

## **Gaelscoil na bhFál**

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### **Assembly Education Committee Inquiry into the Education Training Inspectorate (ETI)**

#### **Submission from Gaelscoil na bhFál - 1046571**

#### **Introduction**

Irish-medium education has been part of the educational landscape in Northern Ireland since the first school was founded in 1971, more than forty years ago. It has been a formal part of the grant-aided educational system since 1983.

One recurring complaint from practitioners in the Irish-medium sector is that the education authorities have not yet managed to come to terms with the implications of running what is, in effect, a bilingual education system. Many aspects of the education system appear to be run on the implicit assumption that the only language of instruction is English: provision for Irish-medium education is, more often than not, little more than a bolt-on to policies and practices which have been formulated to a monolingual template.

We believe that ETI has not yet come to terms with the complexities of Irish-medium education, and that its approach to the Irish-medium sector requires a radical overhaul.

#### **Background information**

Gaelscoil na bhFál is an Irish-medium primary school situated in Iveagh, west Belfast. The vast majority of children in Gaelscoil na bhFál have English as their first language. Gaelscoil na bhFál provides a language immersion approach to education, whereby children are educated through a language which is not the language of the home. Language immersion approaches are widely adopted throughout the world and are accepted as a significant strategy in the maintenance and revitalisation of minority languages and threatened indigenous languages. They reflect common practice in Wales and the Republic of Ireland and have an increasing presence within the education system in Scotland. Gaelscoil na bhFál is one of a number of Irish-

medium schools in Northern Ireland, of which there are ten primary schools in the greater Belfast area. Established by parents in 1987 and funded by DENI from August 1992, Gaelscoil na bhFál was the second Irish-medium school to be established in Belfast. It has an enrolment of approximately 190 pupils.

### **Key issues**

Irish-medium immersion in Northern Ireland involves early full immersion where staff communicate with children in Irish at all times from their earliest entry to the school at nursery class. Irish-medium schools are subject to the same regulatory requirements in terms of curriculum content as all other primary schools in Northern Ireland (with Irish as an additional core subject). English is introduced as a formal subject in P4.

We wish to address two issues in this submission.

1. The quality of the evidence base on which the inspectors make their judgements;
2. Aspects of the inspection process in Irish-medium preschools and schools.

### **The quality of the evidence base on which the inspectors make their judgements**

ETI's *Service Standards* identifies a series of principles, values and standards which include the following terms: "objectivity and consistency in making evaluations, honesty, openness, concern for accuracy, fairness". *A Common Framework for Inspection* insists that inspectors "will work towards the highest standards of ... professional expertise and credibility", and be "unbiased and consistent when making assessments".

These are worthy ideals, but school inspection is not an exact science, in spite of the Inspectorate's aspirations, and there are, in practice, significant variables within the inspection process. As a result, it is inevitable that the process is characterised by a greater or lesser degree of subjectivity and inconsistency.

Those variables include the individual and collective strengths and weaknesses of the inspection team. There can be significant variability in inspectors' competence in such areas as:

- observational skills
- communication skills, including conduct of discussions with staff
- ability to elicit information
- ability to process information
- ability to distinguish between important and minor detail
- ability to analyse information, summarise their findings effectively, and come to fair and accurate judgements

There is also a range of what could be described as styles of inspection. Whether such variables are rooted in differences in temperament or differences in the attitude

of individual inspectors to their task, such variables undoubtedly affect both the dynamic of inspections and their outcome. Some inspectors are regarded by schools they inspect as critical friends, while the criticism of other inspectors is not experienced as that of a friend. Some tend to emphasise the positive aspects of a school's work as a basis for improvement; for others, rigour appears to be synonymous with negativity. Some communicate a holistic vision of the education process, others strike those who encounter them as being essentially box-tickers and bean-counters. Some are highly intelligent; some less so.

