



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate
and School Improvement Process: Association of
Controlled Grammar Schools and Association of
School and College Leaders

13 November 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Education

Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate and School Improvement
Process: Association of Controlled Grammar Schools and Association of School and
College Leaders

13 November 2013

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Robin Newton
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Mr Stephen Black	Association of Controlled Grammar Schools
Mr David Knox	Association of Controlled Grammar Schools
Mr Frank Cassidy	Association of School and College Leaders
Mr Scott Naismith	Association of School and College Leaders

The Chairperson: I welcome Stephen Black, a member of the Association of Controlled Grammar Schools; Mr David Knox, the chairman of the Association of Controlled Grammar Schools; Mr Frank Cassidy, a regional officer of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL); and Mr Scott Naismith, the president of Association of School and College Leaders.

I thank you for agreeing to do the session jointly. That is very commendable. I also appreciate the time that you have taken to make a presentation to the Committee on its inquiry. I hand over to Scott or David.

Mr David Knox (Association of Controlled Grammar Schools): Chairman, thank you very much for the opportunity to make our voices heard. You will have read the points that we submitted to you expressing our concerns.

Although I am wearing my controlled heads hat today, I am also a member of ASCL, and I used to travel over to council four times a year to represent Northern Ireland head teachers and heard from English heads their experience of inspection under Ofsted. I heard all kinds of horror stories about the regime of fear under which they operated, and I would fly home very happy to be coming back to some good old Ulster common sense and a world in which there was respect for teachers, head teachers and schools. Now, I have concerns that we are moving into something that might become

much more akin to what has happened over the years in England: a culture of fear, failure and reprisal. I hear talk of schools being inspected every three years in future, whether they are good or not; a chief inspector being brought in from Ofsted — I am not getting personal; I am just connecting the name of the chief inspector to the organisation called Ofsted — head teachers being accountable at the point of delivery; and head teachers leaving their jobs because of unsatisfactory inspection reports. I hope that the Committee will do all in its power to prevent our education system becoming a culture of fear. That would be counterproductive.

Why are we moving to a position that we only allow schools two weeks' notice of inspections? Does our inspectorate think that it is helpful to put head teachers and teachers under more stress than they feel at the moment? That said, I, and many of my colleagues, have had sound relationships with our inspectorate over the years. We want our children to have the highest-quality education. We also recognise that head teachers and teachers must be accountable and that inspections must be of the highest quality from the analysis of data to the classroom observation. However, they must also be flexible enough to recognise that there are many different styles of leadership that can be effective and many different styles of teaching that can induce learning.

We want to make one or two specific points. An inspectorate questionnaire that seeks views from staff on the leadership in schools is a blunt instrument that can be used by those who have an agenda or a gripe. It has done damage in the past, and it would be good if that blunt instrument could be reviewed and replaced by something better. Is the inspectorate convincing enough on its claim that it confirms good practice in schools, or is there a focus on finding issues and judging when it goes into schools? Are we convinced that our current inspection framework is fit for purpose and value for money? How long has it been since some inspectors have been, or have taught, in a classroom? How much experience do they have of leadership, motivating staff and doing the job that school leaders do? If we want to improve schools, it needs to be part of a wider debate with all stakeholders, including parents and governors. A short, damning report will inflict great damage and will not build on or improve anything. There may be short-term gains, but how many good schools have emerged from the debris of a damning inspection report?

I will stop there, because I know that we are splitting the time. More things will probably come out in the questions.

The Chairperson: Thanks, David.

Mr Scott Naismith (Association of School and College Leaders): I will speak on behalf of ASCL. I start by saying that we concur with David. I have had experience of attending ASCL conferences in England that were addressed by the Chief Inspector, and I have seen the fear of inspection and for career advancement and puzzlement at why the Ofsted model appears to undermine rather than enhance school improvement.

I have also been fortunate enough to have had experience of the former Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIe) in Scotland, which had a different model and one that is very much focused on self-evaluation, quality assurance and inspectors working alongside school leaders and school communities to bring about sustained improvement.

We fully accept that with leadership come enhanced responsibility and accountability. However, accountability should not be a blame game; it should not be about trying to destroy the professional integrity of individuals and, regrettably, that can be — as David said — the outcome of negative inspections. I know that that is not the intention of the inspectorate. Unfortunately, however, once a report is out there, it is like posting it on Facebook; it is beyond your control. The way in which it is often interpreted in the media and in the wider community can lead to horrifying unintended consequences. Recently, our press carried front-page stories of a principal receiving death threats on the back of a community's reaction to an inspection report. That is repulsive and reprehensible, and it is not what the system should be about; it should be about identifying the issues and bringing about improvement. We need to know how we measure success in schools. What is it that we are looking for? Is it just about exam results? We seem to be obsessed by that single individual measure, especially in the post-primary sector.

