularly the secondary modern and the new comprehensive secondary schools.

Featherstone is an unusual personality for the Inspectorate. He started teaching after the Second World War, at first as a temporary teacher without qualifications. He obtained admittance to a college of education through private study and attending night school classes. He qualified as a teacher at the age of 30. Yet within five minutes of meeting this man it is quite obvious that he is highly intelligent and original in his approach to a variety of educational and social problems. And he has a personal history of translating his personal concern into meaningful action. In addition to his record as a headmaster, he can claim that until his appointment to the Inspectorate he was an active Labor Councillor in his town and Labor Party politician throughout Lancashire.

Although on all counts Jack Featherstone is an exceptional man and an unusual HMI, his mode of operation, which I shall now describe, is quite typical of other HMIs.

I met Mr. Featherstone on the night of 24th January, 1972, after he had just returned from a Nottingham teachers' center where a number of teachers had been watching a special BBC-TV program on the problems of ROSLA<sup>5</sup>. Mr. Featherstone had led the discussion after the show. He regularly participated in teacher inservice training programs in his area. As a specialist Inspector in the problem area of secondary curriculum reform, he had himself organized inservice training courses on ROSLA. Such inservice training programs are an important activity of the Inspectorate. However, on this particular night, the inservice training program had been organized by another agency and he had been an invited guest.

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4. A secondary modern school is a non-selective school under the pre-comprehensive English system.
  5. An acronym which stands for the "raising of the school leaving age, in secondary schools from 15 to 16 which will occur in the fall of this year.

The next day Mr. Featherstone visited the Bingham Toothill Comprehensive School in Nottinghamshire. This school was not on Mr. Featherstone's general list, but the General HMI for that school had suggested that he visit it, because it was engaged in a number of interesting experiments in preparation for ROSLA, which the General Inspector thought Featherstone ought to see. Also, the physical plant of the school is a joint-use facility-- that is, parts of the school plant are regularly used by community groups and it was designed with this shared use in mind and Featherstone thought that I would enjoy seeing this unusual facility in operation. Finally, he visited this school because the Headmaster, Mr. Roy Hopwood, had been a deputy head and adviser in Mr. Featherstone's former school area. So Featherstone thought he ought to renew his acquaintance. This catalogue of reasons for visiting this particular school highlights the multiple purposes of HMI visits to a specific school.

The first activity of the day was a brief chat with the headmaster. In this particular visit, the chat was as much an exercise in reminiscence as an actual dialogue about the school. But Featherstone carefully extracted from the conversation the Head's views about the problems he faced in his new school and an overall idea about the Head's impressions of the school's strengths and weaknesses.

