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

NI ASSEMBLY EDUCATION COMMITTEE
REQUEST FOR WRITTEN EVIDENCE

Introduction

NICCY would like to thank the Northern Ireland Assembly Education Committee for the invitation to submit a written response to its inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and the school improvement process.

The Office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was created in accordance with 'The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order' (2003) to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Under articles 7(2)and (3) of this legislation, NICCY has a mandate to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law, practice and services relating to the rights and best interests of children and young people by relevant authorities. In determining how to carry out her functions, the Commissioner's paramount consideration is the rights of the child and NICCY is required to base all of its work on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Articles 28 and 29 of the UNCRC address the right to education, and the goals of education. The Convention places a high value on education and the importance of ensuring that it promotes different aspects of young people's development.

As further consideration is given to the work of ETI, NICCY would strongly recommend that relevant articles of the UNCRC are taken into account to ensure that children's rights and best interests are kept to the fore. Relevant articles include those pertaining to education (Articles 28, 29), referenced above, Article 3; the best interests of the child being paramount, Article 12; taking account of the views of the child in all matters affecting them, Article 19; protection from all forms of violence (with specific reference to bullying), and Article 42; the importance of adults and children knowing and understanding the UNCRC.

Clearly the quality of school inspections is a significant factor in determining the quality of education provided to children and young people. Furthermore, the provision of accurate, accessible inspection reports is essential in supporting parents or carers to make an informed choice about schools and to provide reliable information regarding the quality of the teaching and learning experiences which their children receive. ETI provides services to various departments and agencies. NICCY would therefore propose that it is important for ETI to engage with all stakeholders regularly and effectively and that the information shared is accessible, timely and of a high quality.

A review of ETI's approach and processes presents an important opportunity to assess and improve the remit for school inspections. In considering how and where ETI's powers might be extended, it will be important to consider whether such an extension will, ultimately, have a positive impact on pupils' educational experiences. NICCY strongly recommends that this should be the **key** driver underpinning all decisions regarding potential changes to ETI's functions and practice.

Where appropriate, NICCY has addressed issues identified by the Committee, in its request for written evidence, below.

Effectiveness of ETI's approach to school inspection/improvement, and assessment of the 'value-added' in schools which have lower levels of attainment.
Clearly, quality educational provision entails more than the achievement of good examination results and academic performance, and while the quality of learners' achievements is a significant aspect of inspections, NICCY is aware that ETI also examines other important dimensions of educational provision, including pastoral care, special educational needs provision, child protection, teaching, and school ethos.

Before considering any assessment of value-added elements, it is important to clarify what is meant and understood by 'value-added' and how this contributes to improving pupil outcomes and school performance. For example, it will be helpful to confirm if the aspects of provision identified above are regarded as examples of criteria which have been defined to measure perceived 'advantage' or added value in schools. Schools do of course, provide pupils with myriad opportunities to participate in different learning activities and to achieve, outside the formal curriculum. NICCY would therefore highlight the importance of further consideration being given as to how such achievements can be effectively recorded and assessed in each individual school, as part of any inspection process.

When focusing on schools with lower levels of examination attainment, it is important to assess where progress and achievements have occurred, not only in the context of academic attainment, but also through the informal curriculum and across the wider school community. Pupils' achievements in extra-curricular activities such as sports, music, community/international projects, schools' councils and e.g. editing the school magazine, should also be taken into account.

Working with children and young people who experience specific learning difficulties and exhibit disaffection clearly presents significant challenges for principals and classroom teachers in terms of providing appropriate goals and motivating pupils. It is particularly important that where teachers have engaged with young people who find learning challenging or are disaffected, in innovative and creative ways, that their efforts and expertise are acknowledged. Furthermore, where there is evidence that their efforts have positively impacted, NICCY would propose that details of successful strategies and approaches should be actively shared with other schools. Clearly, ETI has a key role in promoting and disseminating good practice across the schools' network.

Key issues impacting on schools experiencing difficulties

As the Committee will be aware, there are a range of issues impacting on schools which may be experiencing difficulties. These may include a lack of parental support, insufficient support or resources, budgetary cuts and a requirement to teach significant numbers of pupils who are disaffected. In addition, prompt access to appropriate SEN services and support has been a problem for many schools and significant delays in providing assessments by educational psychologists has long been recognized as a problem for pupils and their parents. It is important that school development plans reference support services available through health, education and community providers. There is also an ongoing need for Education and Library Boards to support schools in the provision of SEN services.

A significant issue, which is an ongoing concern for NICCY, is the continuing prevalence of bullying within schools. The Office is aware that all grant-aided schools are required, within their discipline policy, to include an anti-bullying policy detailing definitions and measures they will take to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils. The effectiveness of these measures is then monitored through the ETI's inspections of pastoral care arrangements. However, the practice of recording bullying incidents is a matter for individual schools and there does not appear to be any consistency or specific requirements in terms of the level of detail which is recorded, e.g. the form of bullying, type

of bullying, number of incidents. Once incidents of bullying have been recorded, NICCY believes it is vital that schools then provide evidence of how they have responded and dealt with individual incidents. Evidently this is an area where ETI has a key role to play, in terms of advising and monitoring.

Improving ETI's approach to the school improvement process

The right of a child or young person to have their voice heard is enshrined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC), as described above. This Article states that children, capable of forming their own views, have the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them. NICCY therefore believes it is vital that pupils are consulted during the school inspection process and provided with genuine and meaningful opportunities to contribute their opinions and share their experiences. Evidently, pupils are key stakeholders in education and those most likely to be impacted by decisions made by ETI, school governors and senior management. As such, they occupy a unique position in terms of being able to provide insights and feedback as to how decisions actually work 'on the ground'. There are a range of innovative methods which may be used in consulting with pupils to ensure they can effectively contribute their views and reflect on their experiences.[1] In addition, where pupils are consulted as part of an inspection, NICCY would strongly suggest that they should be informed about the purpose of their involvement and how their feedback will be used by ETI. Following the inspection, they should be advised as to how their input subsequently influenced outcomes.

Providing robust assessments of the quality of educational services and support, should encourage and support schools and other education providers to improve provision, and help to inform stakeholders and the wider public about the quality of education. Throughout the inspection process, it is evidently important that appropriate information is shared with all stakeholders and that post-inspection reports and feedback are sufficiently clear and detailed to enable schools, where required, to make changes.

In conclusion, in its vision, ETI states that it is *'…dedicated fully to the education and well-being of all learners.'* and its mission statement is *'Promoting improvement in the interest of all learners.'* In reviewing ETI's role, priorities and practice, NICCY strongly advocates that children and young people remain the central focus of its work, and that any proposed changes should clearly enhance and improve their educational experiences and promote their well-being and development.

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[1] Mechanisms to consult with children and young people in schools may include school councils or other participative structures, questionnaires, suggestion boxes, focus groups and peer research.