

**Eden Primary School**

Dear Mr McCallion,

I am a serving primary school principal who conducted research into the inspection process. My research was in the form of a 100,000 word thesis, with the title being "School Inspection and School Improvement: A Case Study." This research led to me being awarded the degree of Doctor of Education in 2003. While some aspects of the inspection process seem to have changed since this date, most notably the Inspectorate's focus on Key Stage results instead of a focus on teaching and learning, I believe many of the findings are applicable today.

Due to the detail of a doctoral thesis, I have decided it would be more practical for me to attach the summary and conclusions of my research for your consideration.

School Inspection and School  
Improvement: A Case Study

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## Summary

This study is concerned with exploring the inspection process in Northern Ireland and describing its perceived contribution to school improvement. This is achieved through a case study which sought to analyse the Focused Inspection of one Northern Irish primary school, Knocknagoney Primary, and the School Improvement Programme which emanated from it. The research provides a critique of the role performed by the Inspectorate, both historically and contemporaneously, and of the characteristics and processes implicit in school improvement. It culminates in the portrayal of teacher expectations, perceptions and actions during school inspection and school improvement processes, in order to examine the perceived value of these processes to the school. It further investigates the interaction between these processes and, subsequently, highlights those school managerial and governmental policy decisions which will be required to improve upon current arrangements.

The study was conducted using a qualitative approach to methodology, based on semi-structured interviews which focused on issues which were identified by staff and which arose as the study evolved. There was also document analysis of governmental and school publications which provided contextual information and aided understanding of the topics under discussion and their development.

The results of the study include recommendations and conclusions relating to both Knocknagoney Primary School and the inspection system in general. In particular, within the confines of current inspectorial practice, the research will draw upon the experiences gained during the Focused Inspection of Knocknagoney Primary School to consider the potential benefits of employing an alternative mode of inspection, namely the Quality Assurance Inspection. In simplistic terms, this method of inspection enables schools to work with the Inspectorate to agree upon those areas of school life to be inspected and also on the timing of the inspection. More radically, this study will argue that a re-definition of the inspection process is needed, to incorporate the views of teachers rather than to exclude them and to make inspection a learning experience for those same teachers by emphasising advice rather than judgment.

## Glossary of Terms

BELB – Belfast Education and Library Board  
BERA – British Educational Research Association  
CASS – Curriculum, Advisory and Support Service  
CCMS – Council for Catholic Maintained Schools  
DE – Department of Education  
DENI – Department of Education for Northern Ireland  
ELBs – Educational and Library Boards  
ERA – Education Reform Act 1988  
ERO – Education Reform (NI) Order 1989  
ETI – Education and Training Inspectorate  
INSET – In-service Training  
HMI – Her Majesty’s Inspectorate  
ISIP – International School Improvement Project  
LEA – Local Education Authority  
LMS – Local Management of Schools  
MBW – Making Belfast Work  
NIAO – Northern Ireland Audit Office  
NICC – Northern Ireland Curriculum Council  
NISEAC - Northern Ireland Schools Examination and Assessment Council  
OECD – Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development  
OFSTED – Office for Standards In Education  
OHMCI – Office for Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector  
QAI – Quality Assurance Inspection  
RSSI – Raising School Standards Initiative  
SBR – School Based Review  
SDP – School Development Programme

### Declaration

“I hereby declare that with effect from the date on which the thesis is deposited in the Library of the University of Ulster, I permit the Librarian of the University to allow the thesis to be copied in whole or in part without reference to me on the understanding that such authority applies to the provision of single copies made for study purposes or for inclusion within the stock of another Library. **This restriction does not apply to the British Library Thesis Service (which is permitted to copy the thesis on demand for loan or sale under the terms of a separate agreement) nor to the copying or publication of the title and abstract of the thesis.** IT IS A CONDITION OF USE OF THIS THESIS THAT ANYONE WHO CONSULTS IT MUST RECOGNISE THAT THE COPYRIGHT RESTS WITH THE AUTHOR AND THAT NO QUOTATION FROM THE THESIS AND NO INFORMATION DERIVED FROM IT MAY BE PUBLISHED UNLESS THE SOURCE IS PROPERLY ACKNOWLEDGED.”

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A qualitative case study, such as the Focused Inspection of Knocknagoney Primary School, is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity. As such, it offers an in-depth account of events, relationships, experiences and processes occurring in that particular instance, with the aim of providing insight and discovery to both the researcher and reader. As has been shown in chapter 3, these characteristics of the qualitative case study are particularly well suited to the nature, scope and aims of this study. Of particular significance is the descriptive nature of the qualitative case study which means that the issues which have appeared during this study will become immersed in the discussion of the inspection process and its meaning for the participants involved. The aim of this chapter is not to fragment the rich and holistic account of school inspections offered in the case study. However, having looked at the participants' explanations and interpretations of events it is necessary to discern those insights which have most significance to bring about understanding that in turn can affect and improve practice.

In this section of work the 'findings' of significance which emerged from the case study and which have implications for either the school or the Inspectorate, or perhaps both organisations, will be discussed. Of most importance will be those findings where current inspectorial arrangements are regarded as problematic or contentious by educational practitioners and, in particular, those issues which display contrariness in values between those held by the school, teachers and school improvement protagonists and those espoused by the Department of Education.

In writing these conclusions, I was initially tempted into making recommendations on means by which the current system of Focused and General Inspections could be refined. Examples of this included: the Inspectorate should consider the benefits, in terms of reduction of teacher stress, to be gained from the implementation of a timetable during inspection; the inspection process could be increased by one additional day to facilitate increased professional dialogue; and schools should have

an opportunity to respond to the findings of inspection, by the inclusion of a commentary by the Principal in the appendix of the written report. However, after considerable reflection I decided that this could not happen, as I regarded such a course of action to be one which merely treats the symptoms and not the causes of the inherent problems of inspection which have been outlined in the case study. The fundamental notion that school improvement must be generated internally is at variance with the top-down accountability system embodied by inspection. No tinkering or adapting with the mechanisms or processes of inspection will alter this fact, therefore one must offer alternatives to, rather than apologies for, the form of accountability which Focused and General Inspections offer. This point is not negotiable, for in any democracy it is only right and proper to hold schools, as a publicly funded service, to account.

However, in arguing for the need to consider alternative forms of accountability I will purposefully not discount the role which the Inspectorate may have to play in such arrangements. This decision results from my belief that the principles and values behind Quality Assurance Inspections would indicate that this mode of inspection may offer a different role for inspectors, and one which is, potentially, more in tune with school improvement theory. Therefore, until research is carried out into the compatibility of Quality Assurance Inspections and school improvement theory and practice, I must consider that the Inspectorate have a role to play, albeit not within the processes embodied in Focused and General Inspections.

This chapter will now analyse the individual issues which have arisen during the case study and comment on how they may be addressed. This will be followed by a holistic appraisal of these factors to ascertain if the inspection process can be made more amenable to the needs and aspirations of teachers and schools everywhere.

### **1. Time notification**

It has been noted that the most stressful time in the inspection of Knocknagoney Primary was the period from when the school received notice of the inspection until the inspection began. This should come as no surprise for previous studies by Brimblecombe et al. (1995) and Thomas (1996) have clearly established this fact. Undoubtedly, within Knocknagoney stress before inspection was caused by an amalgam of fear of the unknown, pre-conceived expectations of inspection and a need to prepare both organisationally and administratively, to meet both the requirements of the inspection process and the pre-conceived expectations held by teachers.