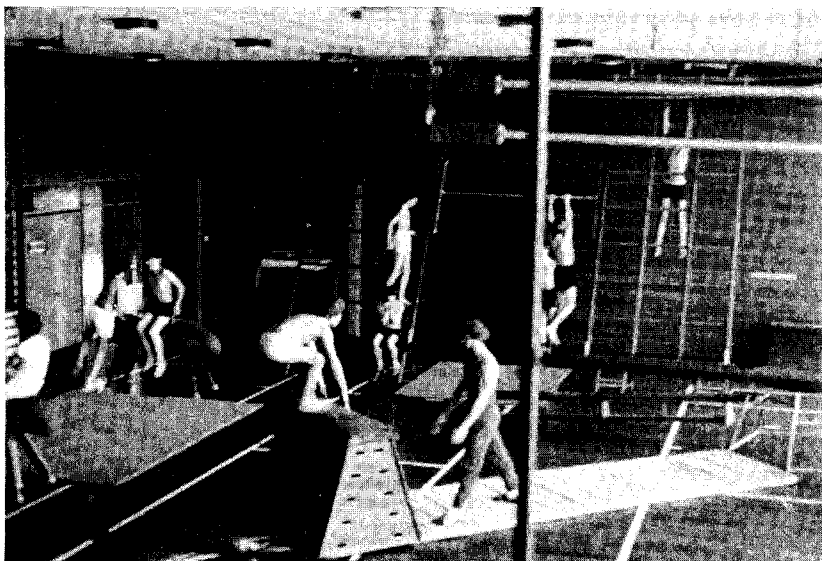
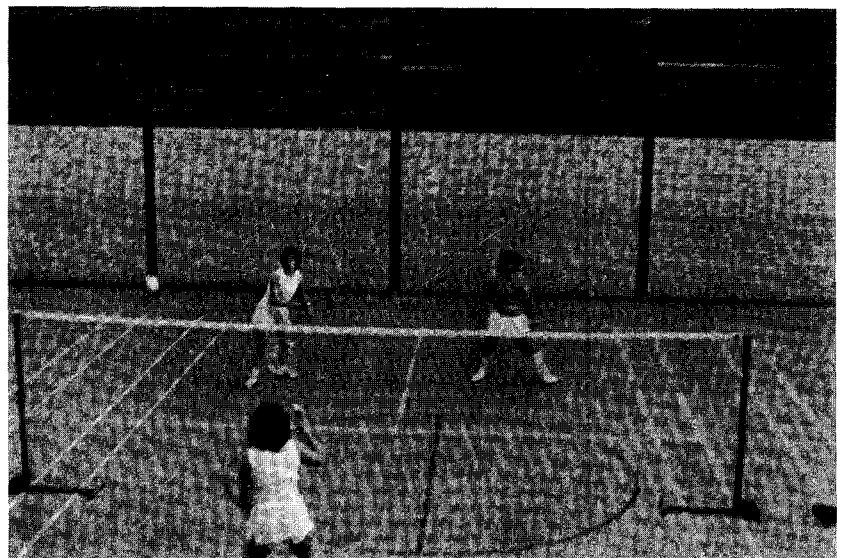
The initial chat with the headmaster is a ritual part of an HMI visit which appears to play a very important part in the HMI's role as adviser to a school. It seems to be especially significant to the Head, because the HMI is one of the few "equals" he will see during the course of his school year, at least within the walls of his school. The headmaster is an absolute monarch -- if not tyrant -- in the British educational system. The substantive educational policy-making power is vested in him by the 1944 Education Act as well as by custom. So within the school most heads approach their staffs and pupils from Mt. Olympus. However, I should hasten to add that the headmaster of Bingham Toothill Comprehensive School is clearly an exception to the rule: he treated his staff with great respect. The conversation with Jack Featherstone was obviously viewed by him as an opportunity to carry on a discussion with a knowledgeable professional colleague about the problems of the school. In this case the discussion was very informal, but in other visits which I observed, the initial conversation was a formal ritual indeed -- both the HMI and the head entered the talk with a prepared list of topics for discussion and investigation during the day. In all school visits, this initial conversation set the parameters for the conduct of the whole visit.

During the morning we concentrated on the joint-use aspects of the school. We saw the physical education facilities being used by young matrons as well as students in the school; and we saw a youth club section of the school as well as a pub for adults, both of which were vacant during the school day and only occasionally used for other purposes by the students. Later we were told that it was hoped to involve adults in the actual educational program of the school in



THE BINGHAM TOOTHILL  
COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL  
IN NOTTINGHAMSHIRE  
IS A JOINT-USE FACILITY...

WHERE YOUNG MATRONS PLAY  
BADMINTON IN ONE PART OF  
THE GYMNASIUM...



WHILE THE PUPILS  
DO GYMNASTICS IN  
ANOTHER PART OF  
THE BUILDING.

the near future by inviting them to participate as students in the sixth form<sup>6</sup>.

The reports of staff indicated that the joint-use of the physical facilities had been remarkably free of any conflicts, although the community served was quite diverse in socio-economic background. And the success of the school in the community was partially indicated by the fact that in spite of the coal strike which was then in progress and which had shut down many other schools in Nottinghamshire, the coal miners who sent their children to this school made sure that enough coal was supplied to heat it and keep it open.

The only sign of conflict created by the joint-use of the school was in regard to future plans to involve adults as students in school programs: and the conflict would not be with or between the adults but instead with a local college of further education which would find the competition unwelcome.

Mr. Featherstone showed a keen interest in the experiences of the school with joint-use provision, because he had been involved in the planning of a new joint-use facility elsewhere in the county and intended to share his impressions of the way in which the joint-use idea was being handled at Bingham with the L.E.A.