Schools are familiar with the subjective element which comes into inspectors' reports. While their own perspectives are also to some extent subjective, they generally accept that evaluations and assessments will inevitably be, to some degree, inaccurate. At times this can actually work to a school's benefit, where an inspection team has failed to identify weaknesses. At other times an inspection team may fail to appreciate a school's achievements properly.

The perception that there is always some arbitrary, subjective element in inspection reports is reinforced when schools exchange experiences of inspections. This perception can be reinforced further by external evidence, when, for example, individual teachers, Governors or support staff have experienced inspections in more than one school, and have identified a lack of balance or consistency between inspectors' reports. While such evidence is by its nature anecdotal, it should not be dismissed, as it often comes from people whose knowledge of the schools involved is both more extensive and deeper than that available to the inspectors during their brief inspection period.

We believe that the greatest challenge of any monitoring or evaluation process is to achieve a high level of objectivity and consistency. Education is enormously complex, multi-layered and multi-faceted, and any evaluation process directed at such a complex sphere of endeavour requires an appropriately complex evaluation model. The pursuit of objectivity and consistency in evaluating the achievement of any school demands a level of sophisticated analysis that can rise to the complexity of the challenge.

As a consequence, if objectivity and consistency are to be achieved:

- An evaluation model for school inspections should include safeguards to mitigate differences or shortcomings in experience or knowledge base, core inspectorial skills, or inspectorial temperament. It must ensure commonality of approach in relation to (a) what information is gathered and (b) how the information is gathered.
- An appropriate evaluation model should also provide a robust evidence base, including documentary evidence giving a clear rationale and convincing explanations for the allocation of evaluative summative statements or descriptor bands, cross-linked to quality indicators and grade descriptions on a differentiated rating scale.

Under Freedom of Information and Data Protection Legislation, our school accessed significant ETI inspection documentation: (a) relating to the documentation created

in relation to an inspection in our own school, and (b) ETI's internal generic inspection documentation. This documentation was revealing, and, we regret, very disappointing:

- The documentation relating to our own school consisted overwhelmingly of handwritten notes – of greater or lesser legibility – jotted down on lined pages without any cross-referencing to quality indicators or grade descriptions on a differentiated rating scale.
- None of ETI's internal generic inspection documentation for guiding and recording evaluations had a mechanism for cross-referencing descriptor bands to quality indicators or grade descriptions on a differentiated rating scale.
- None of the discussion/interview templates were customised to focus specifically on curriculum areas, or had prompts for core questions and possible answers.
- None of the documentation provided demonstrated a clear rationale or a convincing explanation for the allocation of evaluative summative statements or descriptor bands allocated to the school.
- Significantly, none of ETI's internal generic inspection documentation for guiding and recording evaluations addressed any of the specific (and additional) features of Irish-medium education.

The school's Board of Governors had a meeting with senior inspectors to discuss some of these issues. During the meeting the school expressed its concerns about the process through which Inspectors made their evaluations, and queried the lack of safeguards that could mitigate variables which could undermine objectivity and consistency. The Deputy Chief Inspector who chaired the meeting responded to these concerns by saying that inspectors made their evaluations on the basis of the 'hard drive' in their heads.

We believe that the hard drive in inspectors' heads is not an adequate basis on which objective, fair and consistent judgements can be established. It is not an appropriate basis on which schools should be judged against each other. It is not an appropriate basis on which the reputation of schools or staff should depend. It is not an appropriate basis on which to put inspection reports into the public domain, where they carry significant weight in the eyes of parents, other professionals and the public. No reasonable person would accept that the reputation of schools, teachers and school managers should depend – without other evidence – on the hard drive in inspectors' heads.