The nature of pre-inspection activity in schools has been revealed by Gray and Gardner (1999,p.466), in a survey of the impact of school inspections in Northern Ireland: “For some schools, the pre-inspection period was reported to be a frenzy of activity which left teachers exhausted, and in a few extreme instances, ill.” While the extent to which teachers prepared for inspection, and one may assume their ability to cope with the resultant stress, varied from individual to individual, clearly teachers’ workload in the pre-inspection period is raised significantly by the prospect of inspection; for as Hargreaves (1995,p.120) argues “Only the naive do nothing in the run-up to inspection and adopt a take-us-as-you-find-us approach.” This argument is bolstered by a recent report by the NIAO (1999,p.47) which states that, on average, schools invest fifty two staff days preparing for an inspection, covering the time of Principals, department heads, teaching and support staff and governors.

When one considers the nature of pre-inspection activity in schools generally, and in Knocknagoney Primary School in particular, it is difficult to envisage how the practices described, can be reconciled either with the wish of the Staff Inspector that inspections should, as far as possible, reflect the normal life of the school (Appendix A,p.315-6), or, indeed, with Fullan’s (1991) belief that successful initiation of school improvement encompasses ensuring the readiness of staff to become involved in the change effort.

The stress inherent in the pre-inspection period has led Thomas (1996,p.366) to conclude that the period of notice for inspections should be considerably reduced. On the other hand evidence supplied by Gray and Gardner (1999,p.460) suggests that 87% of Northern Ireland Principals were satisfied with the current notice of inspection. Within the case study example, it was shown that the staff of Knocknagoney Primary felt that the present notification of one month was appropriate; although it was also claimed that there is an innate difficulty for any teacher to advocate a measure such as reducing the time notification for inspection, given that such a suggestion could prove to be unpopular within the profession by apparently denying teachers sufficient time to prepare for the forthcoming event.

Clearly, one common denominator linking the findings of Thomas (1996), Gray and Gardner (1999) and the Knocknagoney staff, is that the notice of an impending inspection should not be extended. However, it is also important that no support is added to the belief that the notification of inspection should be abolished completely. Indeed, under current circumstances reducing the notice of inspection or abolishing it, even on a trial basis, would be problematic, for whilst pastoral care inspections have no notice, it would be unfair for some General or Focused Inspections to replicate this practice, for comparison with schools which received notice would be unfair, given the need for published reports.

Furthermore, although there is an argument for suggesting that having inspection without notification may result in a more accurate reflection of daily practice within schools, there is no evidence to indicate that the stress generated by an unannounced inspection would be any less severe than for that with a notice.

One possible solution to the 'stress factor' of the pre-inspection period lies in the developing field of Quality Assurance Inspections. Here schools request the Inspectorate to conduct an external quality assurance inspection of an area of school life which the school has previously identified, evaluated and reported on. The aim of this external evaluation is "To assess the rigour and fitness for purpose of its (the school's) evaluation procedures and to verify the findings of its internal evaluation" (DENI,1998b,p.10). Agreement with the Inspectorate is reached on a provisional date for the inspection to commence. Thus the school becomes the instigator of the inspection process, being proactive in preparing for inspection, by deciding on the areas to be inspected and negotiating the time scale for the inspection to begin. Such a policy may be a viable consideration for Knocknagoney Primary and other schools, for it permits preparation for inspection to be more natural and evolving by allowing the institution concerned to dictate its state of readiness for inspection not against an imposed deadline, but according to its developmental status.

To discover whether these potential benefits are translated into practice, research should take place to discover the impact of Quality Assurance Inspection in primary education. It is hoped that such research would reveal whether the nature of preparation in Quality Assurance Inspections differed from Focused or General Inspections and, consequently, whether this helped alleviate stress in the pre-inspection period. More importantly, the research could also ascertain whether the Quality Assurance Inspection is in keeping with the principles and practice of school improvement.

## **2. Hearsay and speculation**

Within Knocknagoney Primary there were many examples of teachers being mis-informed about the rationale and workings of the inspection process; with rumour and speculation being identified as playing a formative role in the development of teacher expectations and perceptions. The impact of hearsay and speculation in the development of teacher expectations should not be underestimated, for within the case study example expectations clearly influenced actions. The significance of hearsay and speculation is, however, not merely confined to Knocknagoney Primary School, for in a letter to the editor of the Belfast Telegraph on 7 February 2001 a 'Caring Professional' who had recently

undergone a General Inspection commented: “Horror stories abound in the profession of teachers being savaged by inspectors and, following our recent ordeal, I now know them to be founded in fact.”

Undoubtedly, where staff are ill-informed or lacking knowledge about the inspection process a situation of uncertainty will exist, and in a situation of uncertainty myths are easily created. For Brimblecombe et al. (1995,p.55) such a situation will have further repercussions, for they claim that fear of the unknown is a significant contributor to increased stress amongst staff. Dean (1995,p.46) further adds to the belief that uncertainty about the process of inspection will have negative consequences for staff: “Teachers felt better about the inspection when they knew what was going to happen and the criteria by which judgments were made.” Certainly, this view was supported by all the staff of Knocknagoney Primary School.

If uncertainty surrounding inspection can increase the power and influence of rumour and speculation, the challenge, therefore, must be how to overcome such a scenario.

My initial thoughts centred on how inspection documentation could be utilised to negate or minimise the influence of hearsay and speculation. Firstly I concentrated my attention at the school level where it was shown that Knocknagoney Primary utilised the DENI document ‘Evaluating Schools’ (1998a). Although this is a professional and user-friendly document, its aim is to guide schools through the process of self-evaluation rather than to provide an understanding of the inspection process. However, the DENI publication ‘The Inspection Process in Schools,’ (1998c) does offer a comprehensive insight into the purpose, nature and principles of inspection. Therefore, I considered proposing that in the advent of an impending inspection that Knocknagoney Primary and other schools should use this document to provide staff with a more enlightened understanding of the inspection process.

Furthermore, despite arguing that the DENI document ‘The Inspection Process in Schools’ is beneficial, as it offers an insight into the purpose, nature and principles of inspection, I believed that this publication could be enhanced as it fails to provide detail of the criteria which guides inspection activity. This situation exists despite the Inspectorate maintaining detailed internal guidance for its inspectors which includes criteria for assessing strengths and weaknesses over a wide range of aspects of teaching and learning and other aspects of school life (NIAO,1999,p.18). To increase transparency

and knowledge of inspections I contemplated advocating that the Inspectorate should include detail on the criteria which guides the inspection process, following OFSTED's 'Framework for the Inspection of Schools' (1994), which forms part of the 'Handbook for the Inspection of Schools' (OFSTED,1993) and, sets out the principles to which registered inspectors and their teams must adhere; a code of practice for inspectors; and the detailed schedule which specifies for every aspect inspected the criteria against which judgments should be made, the evidence required and the features on which inspectors should report (Matthews and Smith, 1995,p.25).

In addition to considering how the individual school's role in educating teachers on the inspection process could be enhanced, I also deliberated on how the role of the Inspectorate could be expanded. This involved the Inspectorate utilising CASS training days to outline the aims, methods and overall process of inspection to teachers, thereby achieving greater transparency with regard to the inspection system, while also demystifying the traditional image of the 'unapproachable inspector.' It was also thought that if this process was successful it could be extended to embrace both the programme of induction for newly qualified teachers and/or for those in teacher education institutions.