We spent the remainder of the day talking to staff who were teaching integrated studies courses. These courses were designed to provide interesting academic experiences to the widest possible ability groups of pupils. The uniform experience of comprehensive schools in Britain is that the traditional curriculum, which was designed for the top of the ability range, requires new approaches to the curriculum.

Bingham Toothill had two interesting integrated courses: one in the humanities and one in the creative arts. Jack Featherstone was interested in both, because he had served on the sub-panel of the national panel which was concerned, among other matters, with secondary curriculum problems.

In his conversation with the chairman of the Humanities integrated course, Featherstone was the epitome of the good listener: a characteristic of all HMIs I met. He listened to the chairman describe how he organized history and geography teachers each to teach the whole curriculum in the integrated humanities sequence, which was a combination of both disciplines. This course dealt with local history and geography during the first year, British history and geography during the second, and it was planned to emphasize world history and geography when the course moved into its third year next year. The chairman said that many of the teachers were finding teaching outside of their own specialities to be quite difficult; therefore he might undertake differentiated teaching within the integrated course next year.

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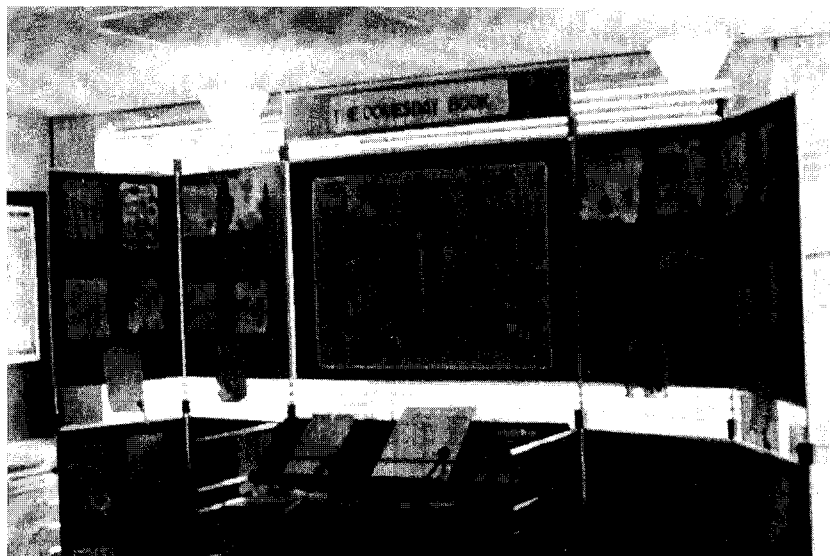
6. The last two years of secondary school.





ABOVE: HMI JACK FEATHERSTONE TALKS TO THE CHAIRMAN OF THE INTEGRATED HUMANITIES COURSE AT BINGHAM TOOTHILL ABOUT A MOCK-UP OF A BIT OF THE DOMESDAY BOOK MADE BY STUDENTS IN THE COURSE.

BELOW: A DISPLAY ABOUT THE DOMESDAY BOOK IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE HISTORY SEGMENT OF THE INTEGRATED HUMANITIES COURSE. THIS DISPLAY EMPHASIZES THE LOCAL INSCRIPTIONS ABOUT NOTTINGHAMSHIRE.



After listening to the chairman, Featherstone shared his experiences with the problem of integrated Humanities courses and talked about examples of how other teachers had dealt with similar problems which were drawn from other parts of the country as well as nearby schools. Out of this conversation grew a discussion of what support the Humanities course received from sources outside of the school. It appeared that there was very little external support: most of the curriculum was devised and prepared in the school, because the staff found most published materials for integrated courses not to be very helpful. And only recently had there been any discussion about the problems of teaching these courses with staff from other schools. Featherstone especially noted this last comment.