On a more anecdotal level an Early Years Irish-medium support group with which our school has contact recently handled a concern raised by the supervisor of an Irish-medium voluntary playgroup. This playgroup had recently undergone an inspection, and was awarded the grade of 'very good', the second highest grade that could be awarded. The inspector told the supervisor that the pre-school had been very close to an 'outstanding' grade – the highest grade available. When the supervisor asked

what aspect of the play-group's provision had pulled it down from a possible 'outstanding' to 'very good' she was told that the preschool lacked "the wow factor". The 'wow factor' does not strike us as an objective criterion. Nor can we see how it contributes to the pursuit of consistency. The body appointed by Government to maintain standards has an enormous influence on the public reputation of all the educational providers it assesses. No educational provider should have to depend on such a clearly subjective – such an obviously inadequate – criterion as 'the wow factor'.

To summarise: on a generic level, we believe that the inspection methodology used by ETI, and the processes by which inspectors come to decisions, is deeply flawed. We believe that the inspection methodology compromises the ability of inspectors to deliver fair, accurate and consistent evaluations of schools.

In relation to the Irish-medium sector, guidance, recording or evaluative documentation, which is embedded in and informed by a monolingual template, is inappropriate for an education sector which involves the use of two languages, one of which is a fragile minority language, and usually the second language of the pupils.

The most alarming result of the failure to make documentation fit for purpose for the Irish-medium sector is that, by ignoring or downplaying the very principle which informs the ethos of Irish-medium education, it can allow a negative bias (whether conscious or unconscious) into inspections of Irish-medium settings. This negative bias is not universal, and we are not claiming that all evaluations of Irish-medium education are negative. However, by allowing inspectors to ignore or downplay, with impunity, a critical element of what they should be inspecting, it can lead to evaluations that reflect a negative and subjective bias.

### **Recommendations (Evidence Base)**

- We recommend that all the guidance, recording and evaluative documentation which underpin inspections for English-medium education and Irish-medium education, must be reviewed to ensure fairness, accuracy and consistency.
- We recommend that all documentation for guiding and recording evaluations must have a mechanism for cross-referencing descriptor bands to quality indicators or grade descriptions on a differentiated rating scale and that schools can see a clear link between grades awarded and the evidential base.
- We recommend that all the guidance, recording and evaluative documentation which underpin inspections in Irish-medium education must be reviewed to incorporate the specifics of the Irish-medium context.

## **Aspects of the inspection process in Irish-medium Preschools and Schools.**

We have a number of concerns relating to the inspection process in Irish-medium schools. As has already been noted, there is much commonality between good practice in Irish-medium immersion education and English-medium education. Nevertheless, the Irish language immersion learning context involves a number of specific challenges.

Language immersion education is a highly specialised area, particularly in the context of fragile minority languages. Its methodologies, priorities and value systems are complex, and while they are coherent, they can also at times be at variance with the prevailing educational orthodoxy of the day.

Our first area of concern relates to the use of inspectors without an appropriate amount of Irish.

It has been common practice for inspection teams in Irish-medium schools to include inspectors on the team without an appropriate level of Irish, at times no Irish at all, and in some cases involving a Reporting (i.e., lead) Inspector without Irish.

No English-medium school in this society would tolerate an inspection by a monoglot German-speaking, or Russian-speaking inspector. In Wales, no monolingual English-speaking inspector would be tolerated in a Welsh-medium school, and the notion of an English-speaking monoglot inspecting a French immersion school in Quebec is laughable.

It could be argued that, because of the small size of the Irish-medium sector in Northern Ireland, it is impossible to have Irish-speaking inspectors with specialisms in all areas. This argument, even after nearly thirty years of state-funded Irish-medium education, has some validity, and a case can be made for allowing, on occasion, an inspector without Irish to join an inspection team. Such an arrangement is far from ideal, and would be contingent on adequate safeguards to ensure that the inspector's lack of understanding of the language of instruction is not allowed to distort the outcome.

It is necessary to understand what an Inspector without Irish is likely to miss. There will be major gaps in what they can observe and understand. For example, the documentation in some Irish-medium schools is almost entirely in Irish, and in others there can be documentation in both languages.