However, upon reflection, I decided that whilst these possible recommendations may serve the purposes of the current inspection system they were not in tune with school improvement theory, nor the needs of teachers. In particular, it was thought that adhering to inspectorial documentation or oratory would increase the controlling influence of inspections and would do little to embrace a process of enquiry and reflection on the part of the staff, which has been claimed to contribute to the successful initiation of change efforts (Fullan,1991), or, indeed, to recognise school improvement's re-conceptualisation of leadership where teachers and managers engage in shared decision making and risk-taking (Stoll and Fink, 1996).

In rejecting such an approach one should be prepared to offer an alternative 'solution,' for as has been noted in chapter 5b, hearsay and speculation are not conducive to the collegial and collaborative approach needed for successful school improvement (Hopkins and Lagerweij,1996). To achieve this aim, we may return to a previously made assertion by Dean (1995,p.46), namely: "Teachers felt better about the inspection when they knew what was going to happen and the criteria by which judgments were made." If the process of inspecting a school, or reviewing its operation, was changed to involve teachers considering and deciding upon the criteria on which a school is to be evaluated, and in

making the subsequent judgments, then it could be plausibly argued that hearsay and speculation would no longer be issues with which a staff would have to contend.

### **3. Workload, stress and performance during inspection**

Recent research has indicated that inspections heighten anxiety and increase stress among teachers (for example Jeffrey and Woods, 1998; Gray and Wilcox, 1995a), whilst a series of letters to the editor of the 'Belfast Telegraph' in February 2001 by serving teachers, also indicated that stress and inspection go hand-in-hand. Gray and Gardner (1995,p.461) argue that such anxiety manifests itself in physical symptoms such as agitation, tiredness, high blood pressure and loss of sleep, and in a range of emotional responses, for example, worry, fear of letting the school down, fear of the unknown, resentment and too much time spent on preparation. Within the case study example the stresses evident in the pre-inspection period continued during the act of inspection, with the manifestation of anxiety being both physical (for example tiredness) and emotional (for example anxiety, worry, excess preparation).

The Focused Inspection of Knocknagoney Primary School was shown to be a stressful event where teachers' workload significantly increased. For the school management fulfilling the requirements of the Pre-Inspection Papers and ensuring staff were prepared were primary concerns, while for the staff producing classroom planning notes, updating record keeping, renewing wall displays and preparing lessons were the most important tasks to be undertaken. It was also shown that lesson preparation was conducted more expansively than normal, whilst teachers claimed that teaching in front of an inspector often involved a change in approach and practice. Thus, the reality of inspections runs contrary to the rhetoric of the Staff Inspector who, as previously noted, claimed that inspection should reflect the normal life of the school (Appendix A,p.315-6).

Indeed, the findings of the case study, which indicate that teachers present a front to inspectors during inspection by adopting practices which may depart from their preferred ways but which are judged to impress the Inspectorate, correspond with recent findings by Webb et al. (1998), Jeffrey and Wood (1998) and Gray and Wilcox (1995a). By adopting an approach to suit inspectors, teachers are undoubtedly creating a self-protection mechanism, perhaps understandably so, for as Pearce, (1986,p134-5) notes:

*Teaching combines privacy, autonomy and immediacy to an unusual degree. No act infringes these three properties so completely as inspection by an unknown observer. Full formal inspection applies that infringement on the scale of the whole institution and does so within a limited span of time.*

For Webb et al. (1998,p.547), performance during inspection can be attributed to the potentially threatening nature of the event, the desired models of practice implicit and explicit in inspectorial publications, and the adverse effects a poor report can have on individuals and schools.

The desire to impress an outsider has, of course, serious implications. Brimblecombe et al. (1995,p.57) declare that such a decision means most teachers plan their lessons with more care than normal, while many planned their lessons to be more didactic than normal. Interestingly, in this study's historical analysis it was shown that the regulatory nature of inspections often resulted in the initiative and individuality of teachers being stifled, to the detriment of their pupils. Jeffrey and Wood (1998,p.96) claim that teachers in their case study could not have continued at the pace they were working for much longer than the inspection lasted. However, most significantly Wilcox and Gray (1996), based on their research into the process and outcomes of school inspections believe that the artificial preparation and conduct of teachers questions the validity of inspection reports.

Gray and Gardner (1999,p.462) have provided recent statistical information regarding whether an inspection team invalidates its own inspection findings by intruding upon and disrupting the normal workings of the school. They claim that despite the relatively high percentages of primary and secondary-level Principals who considered inspections to be disruptive (63% and 42% respectively), the large majority of both groups (66% primary and 84% secondary level) somewhat paradoxically felt that inspection teams saw the normal working of schools. This evidence leads Gray and Gardner to the conclusion that the majority of schools feel that despite its shortcomings the inspection process does have validity. However, it is important to note that these findings were provided by Principals, most of whom would not be classroom teachers. Furthermore, the question asked of Principals: "did the inspection team see a true picture of normal working in the school?" could be interpreted very differently from a question such as "did teachers change or adapt their teaching methods during inspection?" Within the case study, staff were asked explicitly whether they conducted 'normal lessons' or whether they changed their teaching styles or methods for the inspection. All but one of the class teachers in Knocknagoney Primary School indicated that they had altered their teaching approaches for the inspector.

If one accepts the findings of this case study and of other notable authorities (Webb et al. 1998; Jeffrey and Wood, 1998; Gray and Wilcox, 1995a) then it would appear that many teachers do change their practice and approach during an inspection. At a basic level, if teachers only use methods which they believe will please the inspector, teacher innovation will be lost. More profoundly the impact of inspection on teacher development will be curtailed as inspectors will not be able to pass comment or advice on 'normal practice,' thereby allowing the individual staff member to reflect upon their teaching or to identify areas in need of improvement. This is a crucial point, for within the context of school improvement reflection on current/normal practice is the impetus for altering beliefs and, therefore, for bringing about changes to practice. Also, the findings indicate that the pedagogical façade displayed by teachers during inspection does, as Wilcox and Gray (1996) suggest, seriously question the validity of this process. Sadly, it would appear that the current stress of Focused and General Inspections on accountability as opposed to teacher development will sustain the element of 'performance' within schools. If this is to change, then the nature and purpose of inspection must also alter.

#### **4. The inspection did not change classroom practice**

The Focused Inspection of Knocknagoney Primary School was not believed by the staff to have improved classroom practice. This viewpoint is contrary to that of DENI (1998c,p.4) which holds that "The purpose of inspection is to help to promote the highest possible standards of learning and teaching throughout the Educational System in Northern Ireland...." The belief that inspection did not improve classroom practice was due in part to an absence of suitable reporting procedures between teacher and inspector, or what has been previously referred to in this study as 'feedback.' Feedback was judged to be lacking in quality and quantity, thereby depriving the staff of opportunities to further their professional development, and creating feelings of uncertainty about teacher performance.

According to Southworth and Fielding (1994,p.176) the inspection process fails to encourage professional dialogue because it is one in which "inspectors judge and tell, and teachers receive and react." However, in this case study the main problem was that teachers could not receive, because inspectors did not tell. Research findings by NIAO (1999), Jeffrey and Wood (1998), Millet and Johnson (1998) and Gray and Wilcox (1995b) testify that the poor quality of feedback given during the Focused Inspection of Knocknagoney Primary School is not an isolated example.