Measuring value added is very challenging, but we have to look at it and address it in the review. The current measures of school performance, benchmark comparisons and inspections do not always identify the true value added to pupils' attainments in a school or allow them to be reflected. At a time when crucial judgements are being made about the sustainability and effectiveness of schools, it is vital that we get those judgements right and that they are fair and consistent. Standardised robust

tracking systems are needed to measure the value added to pupil attainment from the beginning of primary school right through to the end of post-primary. That is why ASCL supports the introduction of common standardised assessment to provide objective benchmarking data. If you can measure progress, you need to have a common fixed staffing point from which you measure.

It is also why we support a move to focus on the point/score average of pupils at different times in their educational life, as that would shift the emphasis away from performance in the C/D borderline that happens in England to the detriment of the curriculum. It can happen in schools here as well to pupils' detriment. We want to avoid corrupting the curriculum by moving away from that brutal, simplistic measure; we want to focus on what needs to be improved for every child in a school, not just those in the middle. That is why we need to find ways of considering the context in which pupils work, learn and live. Often, inspectors say that they try, through the questionnaires, the feedback and their observations, to take account of life in a school and what its pupils face. However, at present, we are banded in using the blunt measure of free school meals entitlement. Again, that does not always reveal the true picture of the challenges that many pupils and their families face in the school community and the value that the school adds to individual pupils. Therefore, we need to take full recognition of the opportunities that pupils are afforded in school to acquire not just qualifications but the skills and dispositions that employers, universities and society value. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) knows what it is looking for: confident individuals — youngsters who are curious, creative and have self-discipline, and who demonstrate entrepreneurship, independence and resilience. If we are to measure schools' success and their value added, we need to open up how we evaluate and quality-assure; we need to ensure that those skills and dispositions, and the things that schools do to promote them, are included as well.

The Chairperson: I apologise, as I have to step out for a few minutes. I will be back, and the Deputy Chairperson will take over. However, before I go, I want to ask one question. With regard to the submission, particularly from the controlled grammars, you make the comment:

"The improvements brought about through the inspection process must be real improvements in educational outcomes resulting from real improvements to leadership and teaching and learning."

Do you believe that school inspections still serve the school improvement process?

Mr Knox: I am very interested in the paper by the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) and its proposal that detailed research be carried out to determine the impact of inspections on schools and on school improvement. I think that improvements may follow inspection.

I am more concerned about the damning inspection report that makes it difficult for schools and school leaders to pick themselves up after the inspectorate has left. As my colleague said, sometimes, after the inspectorate has left, the media move in. However, I do not think that the Ofsted model — if that is where we are going — leads to long-term, genuine school improvements. It may prompt knee-jerk, short-term improvements, and there are all sorts of ways in which results and the evidence of outcome can be massaged and manipulated. However, what we are looking for are real, deep-rooted changes and improvements in schools.

The Chairperson: One of the things that were highlighted in the submission given to us by a union representing the inspectors, when it came before us last week, was the following passage. I am sure that you have read it:

"However, Inspectors who conduct the inspection need greater assurances about the finality of their decisions and the fact that evaluations may not be over-turned from anywhere outside of the original inspection team."

In your members' experience, has there been much of that in evidence, from the verbal feedback that the school would get to what, ultimately, becomes the final report? To us, that was a very alarming comment. We have tried to delve into it and we continue to try to find out who was referred to.

Mr Frank Cassidy (Association of School and College Leaders): There is a great deal of evidence that there are concerns from school leaders that, as my colleagues have suggested, the full context of the school situation is not always factored in by the reporting team. It is true that representations are often made post-inspection to try to ameliorate some of the findings that a school might think were unfair or inaccurate. However, our experience is that those judgements are rarely changed, and the integrity of the report, as made by the reporting team, is generally upheld by the inspectorate. Our

experience in supporting members who have had difficulties with inspection is that we would be disappointed if genuine concerns were not taken on board, post-inspection, and factored in afterwards.

(The Deputy Chairperson [Mr Kinahan] in the Chair)

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you. I am sorry that we have had to change Chair in the middle of that. That aspect was of great concern to the Committee.

Mr Rogers: You are very welcome.

I turn to the matter of school self-evaluation and particularly to what is happening in Scotland. Last week, we listened to the boards and they can do a little in the way of formal intervention by providing the Curriculum Advisory Support Service (CASS) support and so on for schools that are having particular issues. However, they are really firefighting. There is no high quality staff development for embedding self-evaluation in your school. What are your comments on that? To me, if your self-evaluation is really well embedded in your school after two or three cycles of school development planning, the inspectorate could become a quality assurance mechanism.

What is happening in the Scottish system is related to that. There, ETI is more aligned with CASS, or your development is more aligned there. Can we have your comments on that? I have one more point. I like what you said about how it is not all about driving for exam results. Education is about developing the whole person. Unfortunately, when we see the statistics produced as league tables and so on, it seems that only results matter. They take away from that. In Scotland, they have moved away from publishing those league tables, though the school may publish its own. To me, that is a benefit. In order to get that value-added right, do we not also need baseline assessment when a child joins a school? Perhaps you could give us your comments on those aspects, please.

