

ULSTER TEACHERS' UNION

WRITTEN EVIDENCE TO THE ASSEMBLY EDUCATION COMMITTEE

AUGUST 2013

INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE AND THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SYSTEM

1. The Ulster Teachers' Union (UTU) is the only locally-based teachers' union. With its Headquarters in Belfast, it has a membership of over 6,000, including teachers employed in the nursery, primary, post-primary and special sectors by all the employing authorities in Northern Ireland.
2. The UTU has an elected General Secretary and a Central Executive Committee (CEC) of elected members who are serving teachers and principals from all areas in the north. The UTU prides itself on the democratic nature of its decision-making process, with the CEC meeting at least monthly during the academic year to progress the policy decisions of its Annual Conference and to discuss matters that require instant response during the periods between Conferences.
3. The UTU has for some time been concerned about the direction the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) has been travelling in relation to the inspection of schools and indeed discussion of school inspections has featured regularly at CEC meetings during the past 2-3 years. In addition the Officials of UTU have noted an increase in the amount of anxiety generated by the announcement of a school inspection, as reported by members. There has also been an increase in the support requested by members before, during and after inspections, in some cases requiring Officials to be engaged in quite lengthy counselling of members following on from an inspection. The UTU is therefore very pleased that this inquiry is taking place and is very keen to contribute to providing evidence to the Assembly's Education Committee.
4. The UTU wishes to state that it fully endorses the submission made by GTC(NI) and commends the work that was done by the Registrar of GTC, in collaboration with representatives of NITC, to present a very full picture of the current position, including references to academic research and comparisons with other countries.
5. The UTU in this submission will therefore simply summarise the main issues of concern as reported by its members and comment on the very useful fact-finding

visit its General Secretary made to its sister union, the EIS, earlier this year to investigate the inspection system in Scotland.

6. The UTU has noted the following issues of concern that have emerged during the recent past in relation to the ETI.

6.1 Members have reported that the pressure they feel in relation to the announcement of an inspection is now much higher than it was. This is due in part to the rationalisation agenda which makes inspection reports much more high stakes but also to the perceived change in the role of the inspectorate. Where in the past teachers were obviously concerned that the school would get an acceptable outcome, there is now a feeling that the ETI are there to be critical and this is fuelled by the experiences of schools that have had lower than expected outcomes.

6.2 This fear of inspections has been further aggravated by the statements made publicly regarding “failing schools” and “failing teachers”. The identification of the number of principal teachers who are “failing” in their leadership role has had a very detrimental effect on morale of principals and has resulted in many cases in the teaching staff coming under severe pressure to produce an unrealistic and unsustainable “performance” for the ETI. It has also created situations where a wedge has been driven between the leadership of a school and the rest of the teaching workforce.

6.3 The very public nature of inspection reports has resulted in situations where individuals have been “named and shamed”. An example of this was the very public humiliation of the Principal of Crumlin High School who was subjected to a campaign against her, including death threats, following an Inspection carried out by the ETI. There needs to be a more professional way of dealing with such matters. In Scotland the school receives a detailed report which can be dealt with internally while the public report is much shorter and less likely to provoke such disproportionate reaction.

6.4 In the past teachers were generally quite accepting when the ETI announced their intention to inspect a school as they felt it was a good method of quality assurance and they felt it would be carried out in a supportive manner. Unfortunately recent experience has been that this spirit of support has been diluted and there is a definite feeling that the ETI are there to criticise rather than support. As all teachers know, you get the best performance from pupils where they feel supported, not threatened, and where their morale is high, not

low. The current Inspection system is not supporting professional self- esteem for the vast majority of teachers.