Paradoxically, even though they were performing in an abnormal way, teachers feel strongly about the value of feedback and regard its absence with a sense of injustice (Dean,1995,p.49; Thomas,1996,p.363); as Brimblecombe et al. (1995,p.59) note, “Hearing what inspectors think about their teaching can cause anxiety to teachers, but not hearing is, for many, even worse.” Furthermore, good feedback is deemed by Fiddler et al. (1994,p.351) to be a contributor to school development, whilst it has also been claimed that feedback affects intentions to change (Brimblecombe et al. 1996,p.351). This is a salient point, for change is, of course, central to school improvement efforts:

*Now if the primary purpose of inspection is to monitor the system or even to identify failing schools, low levels of feedback at the time of observation - the point where it is most likely to be useful - is tolerable. Where the primary purpose is improvement, this rejection of dialogue is indefensible (Hargreaves,1995,p.122).*

Feedback is vital for improvement. Without it little or no gains in new knowledge and insights for teachers will be achieved, and hence limited change will result to classroom practice, as evidenced during the case study of Knocknagoney Primary School. Providing feedback to all teachers, would promote the professional development of teachers, and give them the opportunity to place their work/lesson in context. It would thus help realise the developmental aspect of school improvement stressed by Hopkins and Lagerweij (1996) and the belief that classroom teachers’ understanding of teaching and learning must be the precursor of educational change that affects the learning of students, as such change involves teachers acquiring new knowledge, adopting new behaviours and sometimes in modifying beliefs or values (Fullan,1991; Elliott,1998).

Hargreaves’ contention that the importance of feedback depends on what is seen to be the main aim of inspection also challenges the current inspection system to choose either the path of accountability or that of improvement/development.

## **5. Teachers wanted the Inspectorate’s role to be advisory**

It has been shown in chapter 1 that historically the role of the Inspectorate was primarily as a regulator of the teaching profession, but with a limited advisory capability; and that teachers were happier when the advisory nature of inspections was increased. It is clear from the case study that these historical conclusions still hold true today. During the Focused Inspection of Knocknagoney Primary School, the staff believed that inspection was concerned with monitoring and evaluation and

not with improvement. This may be contrasted with the alternative value espoused by DE (2002) in “Promoting Improvement...A Charter for Inspection,” namely that, “The ultimate aim is that the inspection process should contribute to the raising of standards of learner achievement throughout the education and training sectors....”

The perception that inspection focused on monitoring and evaluation was reinforced by some of the strategies employed by the inspection team, which were judged to be too reliant on children’s opinions. It was also evident during the inspection that advice given by the Inspectorate was appreciated by teachers. Unfortunately, this advice was limited in scope.

The desire within Knocknagoney Primary School that inspections should become more advisory in nature receives support from many sources, including Hamilton (1994), Jeffrey and Wood (1998) and NIAO (1999). Whilst North (1991,p.11) and McConaghie (1993) believe that advice is implicit in reports, more recent research has shown that inspections are not viewed by the majority of teachers as developmental, formative and open, but as being concerned with monitoring, policing and checking (Gray and Gardner 1999, Jeffrey and Wood,1998). For some teachers, the methods employed by the Inspectorate help to reinforce this point:

*The inspector doubles back and goes forward checking statements made by a teacher with their colleagues, checks up on remarks made by the Principal with staff and, worst of all, asks the pupils for confirmations of statements made by the teacher, done of course subtly (Letter to the Editor, Belfast Telegraph 20/02/01).*

Within this quotation, and also within the case study, it is evident that teachers believe it is unfair to be judged on the basis of a child’s opinion. Such a practice can lead to discontentment amongst staff regarding the reliability and relevance of methods employed by the Inspectorate. As a priority for school improvement is the encouragement of a process of deliberative reflection on the part of teachers at a classroom level (Elliott,1998), staff may well question the validity and accuracy of findings which result from the use of such methods, and hence reject them.

According to Lee and Fitz (1998,p.238) the lack of advice offered to schools to help them meet the issues identified by inspection, constitutes a lacuna in the system. The NIAO (1999,p.11) has recently offered a solution to such a situation by recommending that the Inspectorate be amalgamated with the ELB Curriculum Advice and Support Services (CASS), the bodies which work with schools to initiate

actions to address issues highlighted in inspection. The NIAO report (1999,p.50) argues that whilst the Inspectorate and CASS have an accurate understanding of each other's work:

*...in an environment where advice and support appear to be more important for school improvement, NIAO considers that the continuum in the activities of CASS and the Inspectorate suggest that the existing separate arrangements may not be best suited to existing circumstances. The closer alignment of the two organisational structures would facilitate greater access and exchange of knowledge and expertise from one service to the other, could provide the opportunity for streamlining efficiencies and fostering a greater sense of partnership and collaboration with schools.*

For the Inspectorate this would not be viable as it would place it in the "...invidious position if it were responsible for providing support and development functions and also assessing the effectiveness of its efforts" (NIAO,1999,p.12). However, an alternative argument suggests that if the Inspectorate was amalgamated with CASS the resultant organisation would be large enough to ensure that those giving advice would not be involved in the actual inspection, thereby maintaining impartiality and objectivity. Alternatively, one could advocate the retention of both bodies but with a much closer working relationship being developed. Whilst the principle of a partnership between, or an amalgamation of, the Inspectorate and CASS may have potential benefits, it does not address the fundamental question of how such structures would encourage the school improvement perspective that teachers should be the creators/designers of improvement efforts, with ownership of the improvement process, for it may be assumed that inspection would remain a top-down accountability system.

These logistical arrangements are, however, of secondary importance to the rationale underpinning them, for in making such recommendations, the NIAO has acknowledged that change must occur if the system of accountability offered by inspection is to meet the needs of teachers by developing an advisory role. However, it could be plausibly argued that the primacy of the regulatory role of inspections throughout history and continuing through to present day, may well make the change advocated for more difficult to achieve.

The need for a redefinition of the purpose and nature of all forms of inspection is upheld by this study.

## **6. Inspectors should be specialists**

Within the case study example it was shown that if inspectors' judgments, as expressed in the written reports, are to be valued, teachers must have confidence in their individual expertise. The perception exists that this expertise is directly related not to inspectorial experience, but to relevant teaching experience by the inspector within the same educational sector as the school. During the Focused Inspection of Knocknagoney Primary School the absence of an inspector with early years experience, and also the absence of a female inspector, were cited as points of contention. This viewpoint is at variance with the opinion of the Staff Inspector (Appendix A,p.316-7), that the training received by inspectors negates the need for specialist inspectors.

The findings of several authorities (Lee,1998; Wilcox and Gray,1996; Dean,1995) correspond with those of Knocknagoney, in that what is termed 'professional credibility' is a key issue for schools. In particular it is believed that having relevant experience makes an inspector not simply more acceptable to schools and sympathetic to them but enables them to exercise professional judgment, even though in actuality, and somewhat paradoxically, this judgment is heavily influenced by the Department of Education's guidelines and expectations. Additionally, if the staff reject the findings/outcomes of inspection then they will probably focus on the background of the inspector as grounds for discontentment.

The challenge therefore remains as to how the 'professional credibility' of the Inspectorate can be maintained, or, indeed, enhanced.

The report on 'School Inspection in Northern Ireland' by the NIAO (1999,p.32) acknowledges that whilst the Inspectorate has taken steps to encourage schools to take responsibility for self-evaluation and improvement, through Quality Assurance Inspections and the booklet 'Evaluating Schools,' formal inspections are still deliberately external, in the sense that nobody with an internal knowledge of the institution forms part of the team. NIAO believes that this could result in inspection being viewed as something that is done to the school, rather than done with it, thus militating against the achievement of improvement. This conclusion has led to the NIAO (1999,p.33) supporting the Inspectorate's policy of using serving Principals as associate inspectors, particularly during Quality Assurance Inspections. This policy is soon to be extended by DENI to include other teachers as well.