Mr Naismith: I will comment on the first one. As regards the bespoke support that is required after an inspection, ASCL has been working with other providers to develop leadership development programmes. That will encourage and, hopefully through government support and backing, provide funding to release expertise in the system, which by and large would come from other schools that have their self-evaluation processes in place and have succeeded to mentor and support those leadership teams that require guidance in that area. To me, that goes hand in hand with the way in which schools are funded. It would be more effective if schools had money delegated directly into their budgets so that they could buy in what they need from where they need it, whether that be locally or from across the water, as a group, an area-learning community or an organisation together. ASCL ran a conference last week. One hundred principals and vice-principals attended. We brought in expertise from where we thought we most needed it. It also came from outside education. That is hugely beneficial. At present, however, we are too constrained about where we source that support, which is vital. If there are specific problems in a school, it needs to be liberated to buy in the necessary solutions.

I agree about the baseline assessment. However, as I said in my opening statement, if you are going to measure the progress of an individual or an institution, you need a standard common point from which to measure. Baseline assessment would be one way in which to identify that. That could happen at different points throughout a pupil's career, and it gives an indication. It should not be the one and only, sole thing that is looked at. The concern is that that is overemphasised. However, it is a starting point. If there is a common starting point, it allows some form of objective measurement. That should then initiate discussion and debate about progress afterwards.

Mr Knox: I could not agree more with what you have said. A number of years ago, the inspectorate experimented with quality assurance inspections. That would be the natural outcome of schools becoming more skilled in self-evaluation. However, it seems to me that that is definitely not the direction of travel. It would avoid the culture of fear to which I referred in my opening statement and create more of a culture of partnership, with the school itself taking responsibility for measuring and evaluating its outcomes.

Mr Rogers: Do you believe that the culture of fear has increased as a result? In the comprehensive spending review, everybody had to cut their cloth to fit. Last year, the budget for staff development was cut by £15 million. The proposal is to cut £20 million off it this year. Do you feel that fear has intensified as a result? Where do you go for help when you have had an inspection? Do you go to the

boards or wherever else you can get that? I think that the fear has intensified because of the lack of quality staff development and the boards being fit only to firefight.

Mr Knox: The announcement was that schools would get two weeks' notice to gather the enormous amount of information that inspectors will require when they visit. In the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) Bill, in the part on inspections, the power is given to the inspectorate to come into schools, commandeer their hardware and go in search of whatever documents they want. Those kinds of measures contribute to the expectation that an inspection will be a more threatening experience than it used to be.

Mr Stephen Black (Association of Controlled Grammar Schools): You mentioned support, but the issue arises before the stage of there being inspections in schools. Through the self-evaluation that we are doing in our school, for example, we can identify where there are issues that we want to seek improvements on.

Ten or 15 years ago, if there was a problem, we could have gone to the board. There was a significant CASS service, and it could have provided support to a head of department who was perhaps having issues that he or she needed to address. That support is no longer there, which causes problems for all of us. We are now trying to seek ways to address that support from within, if we can do that, or through other schools. We do not get support from elsewhere.

You also mentioned the baseline assessment, which is absolutely vital. The inspectorate reports on the numbers of three A to C grades at AS or A level and five A to C grades at GCSE and so on, and it compares that to a notional average for selective or non-selective schools. However, intakes are not average. We benchmark our year groups when they come in in year 8, and there is a significant difference in their average CAT score from year to year. Some years, you could be performing above that average and not doing as well as you should, yet your results will be said to be good or very good. Equally, in a year when you are performing below the average, you could be doing very well for those pupils. However, because of the absence of a benchmark and measure, that is hard to do. I will give you one example of that. We worked quite closely with the inspectorate when we were in the specialist schools programme. I found that to be a very positive experience. At that time, we were looking at targets. As we moved through the years of that programme, through discussions, we were able to show why we were predicting a slightly lower percentage of five or seven A to C grades at GCSE. We were able to demonstrate the figures, and that was accepted by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). However, a formal inspection report is based on the overall figure. Benchmarking would take some of that away.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you very much. At the beginning, David asked that the Committee does all in its power to make the inspection process as good as possible. When representatives from the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) were here last week, they almost denied that there was any fear in the system, yet every one of us have heard that. It was very important to hear that from you today.

Mr Craig: I want to try to delve into the process. Unfortunately, I have some experience of it. What are your views of the questionnaires? I have stopped calling them questionnaires and now call them gripe sheets. I find the questionnaire that goes out to parents and pupils to be pointless. If you send your child to a school, you are not going to criticise it. There would be no point in sending your child to that school, which turns it into a pointless exercise.