Our next conversation with the staff teaching the integrated creative arts curriculum had a different emphasis. The creative arts program combined a number of different arts and crafts experiences for students as well as a special and intensive experience in one. The physical plant for the program had recently been converted to the needs of the integrated course. But there were still a number of architectural problems: e.g., the woodwork shop was supposed to be an open plan classroom with free movement from area to area, but the room was a converted auditorium which, because of the placement of a new wall, required walking the width of the room on a stage in order to move from one half to the other. The problem of architectural design and teaching effectiveness was common theme I met in my visits with inspectors: the HMI is known to be in a position to canvass and integrate these complaints into a form which might have some impact on future school construction. Featherstone noted all comments.

We ended the day with a final conversation with the headmaster and his deputies, as well as the man who was planning the school's approach to the problems of ROSLA. The remainder of the day was spent discussing ROSLA. It is important here to emphasize once again Featherstone's national reputation as an innovator in this field, because of his own record as a headmaster dealing with mixed ability groups. He commented approvingly to the headmaster about what he had seen in the school during the day. But then he asked about other areas of the curriculum.

The coordinator of ROSLA planning said that he was having difficulties in the sciences. He said that the teachers in these disciplines felt that the traditional courses were necessary for all ability groups because of the demands which the secondary school examinations placed on the students. In response to this remark, Featherstone talked about the various alternatives to the traditional examination system (which is set by regional boards) and noted the success in the school itself of new continuous assessment examinations administered by the school but validated by an external assessor and the regional examination board. He said the scientists could do the same.

But Featherstone said that he was not the man to talk to the scientists about their problems, because scientists were unlikely to listen to a former English and drama teacher as an expert. Instead, he said he would ask a colleague to visit the school and talk to the scientists about their problems. This colleague was a biologist by training, who was dealing with curriculum development, including the problem of integrating science courses for mixed ability groups, as the new Staff Inspector with national responsibility in the field.

This conversation about the problem of integrating secondary science courses provides a typical example about how the HMI as a generalist invokes the specialist services of his colleagues in a way quite helpful to the schools. Jack Featherstone, because of his experiences as a general Inspector, could well recognize both the problem and his own limitations. And because of the informal but relatively effective internal communications system of the Inspectorate, he knew exactly whom to call. And he did.

So the day ended.

The next day I travelled with another Inspector, but Featherstone gave me a preview of what would happen in his assignment and related it to his previous week's work. He was going to Curzon Street with the Chief Education Officer of Nottinghamshire to negotiate the authorization for new construction in the local education authority with the territorial officer in the Buildings Branch. He took this assignment as the District Inspector for Nottinghamshire. Prior to his actual foray to London, he and the Chief Education Officer had spent a couple of days discussing the building priorities for the local area. Featherstone knew first hand the general condition of the physical plant of the schools in the area. And he also had a good idea about the general constraints placed by the budget on the possibilities for new construction -- especially that the Secretary had placed highest priority on new primary school construction at the expense of most secondary school building except that needed to provide roofs over the heads of children. The construction list being negotiated was for the last part of the '70s.

The HMI role in preparing the local authority for its confrontation with Curzon Street is illustrated in Featherstone's contribution to one change in the Nottinghamshire submission: the authority wanted a new secondary school which would be comprehensive with a full-fledged sixth form. But the enrollment projections indicated that there would not be enough pupils for a large sixth form until well after the school was due to open. And because of the emphasis on primary school construction, it was quite possible that the secondary school proposal might be in jeopardy. So Featherstone suggested that the local authority postpone the construction of the sixth form component of the secondary school building until the next construction list and absorb

the early, and fairly small, sixth form in the rooms for the other forms. This suggestion was accepted by the authority. And when the actual negotiations took place with the Buildings Branch of the Department, the HMI would strongly support the local education authority position.

Especially in regard to budgetary matters, it appears that the District Inspector combines the role of communicator of constraints from the center with advocacy for the local education authority's position once the submission has been mutually agreed upon between the HMI and the Chief Education Officer. This advocacy takes a more general policy form as well: Some District Inspectors feel very strongly that the way the priority on primary school construction was being implemented is detrimental to the overall educational program in the country. And it is said some HMIs have formally submitted memoranda to this effect. The actual impact of this general policy advocacy is yet to be seen. But no doubt it has contributed to enhanced roles for the HMIs in their dealings with the local education authorities.