The secondment of head teachers, and indeed classroom teachers, has several potential benefits, for it can bring a practitioner's perspective to the inspection team, can bolster the credibility of the inspection team by creating more specialists and can, hopefully, enhance the internal monitoring and evaluation procedures within the associate inspectors' schools when they return.

Despite such plaudits Wilcox and Gray (1996,p.136) contend that the secondment of serving teachers to inspection teams is unlikely to increase feelings of ownership in the particular school being inspected. They conclude that the only way this can happen is for someone the school 'trusts' to be given some sort of role on the inspection team. Although such a person is likely to be a member of the school's staff, an outsider could be nominated. Such a policy was considered by the NIAO (1999,pp. 32-3) which looked at the approach adopted by the Further Education Funding Council Inspectorate in Great Britain, now known as the Adult Learning Inspectorate. Here, inspections are planned in consultation with the colleges and reflect their pattern and provision. All inspection teams include a nominee from the staff of the college being inspected. They are offered preparatory training for this role and become full members of the inspection team. Nominees may accompany inspectors during observation of lessons or interviews with college staff. They also attend inspectors' meetings and contribute to discussions arising from inspection. According to the Chief Inspector of the Further Education Funding Council "...the inclusion of a college representative in inspection teams supports the Inspectorate's wish to operate openly. It has been well received by college managers as a means of enhancing the efficiency of inspections" (Melia,1995,p.40).

Such an enlightened approach was rejected by the NIAO (1999,p.33). The basis for this judgment rested with the potential problems which could exist by engaging a teacher from the staff of the school on the inspection team; for example the school representative may well adopt a defensive stance and thwart the best efforts of the inspection team. The Inspectorate told NIAO that the judgments of colleagues in OFSTED support this view. However, it should be noted that the inclusion of a staff member on an inspection team does not guarantee either a commitment or sense of ownership towards the process being developed by other teachers in that organisation, especially when the ethos of the inspection would remain, fundamentally, external. Certainly, the rhetoric of school improvement, and in particular the need for teachers to have a sense of ownership of improvement efforts (Brown et al.,1995) and to adopt a collegial and collaborative approach to change (Stoll and Fink,1996) would indicate the need for teaching staff, and not just individual members, to be the fulcrum on which future school accountability would operate.

## **7. The inspection was held to be too short to judge the life of the school**

Brimblecombe et al. (1995,p.58) and Gray and Wilcox (1995a,1995b) have argued that teachers want the picture which inspection produces of a school to be accurate, fair and representative. They further contend that the duration of the modern inspection makes this aspiration unrealistic, and use the metaphor of the 'snapshot' to describe the Inspectorate's view of a school. Significantly, this metaphor was also used by the staff of Knocknagoney, who believe that the three day Focused Inspection of their school was insufficient to provide an in-depth insight into the school's operation. This may be contrasted with the view of the Inspectorate that a three day visit can provide a comprehensive and accurate insight into the workings of a school.

Time is always likely to be a problem, especially during an inspection. Wilcox and Gray (1996,p.163) argue that the amount of time available to inspectors in a school can affect at least two aspects of the inspection process: the social courtesies required and the credibility of the methods involved. By social courtesies they mean not only the friendly demeanor which teachers expect inspectors to display but also the opportunity of allowing teachers to explain what they are doing and to receive feedback on how they are doing. Furthermore, Wilcox and Gray (1996) suggest that if credible judgments are to be made by observing individual lessons, then it is vital that judgments are contextualised. The credibility of an inspection will depend in part on the extent to which the evidence used to contextualise lessons will have been given proper consideration, irrespective of whether this is derived from lesson observations, the scrutiny of pupils' work or interviews. In Knocknagoney Primary School, this credibility was questioned as staff perceived the three day inspection to be inadequate not only in contextualising lessons, but in providing an accurate overview of either the school or individual. This outcome diminished teacher confidence in the inspection process.

Given these arguments, it is important to note the school improvement perspective which claims that change is a process, not an event, which requires time for teachers to participate in collaborative planning and decision making (Marsh,1988). Such collegiality takes time to develop, with the short duration and ethos of the Focused Inspection failing to engender such an approach.

The logical conclusion of this argument would appear to favour an extension of the inspection period. On the other hand, the stress factor amongst teachers evident during the Focused Inspection of Knocknagoney Primary would seem to mitigate against increasing inspection time within the classroom. This apparent dichotomy between personal and professional interest however, may not be insurmountable, for whilst inspection of teachers' classroom practice need not be extended, an additional day could be added to the inspection process to facilitate feedback to teachers.

Although this recommendation may address the issue of what Wilcox and Gray (1996,p.163) call the social courtesies of inspection it fails to deal with the perception that inspections offer a superficial insight, or a snapshot, into school life. If, as in Knocknagoney Primary School, teachers would not welcome classroom inspection being increased, then it would appear that the only viable alternative is the enhancement of the role of teachers in identifying the issues, challenges and problems facing a school. Significantly, Gray and Wilcox (1995b,p.141) believe teachers should join with inspectors to become part of a group within which “unforced agreement” on an inspection might be sought. In agreeing with the need to involve teachers, this study argues that a re-definition of the inspection process is needed, to incorporate the views of teachers rather than to exclude them and to make inspection, in whatever form it may take, a learning experience for those same teachers by emphasising advice rather than judgment. If this is done inspection, as Gray and Wilcox (1995b,p.140) argue, need not be doomed to produce at best the agreed views of an inspection team thus leaving the possibility of its acceptance by others, particularly teachers, as uncertain. This is a salient point, for as Eisner (1991,p.86) reminds us evaluation is a form of criticism and that:

*...every act of criticism is a reconstruction. The reconstruction takes the form of an argued narrative, supported by evidence that is never incontestable; there will always be alternative interpretations of the ‘same’ play, as the history of criticism so eloquently attests.*

Accordingly, this study will adopt the pragmatism which Rorty (1991,p.38) recommends more generally as a philosophic stance:

*(we) can always enlarge the scope of ‘us’ by regarding other people, or cultures, as members of the same community of inquiry as ourselves – by treating them as part of the group among whom unforced agreement is to be sought.*

For Gray and Wilcox (1995b,p.140), inspection privileges the voice of the inspectors. It is they who constitute the Rortian ‘us’ in the context of inspection. The ‘us’ should be extended, however, to include the teachers of the school. It remains to be seen whether this will involve joining with the Inspectorate to form a group within which unforced agreement might be sought.

The Inspectorate should therefore investigate methods by which it could utilise and harness the unique knowledge and skills of school staff so that self-evaluation becomes an integral element of school accountability. At present only Quality Assurance Inspections have such an ethos of school participation and development built into their rationale.

## **8. The written report.**

The prospect of the written report being published led to teachers being generally unwilling to be open in conversation with inspectors, during the Focused Inspection of Knocknagoney Primary School. Furthermore, the Principal believed the nature of the RSSI project, where the school's openness regarding its weaknesses was vital to the improvement efforts which followed, should have resulted in the report remaining unpublished. While McConaghie (1993,p.38) states that the advice which is implicit in reporting constitutes a developmental aspect of inspection, the publication of reports is only acceptable if the primary concern of inspection is accountability. It could be argued that this is not true if one believes that the inspection process should be developmental, for there appears to be no encouragement for schools to interact with the Inspectorate or to be open regarding the weaknesses and challenges facing the schools. However, as has been stated, the publication of reports is appropriate as an accountability mechanism, and therefore it does suit the aims and purposes of the current inspection system, but not those inspections carried out as baseline assessments for school improvement projects.