I also want to deal with the questionnaires that go to staff in schools. You are all senior managers in schools and will know what I am getting at. If you are running a school properly, you will know those who are underperforming and those who are not reaching the mark that you would like them to reach. You obviously deal with that, but they are the ones who then have the opportunity to put the knife in the back of the senior management in a school. What is your view of the value of those questionnaires?

Mr Cassidy: Based on the experience of members and the help that we have offered to members, I can tell you that there are two problems with staff surveys. As you eloquently described it, they can become grippers' charters. We have had instances in which the responses to the inspectorate have been manufactured from a central source, been duplicated and the names of a number of members of staff applied to them so that multiple complaints emanated from one source and skewed the final outcome. At a general level, if staff are given the opportunity to make complaints anonymously, they may choose to do so. In a situation in which school leaders are accountable for high performance,

increasingly they have to put staff under pressure and challenge underperformance. We have found that when there is a genuine challenge of underperformance, principals are subject to personal attacks in the circumstances that are offered by the staff survey. That is the first problem.

In a sense, the second problem is worse. A snap or standard inspection can take three days. The inspectors have a limited time and make choices about what they will look at in a school. Much of that time can be misdirected by the outcomes from the staff survey, and the inspectorate can then focus on often bogus claims of, for example, poor communication between staff and leadership and miss the best practice in a school. Therefore, the overall judgement is skewed simply because of the amount of time for the inspection is used up by following and tracking down claims from the staff survey.

Mr Naismith: If a school is doing its self-evaluation properly, the questionnaires should be redundant as the issues should have been identified. We do our school development planning and survey staff pupils and parents. We ask the sort of questions that the inspectorate would ask if it came in, but we also ask tougher questions and are able to have the discussions afterwards and note the contextualisation of the responses to the questions. The inspectorate will miss the higher-quality evidence if it takes more time to focus on a snapshot questionnaire than those sorts of returns, which are compiled over a sustained period of time.

We have no issues about that information being made available to inspecting teams that come into schools because, again, it looks at how well a school carries out its function of quality assurance. It will also get the quality data that the inspectors can work with, and they can be directed to look at what they need to look at.

Mr Black: As schools, we all want to gauge opinion from our pupils, parents and staff, and, in my school, we have brought in outside providers to do that. We have used Kirkland Rowell, which is recognised across the UK for doing that work. We have also used other organisations that are connected with staff well-being. We are keen to hear that information.

To echo what Scott said, if schools are doing that, we can clearly identify the areas of concern and start to address them. It is about having a self-evaluation in place, and a quality assurance process of that certainly gives more validity to it. We are keen to hear what our staff have to say, but there is a context for it, and the context is very different if it is done in a Kirkland Rowell survey, which is confidential, or a staff well-being survey rather than in a standard inspection.

The Deputy Chairperson: That is what I was going to ask.

Mr Craig: I also want to ask you about the feedback that you get from the inspectorate when it sits down with you, senior management and the governors. Quite clearly, it will identify areas of concern. That is its job and what it is there for. It is very good at doing that and at using the statistics that are held in schools to point to problems and issues. Sometimes, it will also point out individuals.

If the governors and the senior managers are doing their jobs correctly, you will smile at them. You will have known that anyway and will have been trying to deal with it. What is your view of the inspectorate pointing out those issues and then walking away? No assistance, support or guidance is given to anyone, including senior management or boards of governors, about how you could help to resolve some of those underlying issues.

Mr Cassidy: We have a serious concern about the difficulty in addressing underperformance in the system. Procedures are in place for dealing with unsatisfactory performance. School leaders are familiar with those procedures and carefully follow them. However, we are finding that there is not the support from the system when school leaders want to take on some of those underperformance cases. There is not the support for that from boards, the Department or the inspectorate. School leaders can find themselves out on a limb and subject to personal attack from teaching unions defending their members. That can get into the press and add to or be just as bad as bad inspection issues being taken to press level. So if we are genuine about improving the system, we must be supportive of the genuine desire of school leaders to address underperformance, which is often identified in the context of inspection. However, you are absolutely right: that is left on the plate of school leaders, and there is not the support or the mechanism to deliver on the procedures that have been agreed but are almost impossible to use for fear of financial penalty and union opposition.

Mr Craig: I am really getting at the fact that, rather than working with a school and its leadership on those issues, the approach is very much, "Here's your problem; I am away, goodbye". The inspectorate gives no support, despite the fact that it writes the report.

Chair, you will be glad to hear that that brings me to my last point, which concerns the language that is used in the final reports. You know what happens. It is the final page, and what is said there will dictate where the press goes with the whole thing. The language used damns a school or praises it to high heaven, but there is no in between. The other difficulty is that a school can fail on perhaps one or two specific areas, and that brings down the whole house of cards. The inspectorate does not concentrate on the two problem areas but instead damns the whole system. What are your views on that?