- 6.5 The disjointed relationship between schools and the ETI is very evident, even at policy level. By its own admission, the ETI states on its website that “it is not the duty of the Education and Training Inspectorate to provide extended support for teachers and schools”. Reports from teachers indicate that inspectors give little or no feedback on lessons. This clearly undermines any claim by ETI to any commitment to supporting school development. Instead ETI rhetorically allocates the responsibility of school improvement to the Curriculum Advisory Support Service (CASS). In a financial climate that has both crippled and restricted CASS across the five Board areas to schools falling into special measures, not all schools will in fact be able to avail of support to attain the desired “very good” and “outstanding” rankings which ETI are pressing schools to achieve.
- 6.6 The District Inspector role has been viewed in the past as a very important one, but it has been reported that the very supportive relationship between the District Inspector and school principals is under threat. This was confirmed to the teaching unions at a meeting with the Chief Inspector who stated that District Inspectors were inspecting from the minute they walked into a school. Many principals valued the informal chats they had with District Inspectors and used them as a tool for improvement. If they feel that they are under full professional scrutiny they may feel inhibited in sharing their concerns honestly, which will be to the detriment of the school. The UTU would suggest that the role of the District Inspector should be restored to its previous status.
- 6.7 The grading system for school inspections has been the subject of concern for the UTU and other teaching unions for some time. Where a school has been deemed “satisfactory” then that should be regarded as a positive, albeit there may be some areas which could be addressed in order to improve. Unfortunately the ETI appear not to have the same interpretation of “satisfactory” as everyone else and actually feel that a school falling into this category is not satisfactory. (This was confirmed by comments made by the Chief Inspector.) As stated previously, teacher morale suffers in such a critical atmosphere. Schools in Northern Ireland produced wonderful international results in the TIMS and PERLS study announced earlier this year. It is difficult to match this up with the negativity that is generated through the Inspection system.

6.8 Following on from this, there seems to be a concerted effort to divide schools into the “good” schools and those that are not good. This has been exacerbated by the invitations extended by the ETI to those schools who have achieved “outstanding” or “very good” Inspection outcomes to celebratory ceremonies. The UTU believes that this an entirely inappropriate way to divide the profession and that it again impacts on teacher morale. Since there are indications that the socio-economic intake of a school impacts on the Inspection outcome (as per statistics requested by the teacher unions) it disadvantages very good teachers who choose to teach in the more challenging schools but who are never likely to be lauded in this way due to the in-built bias within the system.

6.9 The process for arriving at a final grading for a school seems to be unclear. It has been reported that some schools are led to believe that they have performed at a certain level but when the final Report appears this seems to have changed. The UTU is concerned that there may be influences on the outcome of an Inspection that are not directly related to what has been observed by the inspectors who visited the school.

6.10 The pressure placed upon schools by the current inspection model’s desire for copious evidence and increased accountability has at times put intolerable pressure on staff. Staff who are on leave due to illness or other leave feel under pressure to co-operate at full capacity in order to avoid the prospect of a re-inspection caused by teacher absence. Moreover the additional workload placed on schools in preparation for inspections is at tension with the values of the Teacher Welfare Strategy and contravenes the terms and ethos of the Teacher Workload Agreement.

7. During the tenure of the previous two Chief Inspectors (and indeed before that) there was a good professional working relationship between the teaching unions and the Chief Inspectors. There were regular meetings where issues were raised and genuine professional dialogue took place. Since the appointment of the current Chief Inspector this process has been seen by the unions as less effective.
8. The UTU was very disappointed at the way the ETI reacted during the recent period of Industrial Action in schools. In some instances very positive relationships between the ETI and schools that had been developed over many years were put under great pressure due to the directions given to Inspectors and to the correspondence sent to schools from the Chief Inspector. This has not been typical of similar situations in the

past where the ETI showed sensitivity in order to ensure that relationships were maintained.

9. The UTU would suggest that the Education Committee examine the ethos and operation of the equivalent service to the ETI in Scotland which seems to command the full support of the teaching force. The UTU also suggest that there should be an immediate review of how schools are graded and in addition, that the issue of teacher morale be addressed. The UTU also suggests that the whole reporting system be examined in order to ensure that the message going out to the general public is one that will not undermine the very good work being done by the vast majority of schools.
10. In relation to the School Improvement Process, the UTU has grave concerns about the emphasis on raising standards at a time when the Education Service is fighting just to maintain standards in a climate of harsh cuts to the Education budget. This does not seem to be taken into account by the Department of Education in their constant mantra of school improvement. At present schools are working in a very difficult situation with staff redundancies, a lack of proper support services to schools, an absence of comprehensive Professional Development for teachers and with the uncertainty around the formation of an Education and Skills Authority. The current employing authorities have been cut back drastically and the support services that were once there have dwindled and in some cases disappeared completely. Serious thought must be given to the reality of where we are economically – we can only have standards that relate to the resources we put into schools, not the standards we would all aspire to if there were endless streams of funding available.
11. The UTU once again thanks the Education Committee for this opportunity to participate in the Inquiry and would be very happy to send a representative to speak to this paper should the Committee request it to do so.