The staff of Knocknagoney Primary believe that the written report was generally accurate and representative of the conditions which prevailed within the school. These findings correspond with those of the NIAO (1999,p.39) which showed that 75% of respondents in their survey were largely satisfied with the accuracy of their inspection reports; and with Gray and Gardner (1999,p.462) who found that 68% of primary school Principals felt that inspection reports gave a fair and accurate account of their schools. This evidence does not, however, mean that written reports are bereft of criticism from schools. Indeed, within the research by Gray and Gardner (1999,p.462) 21% of primary Principals felt that inspection reports did not give a fair and accurate representation of their school.

Within Knocknagoney Primary the major criticisms centred on the wording and content of certain sections of the report. At times the report was regarded as being misleading and at other times it was judged as being too vague, with teachers being unsure to which classes or individuals the report was referring. It was also felt that the written report did not fully reflect the oral report; an outcome similar to that documented by Hamilton (1994,p.37) who claims that in his case study of school inspections the praise offered in the oral report was toned down in the published report. Finally, the written report did not reveal anything new to the school, although this was deemed not to be a criticism of the Inspectorate, but to the credit of the school.

Two important points emerge from these findings. Firstly, the vagueness of certain aspects of the written report may be attributed to the staff playing no part in its formulation. Secondly, the belief highlighted, that the inspection did not reveal anything new to the school, is one that has been constantly reinforced by other studies (Webb et al.,1998; Wilcox and Gray,1996; Gray and Gardner,1999). This is a very important point, for if inspection is not a learning experience for the school, then one must question whether it is a cost effective way of generating predictable insights for teachers. As the NIAO report (1999,p.39) states “...if inspection recommendations highlight little that is not already known to the school, the improvement gains to schools may be too small to be good value for money.” Certainly, as a starting point for debate on the future of inspections, it would be interesting to consider the compatibility, or otherwise, between the key issues identified through inspection and those outlined in schools’ development plans in order to gauge the impact and cost effectiveness of current inspection arrangements. Furthermore, if as in the case of Knocknagoney Primary, there is a high level of compatibility between those issues identified by the school and those highlighted by the Inspectorate, then the argument made previously, that the views of staff on those issues which affect a school should be pivotal in any form of school accountability, seem to have been reinforced. Such an arrangement would also mean that findings on a school’s operation would be readily acceptable to staff; a situation which must occur if inspection is to lead to improvement, for as both Brown et al. (1995) and Barber and White (1997) have recognised, one of the fundamental values underpinning school improvement is that improvement comes from within. Indeed, given the need for teacher involvement, commitment and ownership in change efforts “...it cannot be assumed that teachers will be ready to accept...findings as an agenda handed down from on high” (Brown et al., 1995,p.9).

The staff of Knocknagoney Primary judged the oral report to be more useful than the written report, in that it gave practical advice and provided an opportunity for the school to respond to criticism. Similarly, the follow-up report was welcomed as it motivated the staff by highlighting the improvements which the school had made. It was believed by teachers within the school that this report should be published, a proposal which has since been accepted by DE. The desire of the school to have its viewpoint acknowledged and to have an opportunity to counter criticism against it would also support the belief that teachers perceive shortcomings in the current mode of reportage.

Whilst the NIAO (1999,p.22) argues for the inclusion of school action plans in the published report, the premise for this action is that it would enhance the accountability function of the inspection process. Where the desire is to encourage a more democratic or participative approach in inspection, then the school’s perspective on the issues and challenges facing it must be central to findings reached.

## **9. School self-evaluation complemented inspection**

This research has shown that self-evaluation was viewed positively by the staff in that it could reduce teacher stress and give a more comprehensive account of the strengths and weaknesses of the school than that offered by a three day visit. It was also believed that such an approach could utilise the unique expertise and experience of those within the school to provide an analysis of the school which was more accurate, reliable and relevant than that of the Inspectorate.

However, although the staff of Knocknagoney Primary School extolled the virtues of self-evaluation, perhaps it is more accurate to state that they viewed self-monitoring as a positive feature rather than self-evaluation, for the latter strategy is often set against an objective dictated by the education system and not the school.

Within the literature on school inspections the advantages of self-evaluation are well documented. According to Moore and Reid (1992,p.3) school self evaluation is "...most importantly done by and for the school not to the school for an external body." Webb et al. (1998,p.554) claim that school self-evaluation means that schools have ownership over their methods of data collection and analysis and also have a commitment to respond to evaluation findings which leads to direct and immediate change in practice. Hargreaves (1995,p.120) further claims that in an internal audit more honesty can be afforded than in an external inspection. Whilst no school will actively draw its weaknesses to the attention of the inspectors, the object of an audit is to uncover weaknesses so they can be rectified.

When one aligns the strengths of self-evaluation to the weaknesses of external inspection the argument in favour of the former appears compelling. Among the disadvantages of external inspection is the fact that it can be seen as a wholly external process, thus militating against the achievement of improvement; that it results in changes in written policies, systems and procedures but not in classroom practice (Webb et al.,1998,p.553); that it breeds apprehensiveness and encourages schools to put up something of a performance; and that its whole ethos and approach have been rejected by business and industry. Inspection is a form of quality control and the problem with quality control is that it merely monitors the failure rate or the site of the failure, but does nothing in itself to put the fault right. The success of Japanese industry is due, in part, to its decision to drop quality control in favour of quality assurance, which returns to the work force the responsibility for quality

(Hargreaves, 1995,p.123). This philosophy is also appropriate to self managing schools, is compatible with most improvement strategies and is in line with the Government's philosophy of schools being responsive to clients (Murgatroyd and Morgan,1993; Sallis,1993).

The picture painted so far of the benefits of external assessment compared to self-evaluation may appear bleak, but that is because the picture is incomplete, for external inspection does offer some notable advantages. For Webb et al. (1998,p.539) school inspection can offer a whole school strategy missing in self evaluation; while for Hargreaves (1995,p.119) inspection has undoubted strengths as a form of school audit: inspectors are trained for their job and can become shrewd observers and judges; they view the schools within a wide frame of reference of policy and practice; they are detached; and they are trusted by governors and parents to be truthful.

Within the case study the alternative perspective on the school's operation offered by the Inspectorate was welcomed by the staff, and it was felt that self-evaluation should complement inspection rather than replace it. This viewpoint corresponds with that of Hargreaves (1995,p.120) who contends that the most effective audit of a school comes about by neither internal self-evaluation nor external inspection; rather some combination of both probably does the job better than either alone. While external inspection will provide regulation and accountability which the Government desires, self-evaluation can contribute significantly to the improvement process. However, whilst self-evaluation may be equated with a process of quality assurance, the current mode of Focused and General Inspections may be regarded as a form of quality control. Given such a conclusion, one must question the value to school improvement of these modes of inspection, if their major contribution is that of quality controller.

In analysing the role of school self evaluation within a process of school accountability, it is interesting to look at the work recently undertaken by the NIAO. In their report on the inspection system in Northern Ireland, the NIAO (1999,p.27) examined school inspection in the context of the broad range of review and accountability mechanisms currently in place, such as school development planning, target setting, performance information and, to a lesser extent, self-review. It concluded that the cycle of mass inspection established by the Department is essentially a 'top-down' accountability system rather than one based on the shared responsibility for education of DE, parents, public and teachers. NIAO considers that the current model of inspection could be enhanced if it takes increasing account of the importance of partnership with schools by incorporating elements of

self-review and self-improvement. In particular NIAO believed that an integrated framework, combining school development planning, internal self-review and external inspection, can provide a re-defined and enhanced inspection model for the future. School development plans would contain specified improvement areas and specific measures of achievement. Performance against the goals and priorities stated in plans would be monitored by schools as a basis for an analysis of their achievements. Periodically, schools would undertake a formal self-review in which they would identify and analyse the trends apparent in their achievements. Independent verification through external inspection would be used to validate schools' achievements and facilitate agreement on the directions to be incorporated into subsequent planning. For the purposes of this study, it is interesting to note that such an approach does not exist in either Focused or General Inspections, suggesting that an alternative to these inspectorial arrangements is needed.