This brief description of one HMI's activities gives a representative picture of the substance of an HMI's life in relation to the schools and the local authorities. Featherstone's style is much more outgoing, nononsense, and informal than most Inspectors, but his mode of operation is quite typical. HMIs bend over backward to keep from appearing to interfere. Indeed, only one HMI I observed ever really lectured his teacher and/or head audience: and he was an irrepressible Welshman, whose lecture was both informative and amusing; though still a lecture.

The visit to the Bingham Toothill Comprehensive School was representative of a visit to a good school, because it was a fine school indeed. I did accompany one HMI on a visit to a school which I judged to be bad, which therefore must remain nameless in order to protect the HMI and the school from any injustice in my impressions. The HMI went to this school with some apprehension, because it had had a number of difficulties in the previous year. The Head! had been in office only a year, and had been ill for part of that time. So because of the importance of the headmaster in the life of a British school, the institution had been drifting. After meeting the Head my personal impression was that the drift must have been a vast improvement over life with this particular headmaster in residence. If a Welsh HMI lectured his headmaster, then this headmaster combined a lecture and a sermon for the HMI and myself during our visit. And the substance of this headmaster's oration was a most intolerant diatribe against members of his staff and the local authority. This distasteful performance was combined with a clear indication that most of the work of the school had been delegated to the deputy head, which was the only redeeming factor in the life of the school.

The HMI's response to the obvious continuing problems of the school and the headmaster was to keep the proverbial stiff upper lip and to listen to the Head and talk to other members of the staff. This particular HMI used the self-conscious strategy of changing the subject when the Head moved into a diatribe and then returning to a problem again later on. However, the HMI never once really challenged the rubbish the headmaster was throwing at us. He justified his approach by saying that although the school was weak by a number of measures, it was not really a bad school. And he felt that he had to keep the channels of communication open with the headmaster, if, for no other reasons, in order to support the good work of the deputy head in difficult conditions. My impression is that many other HMIs would have adopted exactly the same strategy. Which may indicate a problem in the approach of HMIs to difficult schools, in that the fear of appearing to interfere may slide into diffidence in the face of incompetence. However, I should also say that this HMI's approach to the problems of this school was quite justifiable and he clearly had thought out what he considered to be the best strategy. Nevertheless, were there not this often healthy fear of actually interfering or appearing to interfere, one would have expected a more vigorous response from the HMI to the conditions in this school.

I could offer a number of additional examples from my days on the road with HMIs to illustrate the nature of their work in the schools. But I believe this small sample provides the reader with a fairly representative taste.

To conclude this anecdotal account, it will be helpful to recall the three HMI roles and see how the categories relate to this description of actual HMIs on the road.

As a communicator, one sees the HMI sharing the experiences of one school with those in another which must deal with similar problems: Jack Featherstone's discussion of integrated Humanities programs with the chairman of the Bingham Toothill Comprehensive School Humanities Program.

As an adviser, one finds the HMI recommending possible courses of action to headmasters or teachers that he believes to be appropriate in the particular school (or to the chief educational officer in the local education authority): Featherstone talking about continuous assessment examinations at Bingham Toothill. Or if the HMI does not feel competent to make specific suggestions, he calls in a colleague to help out: Featherstone on integrated science courses.

Finally, as an administrator, he personally talks to all probationary teachers when he visits the schools: in the foregoing account we have no examples, but a number of the HMIs had probationary teachers in their schools when I visited with them, and they made it a point to spend some time talking to them.

One additional role of the Inspector, which cuts across the other roles, is apparent from the account of Jack Featherstone's experiences: that of ombudsman. Headmasters, chief education officers, and teachers with problems share them with the HMI with the expectation that he will get the message to the appropriate place. And HMIs usually do -- either in the form of communicating the particular complaint or noting it for further advice on policy later on. This role is illustrated by Featherstone's interest in complaints about architectural design. Word will get back to the architects in the future.

This account of the activities of HMIs in the schools provides a description of how the Inspectorate relates to some of its constituencies. Next we must turn to the Inspector's first and foremost constituent: the Secretary of State for Education and Science.

Received in New York on May 31, 1972