However within the classroom environment, where an inspector is making judgements about the quality of teaching and learning, there is a more serious problem. An inspector without Irish can certainly observe what children are doing, and the tasks they are involved in, as well as how purposeful, engaged and on-task they appear to be. They can get a general sense of how prepared a teacher is and of their classroom management skills. They can get an idea of the children's written presentation skills. However, they are not really in a position to judge the quality of much of what is going on, for example, where an inspector is making a judgement about the quality, structure, pace and presentation of a lesson, whether or not it is pitched to the levels of the children, the quality of the communication between

teacher and children and between children, the quality of the discussion and questioning style, children's responses and what it indicates about their learning, and how the teacher builds on the lesson, elaborates, clarifies and differentiates. They are not able to judge the quality and range of the children's writing activities, or the quality of much of the children's work in classroom and corridor display.

In particular, given the pivotal role of the Reporting Inspector within the Common Framework for Inspection, and the consequent scope for a distorted outcome, there are no circumstances which justify the use of a non-Irish speaker in leading an inspection in an Irish-medium school.

A second area of concern is one of which the Inspectorate appears to be itself unaware, but one which may reflect a more general attitude to the Irish-medium sector. The guidelines for inspectors speak of the need for "sensitivity to the circumstances of the organisation" in carrying out inspections. This requirement should be extended to involve sensitivity to the circumstances of the entire Irish-medium sector. Although Irish-medium education has been established in Northern Ireland for a generation, a surprising number of inspectors display a low level of awareness of or insight into the nature of this form of education. Their ability to cope with Irish-medium education is not helped by ETI inspection guidance material, which addresses Irish-medium education in exactly the same way as it addresses English-medium education. This is another example of a deeply embedded predisposition to perceive Irish-medium educational issues through a monolingual lens.

One consequence of this lack of insight into the realities of the sector is a tendency to see the Irish language as a somewhat eccentric sideshow to the real business of education; real education being that which is conducted in English. This can manifest itself in a recurring pattern of pressure put by the inspectorate to introduce English as a language of instruction at far too early a stage. It can also involve pressure on schools to use English as the medium of instruction for a range of subjects, and can involve claims that the Irish language is holding back the children's education in mathematics, science, history, etc., or claims that the children do not understand these subjects when they receive instruction in Irish. Much of this pressure is known, to those working in the sector, to be inappropriate. Inspectors make these remarks without any justification whatsoever in terms of theory, methodology, evidence or research.

An excessive preoccupation with English can also take the form of inspectors failing to distinguish, in their evaluations, between English and Irish. Although literacy in English and Irish face very different challenges in Irish-medium schools, they can be bundled together without appropriate differentiation. Even worse, Irish language literacy can be ignored. Prior to inspection it is normal for schools to be asked to fill in a basic information sheet which gives important statistical information about the school including End of KS2 results. Until a complaint recently made by our school, ETI had not sought information from Irish-medium schools in relation to Key Stage 2 achievements in Irish. This failure was not a simple bureaucratic oversight, but was

symptomatic of an overall tendency to marginalise the language within the inspection process.

**Recommendations (with particular reference to Irish-medium education)**

- ETI should undertake a review of its training programme for inspectors in relation to Irish-medium education to inform them and sensitise them to the methodologies, priorities, value systems and challenges of Irish-medium education.
- We believe that this review should be undertaken through meaningful partnership with established experienced practitioners in the sector.
- ETI should terminate the practice of using Inspectors without appropriate competence in Irish to lead inspection teams in Irish-medium schools.
- ETI should make a commitment to the deployment of inspectors with appropriate levels of fluency in Irish in inspections in Irish-medium schools.
- Where inspectors without an appropriate level of Irish participate in an inspection in an Irish-medium school, there should be safeguards in place to ensure that the inspector's lack of understanding of the language of instruction does not compromise the fairness, accuracy or consistency of an inspection report.

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ÁINE ANDREWS  
Secretary of Board of Governors  
Gaelscoil na bhFál