The NIAO report (1999,p.8) recognises that the Inspectorate has already taken steps towards embracing such an approach through its involvement with schools on the RSSI project and its piloting of Quality Assurance Inspections. For their part, the Department have stated that incorporating elements of self-review and self-improvement into the inspection process and developing partnerships with schools will form part of the Inspectorate's future strategy.

As a basis for future policy the NIAO recommendations are to be welcomed in that they formally recognise that schools can make important contributions to both the review of a school's operation and the improvement process. However, a note of caution must be sounded for the results-based focus of this scheme on measuring and evaluating the performance of a school against its intended benchmarks, could allow the wider development of pupils, in non academic areas, to be viewed as being of secondary importance. It must be remembered that teaching and learning are ethical pursuits and are concerned with developing children holistically and with valuing, appreciating and understanding, concepts which are difficult to measure.

Undoubtedly, within the NIAO recommendations there is a vision of a convergence between the fields of school effectiveness and school improvement, with school improvement being viewed merely as improvement in effectiveness over time. It should be recognised however, that whilst school effectiveness practitioners are concerned with making schools more effective as production systems, for proponents of school improvement the emphasis is on how schools can change to become more

educative institutions. Therefore, one must realise that whilst improvement strategies may enhance student outcomes, they must also strengthen the school's capacity for change.

In terms of present day policy, the NIAO report (1999,p.8) recognises that Quality Assurance Inspections can offer a current example of an integrated approach to inspection. It has already been established in this chapter that this approach has a number of potential advantages, for example, less rush in pre-inspection preparation and less staff anxiety; features readily noticeable during the case study. The process also has the potential to have closer affinity with the school's own mission, as it permits schools to be assessed to a greater extent on their own stated aims and activities (Gray and Gardner,1999,p.458).

The benefits of the Quality Assurance Inspection listed above, together with the fact that it recognises the ability of schools to self-evaluate and thereafter to address areas of concern, thus leading to improvement, would seem to constitute a redefinition of the relationship between teacher and inspector, to one which places greater faith in the professionalism of teachers to be an integral element in the inspection process. Such an innovative development in school inspection in Northern Ireland is to be welcomed and the apparent benefits inherent in it means that it demands serious consideration by all schools, including Knocknagoney Primary School.

#### **10. The role of inspections in promoting improvement is limited**

The staff of Knocknagoney Primary School viewed the role of the Focused Inspection in promoting school improvement as being limited to providing a catalyst for change and to identifying those issues which needed to be addressed. While this role may be viewed as being important, the close correspondence between the School Development Plan and the issues raised by the Inspectorate, combined with the unanimous views of the staff that no issues were identified which the school was unaware of, questions the significance of this role. This evidence is at odds with the Staff Inspector's (Appendix A,p.319) view that inspections help schools to reflect on their own practice, identify strengths and weaknesses, and thus contribute to improvement.

It would appear that the views held by the Knocknagoney staff, that the role of inspections in promoting school improvement is limited, is reflective of the wider Northern Ireland picture. The NIAO (1999,p.8) have concluded that "Data analysed by NIAO indicates that there does not appear to

be any clear evidence that an inspected school will necessarily improve its examination results in subsequent years more than a school which has not been inspected.” Additionally, only 48% of Principals felt that standards were improving as a result of inspection, while within the primary sector, a mere 18% of the schools inspected reported increased performance following inspection (NIAO,1999,p.39). The report does recognise that their conclusions contain certain methodological limitations, for instance the prominence that it accords to examination results in measuring the performance of schools and the time scale within which it is reasonable to expect the implementation of changes to begin to impact upon pupils’ learning. Nevertheless, the emphasis upon increased pupil attainments within the report again suggests that for inspections, school improvement equates largely to improvement in effectiveness, rather than on school processes, ethos or culture, and capacity to generate future change. It is also recognised that there are practical difficulties involved in disentangling, from a range of other factors, the specific impact of inspection on school level improvement. The view of the Inspectorate is that drawing a causal link between inspection and improved examination results is tenuous because it fails to take account of the fact that inspection may have helped schools to stabilise; and that no two consecutive year groups are identical in ability, motivation or subject choice. Interestingly, the latter objection that no two consecutive year groups are identical in ability or motivation was one put forward by the teaching profession to object to the target setting mechanism for schools which dictates that a school must improve its performance by raising targets annually. Such protestations were rejected by the Department.

The NIAO (1999,p.36) has concluded that the Inspectorate should build upon the approach of the RSSI by being as specific as possible about the issues it wishes to see addressed by the wider school community and recommending a format for response which would encourage consideration of improvement. This course of action would, however, run contrary to the school improvement rhetoric on introducing change and would still constitute a very limited role for the Inspectorate in the improvement process, begging the question as to what else could or should be done by the Inspectorate?

Firstly, if inspection is to lead to improvement then the findings on the operation of a school would need to be accepted by the staff. This implies that the staff should have a formative role in compiling the issues which need to be addressed. At present, only the Quality Assurance Inspection facilitates such an approach. Secondly, the Inspectorate as an organisation could facilitate school improvement by providing more feedback to staff and fulfilling an advisory role in the post-inspection period. This argument, however, would involve a reconceptualisation of inspection beyond its current parameters.

Whilst this may prove unlikely given the accountability focus of inspection, it does not make the realisation of this goal any less desirable.

### **11. Inspection did have positive benefits**

The most valuable aspects of the inspection process identified by the staff of Knocknagoney Primary School included: the impetus for change which the inspection provided; clarification of the areas which the school needed to develop; the alternative perspective which it offered on school performance; the reassurance that it provided to staff by validating current practices; and providing justification for co-ordinators to introduce new measures into the school. Also, the need for the school to be accountable for its practices was noted by several members of staff.

However, whilst the staff may have viewed these features of inspection as being advantageous, the process of self-reflection inherent in school improvement theory (Elliott,1998) suggests that a number of these conclusions, such as clarification of the areas which a school needed to develop and validating current practices, need to be reached by the staff themselves.

The findings from the case study are echoed by authorities including Matthews and Smith (1995), Webb et al. (1998) and Gray and Gardner (1999). Indeed, the only additional benefit to schools offered by these sources is the growth in confidence and morale amongst the staff which may result from an inspection's affirmation of a school's quality and direction.

Taken in isolation, these findings would indicate that external inspection is desirable for schools in the UK, by providing information for parents and accountability for the expenditure of public money. However, if one recognises the many draw backs of external inspection highlighted in this chapter, then it would appear more accurate to conclude that whilst teachers accept the need for accountability, the form of accountability offered by current inspections does not satisfy their expectations.

According to Elliott et al. (1981,p.xiii) there are two main views of school accountability, representing different ideas about how schools might be improved. Firstly, 'responsive accountability' involved free and open communication by schools with a variety of interest groups such as parents, governors, representatives of local industry and the community about the aims and

nature of the education it provides. The relationships through which influence is exerted are characterised by dialogue rather than power, and therefore must operate at the local rather than the more remote bureaucratised level of the state. The responsive model suggests that schools ought to be self-accounting; generating and communicating information about themselves in the light of interests and concerns expressed by local 'audiences.' Therefore for this form of accountability, schooling is more readily improved when the school retains control over decisions but becomes more responsive to those whose interests are affected by those decisions. This can be contrasted with the 'control' or 'productivity' model where the accounting is done by some external monitoring agency, and where improvement comes with greater public control over decisions about school organisation, teaching methods and the curriculum.