Mr Naismith: That may come back to the notion that inspectors are constrained by the systems that have been set up. I know that they would probably appreciate an opportunity to give more nuances to sophisticated inspection reports, which, as you correctly say, would then be able to identify the real strengths in a school and perhaps give some explanation for the statistical anomalies that occur. Stephen referred to those earlier when he said that headline statistics can look really good or as though a school is underperforming, when, in fact, significant value has been added to the learning outcomes and attainment of its pupils. Opportunities to put that information into inspection reports must be taken. Unfortunately, they are also constrained by the requirement to use stock phrases so reports can become very bland. In comparison, Ofsted reports or those from Education Scotland are able to be more effusive, more directly critical but, therefore, ultimately more useful to the end user. We want to end up with that, with something that gives you a constructive document that school leaders and a school community can use to move forward.

Mr Knox: The inspectorate's view on this, although I think that it must speak for itself, is that it is very unfortunate that the press comes in and behaves unfairly towards a head teacher. The inspectorate dislikes that as much as we do but feels that nothing can be done about it. However, when the inspectors write that final report, they should be thinking about how it may be picked up in the media and adjust the wording in that light. They should take responsibility for how their words are interpreted.

Mr Craig: What you are saying, David, is that we need a bit more flexibility in the wording as well. We know what the press is like, and the four or five columns at the end of a report are all that it is interested in. The language used in that part of the report is the problem.

The Deputy Chairperson: Stephen, when you spoke about Kirkland Rowell, you almost stated that we should have some form of independent assessment of the inspection system for all schools, or something that you can all use if you do not have CASS helping you at one end. Is that what you are saying?

Mr Black: It is important for everybody to have an understanding of where their staff sit and the pupils' and parents' opinion of the school. As a school, we value that, and we have put money into it. It would not necessarily be within every school's ability to do that. It is important that people have a sense of where their school is sitting. In exactly the same way, we talk about benchmarking. Many schools spend significant amounts of money to give us a baseline of where pupils are to benchmark our pupils. That is all being done by a lot of people. If it were being done centrally, we would have a better idea of where schools are in general.

The Deputy Chairperson: Scott, you mentioned two areas that always seem to be missed out. You talked about the context of the pupils, and you also talked about the CBI and what it wants. Will you expand a bit on both those issues? I get the feeling that the inspection process should assess both of those and become part of the process.

Mr Naismith: That is perhaps the point of the inspection at which you discuss with your senior team and the inspection team what they have seen. That should be an opportunity to elaborate on why certain pupils or members of staff present in the way that they do, why their outcomes are the way that they are, and to give much more detail and, sometimes, confidential information on the performance and achievements of individuals. It is also an opportunity to broaden out the categories that inspectors look at in schools. They often miss what happens outside a classroom and after school hours. What about all the additional support that teachers offer? Not only do they provide additional study lessons or support around exam time but they listen to pupils' problems and issues.

Reference is made to the quality of relationship identified in the classroom. Very often, however, they miss out on the places in which that relationship is developed: the lunchtime clubs, the after-school activities and events at which staff engage with parents in the evenings. That requires inspectors to

spend more time considering that or discussing it again so that that can be reflected in an inspection report.

The CBI is strong on the idea of looking at the skills and dispositions that pupils develop. Schools develop those through the learning processes in the classroom and the subject areas. Most importantly, a lot of the leadership skills, managing information, working with others and problem solving are developed even further outside the classroom. The opportunity is sometimes missed to see the pupils who perform reasonably well or adequately in examinations but have those skills in spades, demonstrate them in the school community and beyond and have gained the confidence to do that in the environment in which they are being educated.

The CBI is also interested in looking at outcomes, such as where the pupils go afterwards, what their destination is and how they have taken the education that they received and used it to progress to the next level. That should not and must not be just the blunt instrument of asking how many of a school's pupils go on to university. That is not necessarily the most appropriate destination. Certainly, because of university fees, fewer and fewer pupils will take that route. Are they going into companies in which they are getting opportunities to develop through new apprenticeship schemes? Are they going into gap years? Are they starting up their own businesses? Are they taking what they gained in school and using it constructively? That might mean looking at them in not just the year in which they leave but maybe five years after that. It is a more sophisticated measure, but that can give a huge amount of information about how well a school is serving its community.

The Deputy Chairperson: I am very grateful for that, because those two things are phenomenally important. We really have to push for those.

Mr Newton: I have to say that, historically, I always regarded school inspectors as nearly being infallible; I put them on that sort of pedestal. I did some previous work experience as an assessor, so I have a wee bit of an understanding.

Before you came in, I asked a question about the school inspection process. I was assured that the information was available on the website and that anybody, even an idiot like me, could follow it and understand it. It is simple, open and transparent.

