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We are a group of ex teachers from all types of school; primary, secondary, grammar, who meet very regularly and who are still in touch with many serving teachers. We invariably talk shop. These are points which are often raised. (I am spokesperson as I am out of teaching long enough not to be associated with any school or employee).

From speaking to many teachers, Vice Principals and some Principals the same concerns keep being raised.

- An over reliance of data.
- The inspectorate itself.
- The cosy relationship which seems to exist between the ETI, the boards and the DENI..

An over reliance in data.

To take a school in the NEELB as an example its inspection report of Feb 2012 states “In most of the areas inspected the quality of education provided in inadequate.”

Yet the report finds

- Satisfactory quality of provision in English, maths and science.
- Satisfactory quality of the care, guidance and support of pupils
- Satisfactory curricular provision for the pupils
- Good quality of CEIAG

All of this would point towards a satisfactory rating overall. However because of the GCSE results being below the N.I average for similar type schools and because the SDP did not meet with approval the school is described as inadequate.

If you scrutinise the inspection reports of the schools in formal intervention in many cases everything; pastoral care, the provision for learning and the quality of teaching are all satisfactory or above and the parents, pupils and the boards of governors are all satisfied with the school. Yet because of below average results the quality of education is described as inadequate.

The bands the schools are put into are determined on the number of FSM.

How is the number of children on FSM determined? If a child does not take up the offer of FSM are they still included in the statistics?

Services children are not allowed to take FSM yet they are often below average because of constantly moving from one country to another.

Small schools are disadvantaged. The inspectors acknowledge this themselves (in very small print) viz- “the key stage outcome should be interpreted with caution for small primary schools as a large

percentage change from year to year can often be attributed to a very small number of children.” Yet they still use the standard N.I. averages in these schools. If you look at the inspection reports of failing schools a higher percentage are small schools. Are inspectors setting too high targets? Inspection reports show that even with intensive help from the Boards and CASS school development plans have still not met with approval. If the experts from the Board and CASS cannot produce an acceptable how can a senior management team be expected to?

If the school is described as below average it almost invariably follows that the leadership is deemed to be inadequate. This is unfair to Principals and may lead to fewer able candidates applying for principalships in the future. For instance in the school we used as an example previously the principal had been described by inspectors as providing “excellent leadership that is characterised by his high expectations of the pupils and the staff and his commitment to continuous improvement” in an inspection survey in 2006 and the 2012 inspection stated “the principal is strongly committed to the life and work of the school, has fostered good working relationships and is supported by his SLT and Board of Governors.” The leadership was still classed as inadequate.

The principal resigned shortly after. He has been replaced by someone who in the past four years as a VP and acting principal has been given an unsatisfactory rating on two separate occasions by inspectors.

A VP who has been used by her board and other principals as an example of good classroom practice has taken early retirement. This is partly because her school is due an inspection and although she is recognised as an exemplary classroom teacher she is afraid her documentation would not satisfy the inspectorate.

Schools will try to find ways to maximize their results, ways which aren't always in the pupils' best interest. Already we know that

- Schools are pulling pupils from GCSE classes if it is thought that they won't do well.
- Children are being advised to do subjects that it is thought that they will pass well. These are not always the subjects that they need for what they want to do in the future.
- Pupils are not being allowed to proceed to year 14 if they haven't achieved AS levels of D or above.
- One Grammar school we know of is making some pupils repeat year 11 if their term exams have not been good enough.
- One Primary school principal has told his P7 teacher how many Key Stage 3s are needed to keep the Schools average consistent within the band it is in.

All of these are intended to make sure schools averages are at the level required to please the inspectors.

The inspectorate themselves.

Who inspects the inspectors? To whom are they accountable?

A recently published report by the ETI entitled 'Preparing School Principals for leaderships' recommends that Principals need “appropriate opportunities to refresh their skills and professional competencies.” Are there opportunities for inspectors to do the same? Inspectors that have not

taught for many years should have to refresh their skills in the classroom. Otherwise how can an inspector who has only ever taught French in a grammar school assess a Primary 1 lesson on play?

If an inspector is found wanting are there appropriate channels for complaint and who investigates the complaint?

The cosy relationship between bodies

The ETI, the DENI and the boards seem to have a cosy relationship which seems to exclude Principals and teachers. For instance the NEELB had a telephone conversation for which an email exists saying that they were going to remove a principal and asking for the inspection report to be printed early which it was. The NEELB installed an ex-inspector as an extra governor of a failing school even though he had no experience of being a Governor or had never taught in a primary school.

There is a very high level of dissatisfaction among principals and teachers we have spoken to with the inspectorate and the criteria by which their schools are measured.

Yours faithfully,

I Whitten