Clearly, the form of accountability embodied in present day Focused and General Inspections is representative of Elliott's control model. However, perhaps the responsive model should be the one adopted by the self-reflective school intent on improvement, for as we have seen in chapter 4 the very ethos of school improvement assumes that there is a multi-level perspective to change whereby although the school is the centre of change, it will work collaboratively with all its partners in the education system.

Although responsive accountability would constitute a radical departure from the current inspectorial arrangements, proponents may well argue that within schools there already exists a body, in the form of Boards of Governors, which could act as public guardians of school's development, progress and improvement. Furthermore, it could be argued that neither doctors, solicitors, social workers, nurses, nor ministers of religion are inspected. However, given this study's advocacy of the principles of the Quality Assurance Inspection, it is important to realise that the adoption by a school of responsive accountability, through which schools are self-accounting, does not necessarily mean the demise of the Inspectorate, for Halstead (1994,p.151), has noted that "Where self-accounting exists, as in the recently developed quality assurance mechanisms in higher education, it is usually subject to some form of external monitoring."

## **12. School improvement**

School improvement was regarded as being detached from the inspection process. Whilst the literature in general and the NIAO (1999,p.45) report in particular equates improvement in school performance with increased attainment as evidenced in examination results, within the RSSI project

improved outcomes were more broadly defined to include improvement in interest levels, attitude and confidence.

Generally, the literature on school improvement was informative and enlightening, with Fullan's (1991) work on implementing change providing a useful theoretical backcloth to school improvement efforts, yet one which has a resonance of practicality in it. Indeed, the insights provided by the literature regarding the possible approaches to school improvement and the potential pitfalls surrounding it, merit consultation by schools wishing to implement school improvement projects.

Finally, the improvement model proposed by inspection is a top-down model, which is deeply problematic, for these models have had a relative lack of success in engendering improvement by failing to recognise that the focus of school improvement is on whole school development and the creation of a self-developing learning organisation (Lee and Fitz,1998,p.249). Although one might argue that the Inspectorate is not directly concerned with school improvement, its publications, seminars, conferences and advice to DE are all mechanisms through which it seeks to facilitate the process of school improvement. Therefore, whilst the Inspectorate may support the ideas of school improvement in theory, in actuality the mode and processes of inspection can be seen as being out of tune with the idea of the self-developing learning organisation. The inspection process has thus been identified as something which has been imposed on schools from the top down. It is proposed that the motivation in future should reverse that role and come from schools.

### Summary of Recommendations

Within this discussion of the findings from the case study it was evident that the current system of Focused and General Inspections cannot be refined or moulded to realise the educational values held by the Knocknagoney Primary School staff and, indeed, teachers everywhere, for the ethos and principles underpinning them are at variance with the rhetoric and reality of school improvement. Indeed, as can be seen from the preceding text and from the final recommendations listed below, an alternative perspective is offered which advocates a more radical adaptation of the inspection process to reflect the needs of all schools:

1. Teachers accept the need for a form of accountability within the profession, but not that provided by the current inspection process. Therefore, teachers, both as members of individual organisations and collectively as a profession, must debate and reconsider the most suitable form of accountability

which can meet the needs of pupils, staff, parents, governors and all educational partners, and which, ultimately, can facilitate improvement.

2. Research should be conducted to discover if the Quality Assurance Inspection offers a less stressful mode of inspection than Focused and General Inspections, and whether the theory it espouses is aligned to the principles and practice of school improvement. Subsequently, schools will be able to consider the prudence of employing Quality Assurance Inspections within their schools.

3. The Inspectorate should harness the unique knowledge and skills of teachers by ensuring that school self-evaluation becomes an integral element of school accountability.

4. The Inspectorate should conduct a re-appraisal of the purpose and nature of the inspection process, for it is impossible to successfully marry the system of external accountability and control embodied in the Focused and General Inspections, with one which focuses primarily on improvement and development.

At this juncture, it is necessary to state that the work reported here is an important contribution to the knowledge base as it is the first study which portrays the mode and processes of school inspection, compares and contrasts these with school improvement processes, passes judgment on the compatibility of these processes, and subsequently concludes through its findings that there is a need to align school accountability with school improvement theory and practice. In addition to the professional knowledge which has been generated this research has also contributed to personal knowledge, as it has provided me with an insight and understanding of school improvement processes and strategies which I intend to embrace in my role as Principal of a primary school.

In the context of today's inspection arrangements, the discussion of the findings of this study and the resultant recommendations indicate the possibility of schools in general, and Knocknagoney Primary School in particular, considering the Quality Assurance Inspection. This approach permits a school to dictate its readiness for inspection, not against an imposed deadline but according to its developmental status and in line with its own stated aims and activities; thus possibly alleviating stress in the pre-inspection period. The Quality Assurance Inspection allows staff to have a formative role in the monitoring and evaluation process thus developing a sense of ownership, and also stresses the importance of school self-evaluation. Furthermore, the strategy implicit in Quality Assurance Inspections facilitates a top-down, bottom-up approach to school improvement, is one of quality assurance rather than quality control, and its purpose should be to check that each school has a

philosophy of continual improvement, has mechanisms for monitoring its practices, and establishes procedures for designing and implementing change in the interest of improvement.

This study, however, does not confine itself to the parameters of the inspection process as defined by DE. Accordingly, the need for a redefinition of the purpose and nature of Focused and General Inspections has already been noted. Under the current system the emphasis on accountability as opposed to development or improvement will sustain an element of performance during inspection and will stifle demands supporting increased professional dialogue between the teacher and inspector. The findings of this study also revealed that inspection did not make any new revelations to the school about its performance; did not result in any altering of classroom practice; had a limited influence on the improvement process; and was lacking in advice, much to the displeasure of staff. If this situation is to change, then the ethos and principles supporting inspection must change. Therefore, any reconceptualisation of the inspection process must go beyond that currently offered by the Department's existing Focused and General Inspections, for these models emphasise judgment at the expense of advice.

Undoubtedly, if the Inspectorate has a role to play in any future school accountability mechanism, it would appear that this should be constructed on the framework provided by Quality Assurance Inspections. This would involve working with teachers, as partners in the education system, to adopt a multi-level approach to change (Hopkins and Lagerweij,1996); avoiding the imposition of school improvement solutions by dictating to schools the issues to be addressed, but instead allowing these to be generated internally by the school; and providing a standardisation of the quality of accountability, and not the form of accountability, in all schools. However, the duties of inspectors should also extend beyond that envisaged by Quality Assurance Inspections and should become one in which the Inspectorate adopt a more advisory role if it is to have a significant influence in the arena of school improvement. It must also incorporate a realisation that improvement in terms of achievement is more broadly defined than simple gains in test scores.

In conclusion, the function of the Inspectorate should become one which may embrace identifying good practice and offering advice and assistance but which, crucially, should support a process of deliberative reflection on the part of the teachers to reconsider personal and shared values, assumptions and goals and their practical implementation. In performing this function the Inspectorate must strive to create a system of school accountability responsive to the needs of

Government, parents, teachers and pupils in the 21st century. Although the foundation for such a policy may already be in place, the challenge remains as to how and when this will be achieved.

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