I note in your submission that you said:

"There is a level of mystery, uncertainty and confusion around the inspection process, how it operates and how our schools are evaluated. If teachers, school leaders and the public are to have faith in the ETI and the inspection process, it is essential that all aspects of that process are carried out in an open, honest and transparent manner. The outcome of an inspection should not come as a surprise to anyone."

What is your experience of an inspection and how it operates, if the process is already established?

Mr Naismith: I will answer one half of that, and then I will pass over to Frank to answer the other half, because he has more direct experience of that aspect.

You are correct: if you go to the ETI website, you will find a significant amount of information outlining the inspection process and the headline items that inspectors are looking for, and information for teachers and pupils about what it means. It is a very broad introduction to inspections.

Once the inspection team is in the school and begins its work, what exactly is it that the team is looking for? Sometimes, there is a compliance agenda and an expectation that something should not only be done but done in a certain way. Things such as that can change over a period of months or years, and it is not until schools are inspected that they find that out. I know that the inspectorate is keen to address this issue, because it does not want there to be a disconnect between what its leadership is expecting from inspections and what actually happens on the ground.

(The Chairperson [Mr Storey] in the Chair)

Mr Cassidy: We have often asked the inspectorate this question: what is it that you want to see when you go into schools; what are the headline experiences that you want to see? In addition to the description of how an inspection process works, there are quality indicators, which are available and

easily accessible. However, schools are very complex organisations, and the process of education is much more intricate than that.

The problem that I am trying to identify is that the agenda that a school may be following, and the priorities that it has set for itself in its planning, are two or three years in the making. Schools are expected to conform to the continual sequence of initiatives that come down the line from DE.

When an inspection happens, there can be a disconnect between what the inspectorate is looking for and what the school is actually working on at that time. In many cases, schools are ahead of DE agenda to which they are responding. Perhaps it could be the entitlement curriculum, the new assessment procedures, or initiatives to encourage shared education projects. The inspectorate has an agenda that is quite firmly fixed, and it is slow to respond to new agendas. Perhaps that is a necessary side effect of having established, agreed procedures in that the inspectorate is not responsive to the speed of change in education.

My experience and that of others has been that inspection can lag behind where schools actually are. So, when the process arrives in your school, the inspectors have a set procedure that they follow, and, sometimes, when you present them with the latest thing that you are doing, it is not on their radar screens and it is not what they want to focus on. They want to look at this, this and this, and only these things.

This overlaps into two of the things that we discussed previously. First, unsatisfactory performance can be missed because inspectors are simply looking for a checklist on what is happening in a classroom. Secondly, good practice in extracurricular activity, and the huge value that that adds to pupils' experience in schools, can also be missed because it is not on the checklist either. Therefore, judgements are made through headline statistics and an agenda that may be slightly out of date and may miss a lot of the value. Does that answer your question?

Mr Newton: It does, but it gives me cause for concern. There seems to be only a very rigid comment made. From what you say, there is a very rigid, fixed process and where you have, through your own staff development plans or leadership qualities, gone beyond what is stipulated in whatever area — if I take you up correctly — it is ignored because of the rigidity of the process. It is a tick-box process.

Mr Cassidy: I have been involved in research into area learning communities, and I have published work on it since I left headship a couple of years ago. One of the things that we found is that there is a tension between the time that principals have to give to the DE agendas, requirements and the compliance issues that Scott mentioned, and the need to go outside and be part of the bigger education community and serve the system by investing time, energy and focus outside your own school. Sadly, there is a penalty for doing that. Time not focused on compliance issues can leave a school vulnerable to criticism through inspection.

Mr Newton: Do schools ever apply for the Investors in People awards?

Mr Cassidy: Yes, they do.

Mr Newton: How would you compare that assessment with the schools inspectorate assessment?

Mr Naismith: I suppose that the benefit of Investors in People is that it is an ongoing development process in which you are setting the agenda and targets for yourself and you can home in on very specific issues. As you go through the criteria you can say: "We will do that, that and that to this standard." Or, someone may have identified three or four areas in which you need to improve. You get that improvement, and it is recognised and rewarded. It is a very helpful structure for improving staff support and development. Although it is used within an institution, people from outside lend support, give advice and direct you to best practice.

Let me come back to your original question. A couple of points have occurred to me —

Mr Newton: Forgive me, is that not what one might expect from an inspection procedure? Should you not be getting helpful advice, pointers and so on?

Mr Naismith: It is, exactly. That is what you would hope for, rather than just a list of what needs to be fixed or of what is unsatisfactory and must be sorted out. When lessons and schools are graded, what

is good and outstanding in the classroom? I have a very good idea of what can be outstanding practice when I walk into a classroom. For staff development, we use a lot of materials produced, ironically, by Ofsted, where they identify, film, record and share, because we want to improve not only the teaching in our school but teaching standards throughout the system for all pupils.

However, we do not actually get that feedback. Even during an inspection, an individual teacher will not get direct feedback from an inspector on his performance in the classroom. That quality of information is necessary, and there is a role for the district inspector to provide ongoing support and identification of issues so that, when the full inspection comes, the issues are already being addressed and the district inspector can say: "I know that that school knows about this and that the school is doing x, y and z about it. I also know that school well, and I know about all the other value-added things that go on there."

So, district inspectors could have a role and an input, and it would not be just a snapshot. They would be able to give the story over a prolonged period of time. Some of them are very good at that. They say to schools: "We have seen this in that school; you might want to try that"; "Give so-and-so a phone call"; or "Do you mind if I get another principal to get in touch with your head of such-and-such a department?" That is really helpful, and that is what we need more of: conductivity.

Mr Black: Can I come in on that?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Black: I think that we need to divorce the role of inspections a wee bit. They are not all about standard inspections. There are inspection visits to schools in relation to other areas. In the time that I have been in Antrim, we have had a standard inspection and inspection visits related to our specialist schools. We have been part of survey inspections for Learning for Life and Work and leadership development. I found those inspection visits to be very useful, as did the staff involved in them. They pointed out elements of good practice to us. We perhaps felt that they were good practice, but it was good to get them affirmed as such. Equally, they pointed out a few areas that we could look at to see whether we could develop them. It is done in a slightly different atmosphere to that of a whole school inspection.

I have a very good relationship with our district inspector. Perhaps I am very fortunate in that regard. It is good to hear other people's opinions of your school and to look at things in your school. We need to be careful to recognise that there are many examples of good practice going on. We want to try to build on those. Maybe I am fortunate, but my experience of those inspections is good. I know that other people would say different things.

Mr Lunn: I have a couple of things, because you have answered a fair bit of what I might have asked you. David, when you gave your presentation, you particularly mentioned the damning report that really scars a school, and perhaps a principal, and leaves it difficult for them to recover. What is the role of the board of governors in all this? I find it hard to believe that such a report could come out of the blue. I am not sure what the cycle of inspections is at the moment, but schools do not fail overnight. Does more attention need to be given to the role of the board of governors to make sure that it does what is supposed to be its job in between inspections?

Mr Knox: I raised that issue and concentrated on the culture of fear in England because, in many cases in England, the role of the board of governors has been to sack the principal. Some principals have been away within a very short time of a damning inspection report. We do not have that in Northern Ireland, although a number of principals have left their post after a bad inspection report. We do not want that in Northern Ireland. The role of the board of governors should be to work with the principal to address the issues raised by the inspectorate.

Mr Lunn: You might conclude that, in some cases, that is not happening.

Mr Knox: It is probably true in some cases that that has not been happening and that, in the case of controlled schools, board teams have moved in to try to address those issues. In many cases, the board teams that moved in have provided training for staff on some of the issues that have been raised. Obviously, that is very important.

Mr Lunn: Without being specific, you get the impression sometimes that the board of governors sat on its hands, when there were indicators that things were not quite right, and perhaps just accepted what it was told at board meetings. The inspectorate then produces one of your damning reports, at which

point the board of governors almost turns on the principal. That hardly seems fair, given that it has the responsibility initially to control the activities of the school as best it can and try to identify some of the issues.

Maybe it points to a lack of experience, knowledge or expertise among governors generally, which will perhaps be addressed to some extent by the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) — they all laugh, because I always mention ESA. The ESA Bill will have something to say about the responsibility of governors. We will see what happens to that legislation.

There is another thing, while I am on the subject. You mentioned the sections of the ESA Bill that refer to the role of the inspectorate. When we talk to people such as you, having talked to the inspectorate, you really would think that we were on different planets. As far as the inspectorate is concerned, the clauses in the ESA Bill, as currently drafted, are really just tidying up what is already available to the inspectorate anyway. I think that you mentioned that it has the power to lift and take away documents and equipment. I am not standing over the Bill, because I really do not know which is the correct version. However, is it the case that the ESA Bill will provide the inspectorate — in your opinion or in any of your opinions — with more draconian powers than it has at the moment?

Mr Knox: It was the assumption underlying that part of the Bill that school principals would try to hide documents from the inspectorate. I will provide the inspectorate with whatever documents it requires when it comes to my school. I have no difficulty in doing that, and I would be very surprised if other principals were not the same. What have we got to hide? What would require the inspectorate to have the power to come and commandeer my computer to find the documents that it seeks?

Mr Lunn: It already has that power. I accept that, when the regulation was drafted, computers probably did not exist, which was part of the problem. It is an opportunity to tidy up the various orders and regulations that govern the powers of inspectors. That is the way that I see it. Is that unfair? Do any of you think that the inspectorate is getting more power out of this proposed exercise than it has at the moment?

Mr Knox: I do not know whether they could have come in and said, "I want to take your computer away and look for x, y, or z documents."

Mr Craig: The PSNI can do that.

The Chairperson: Jonathan, will you ask your question very quickly, because I want to get to Chris and then to —

Mr Craig: In fairness to Trevor, he raised a good issue. Some boards of governors just do not have the expertise, and they need help too.

I want to ask you about the timing of some of the reports, because I found this laughable. If the board of governors and senior management in a school have identified issues, and they are in the process, as I found myself, of actually reorganising the whole structure in the school to deal with those issues — I will give you an example of what happened. We were in the process of appointing a new head of maths because we knew that there was an issue there, and we wanted the whole thing dealt with. We failed to hold the interviews because the inspectors came in and scuppered the whole process. And, what was the one main criticism within the inspectorate's report? It was that there was no head of mathematics. We have to look at timing. What are your views on that? I thought that what they did was almost criminal.

Mr Cassidy: The remit of the inspectorate is to report on what it sees and what it finds —

Mr Craig: At that point in time.

Mr Cassidy: — and all of its comments have to be evidence-based, and we totally respect that. The conversation that we have had this morning underlines the fact that context is everything, and the wider long-term experience of the school and its record over a number of years has to be set alongside the evidence-based findings on a particular day or several days.

Mr Hazzard: I want to pick up on a point that has been made a couple of times. I know that Sean has majored on it before. It is the idea of building the capacity for self-evaluation in schools so that we get

to a point where an inspection or an evaluation is done by or done with, rather than done to, the actual school. Looking at some of the submissions on this — there is a particular one today — it appears that we have travelled quite a way. The inspection process is improving as we go forward. However, maybe self-evaluation is one of the big, last, key things to really help drive it forward.

As for your points on building the capacity for self-evaluation in schools, how do we do that? How do we get to the stage where we really trust and rely on schools to self-evaluate? I know that Pasi Sahlberg is coming to the North to deal with the Department for Employment and Learning's (DEL) teacher training. Do you have any plans to engage with that to ensure that self-evaluation is a key of our teacher training?

Mr Cassidy: One of the public policy positions that we are taking forward this year at ASCL is to develop middle leadership in schools. One of the problems that we have identified, and the inspectorate agrees with us on this, is that accountability has rested too much on the shoulders of the senior leaders or principal of the school. For a school to really drive forward improvement, accountability has to be taken on by the middle leadership of the school. We are talking about heads of departments and heads of sections. ASCL is going to provide training and we will work in conjunction with the University of Ulster and others. I know that there are plans from many quarters to develop this area, but we need to have a new generation of leadership in schools that will take ownership of their particular part of the enterprise and be accountable for it, self-evaluate and take that forward.

The trouble with schools, and the schools that we have experience of leading, is that they are very large organisations. If you are going to have effective evaluation, it needs to happen departmentally and then build to a unified overall evaluation. To do it from the top as a single operation is probably not the best way to do it. We need to change the culture of how schools evaluate themselves and how they hold themselves accountable for improvement, and that will require a change of culture. It will mean heads of department managing the staff under them more directly and addressing issues with the teachers for whom they have line-management responsibility.

Mr Knox: I think that we are becoming more and more aware of the tools that we can use for self-evaluation and we are now using those. That includes things such as Kirkland Rowell Surveys and Investors in People assessors coming into the school, but we also need to build it into the culture of the school from the bottom up as well as from the top down. We are getting better at doing that.

I think that the inspectorate needs to take note of the fact that schools are better at self-evaluating and are doing more self-evaluation. They have more evidence in the school to show in their self-evaluations and the ramifications of those for the style of inspection used in the future.

Mr Black: There is a lot of difference in the levels of self-evaluation going on in schools. We have talked about surveys and how we get opinions across wide ranges. In our school, we have departmental reviews of a couple of subjects each year, involving the senior leadership team going in, talking to pupils, watching classes, looking at results and so on. That then goes back to our governors, while we are talking about the governance aspect, and then through an education committee within our board of governors. We would seek to use that as a way to evaluate performance within those departments of our own schools and I think that that is very important. It is very important right down at the level of teaching. From my experience, I do not think that you can be a good teacher unless you can evaluate how your lesson went and know how you did, what went well and what did not go so well.

One thing that I see in teachers joining the staff now is that there is a greater awareness of that in the initial teacher training than there was previously. That culture should be built up through teachers and through departments, through what we have been given in school development days. Self-evaluation forms a big part of what we do on every one of our training days, whether it is in a subject area, a pastoral area or whatever. I think that that culture is developing in schools.

Mr Newton: Very briefly, I think I owe you, Mr Black, Mr Knox, Mr Cassidy and Mr Naismith an apology, because when I was quoting, I quoted from another document by the National Association of Head Teachers, but it seems as though you did not disagree with their comments anyway.

The Chairperson: Thank you for that clarity. Scott, David, Stephen, Frank, thank you very much for your contribution and for your ongoing interest in this issue and many others in relation to education. I look forward to continuing to work with you.