



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Education and Training
Inspectorate and School Improvement
Process: National Association of Head
Teachers

13 November 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Robin Newton
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Mr Jonathan Manning	Edenbrooke Primary School
Mrs Clare Majury	National Association of Head Teachers
Ms Fern Turner	National Association of Head Teachers

The Chairperson: Clare, Fern and Jonathan, thank you. Apologies for the delay in getting you in. It has run longer than we anticipated, and we are, unfortunately, constrained for time. I will go straight to the issue. Obviously we welcome the fact that you have made a submission to our inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and school improvement process. We ask you to make a presentation, and then members will have questions.

Ms Fern Turner (National Association of Head Teachers): Thank you very much. The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) is an independent trade union and a professional association. We represent members in nursery, primary, secondary and special schools across Northern Ireland, England and Wales.

Our team today has three members. Clare Majury is NAHT Northern Ireland president and a nursery principal in Holywood, Jonathan Manning is the principal of a school in north Belfast, and I am NAHT Northern Ireland regional officer and director of trade unions. What concerns our association is that our children should be at the heart of the education system. Their needs should be our first priority. However, although lip service is paid to the primacy of the child, NAHT Northern Ireland is concerned that what is best for our children is too frequently sacrificed on the altar of bureaucratic convenience, compromise and sound bites.

Parents entrust their children into the care of the education system. They expect staff employed in our schools, the agencies established to support the work of schools and the Department of Education to

work together to ensure that every child receives a quality education. However, it is of concern to this association that, instead of working together to address the issues that impact negatively on the quality of provision, schools and school leaders have been made the scapegoat for a system that is simply not functioning. For example, as a union, NAHT Northern Ireland respects the right of all employees to withdraw their labour or to engage in other forms of industrial action. In such situations, the employer and the Department should provide advice to governors and school leaders, and should seek to either resolve outstanding issues or clarify for all involved why a solution cannot be negotiated. It is of concern to this union that the Department and the employers simply ignore the impact that industrial action has on our schools. It does not affect them, so why would they worry?

To add insult to injury, inspectors, in their reports, will highlight poor communication, but will not refer to the fact that, because of industrial action, teachers are leaving schools at the end of the teaching day and are not engaging in staff meetings or training. If reports are to be of any value, inspectors must be willing to report the context in which our schools are working.

NAHT is very concerned about the use of anonymous questionnaires during the inspection process. While we are committed to the concept that all staff should have the opportunity to have an input into the inspection process, we know from experience that anonymous questionnaires can be used by individuals and organised groups as a tool to extract vengeance or achieve payback. NAHT believes that if anonymous questionnaires are to continue to be used in the system, all questionnaires should be signed and copies should be provided for the school. We believe that issues raised by parents or members of staff should be taken seriously and, where appropriate, investigated, followed up and addressed. That cannot happen if the principal and board of governors are not fully informed and are not provided with copies of the signed questionnaires.

It is also essential that reports produced by the ETI are fit for purpose. The reports that are produced at present are so vague and general that they are of little value to anyone, and therefore do not represent value for money. The chief inspector, in her presentation to the Education Committee, suggested that the verbal feedback filled in the gaps in the report. NAHT argues that that situation is totally unsatisfactory. We believe that at least two, but on some occasions three, different types of report should be produced at the end of an inspection process. A report in the present format would provide an insight into the workings of the school for parents and members of the community. A comprehensive and evidence-based report that highlights the school's strengths and areas for development should be produced and shared with all members of staff and governors. That report would provide a basis for follow-up after the inspection. Where teachers and school leaders, or support staff, are not working at an appropriate level, individual evidence-based reports should also be produced and shared with the individual, the principal, the chair of the governors and the employers, so that help and support can be provided and tailored to the individual's needs.

Reports of the quality envisaged could not be provided by inspectors who had not had recent and relevant experience of the phase of education being inspected. For that reason, NAHT urges the Education Committee to use its influence to promote a new inspection model that is based on the secondment of outstanding teachers, school leaders and support staff who have the knowledge, experience and respect that enables them to assess the work of their colleagues in our schools.

The ETI must also accept its responsibility and accountability for the impact that its officers have on individuals and schools. Inspectors are not infallible. On occasions, they will get it wrong, and, on those occasions, it is essential that systems are in place to enable teachers and school leaders to challenge their findings and, where necessary, lodge a complaint. That process should include access to an independent assessor.

NAHT acknowledges that the role of the inspectorate is not always easy. Our colleagues in NIPSA highlighted the challenges involved in passing on information that is perhaps difficult for the receiver to hear and accept. That element of an inspector's role could be made much easier if everyone in education was aware of how the process worked and the factors that are taken into consideration in the evaluation of the process. NAHT Northern Ireland is convinced that we need a process that is open and transparent. That is not the case at present. In other words, the outcome of an inspection should not surprise anyone.

We believe that it is unfortunate that the trust and respect that used to exist between schools and the ETI and that enabled schools to take on board those difficult messages no longer exists. There are a number of reasons for that, not least the fact that the ETI is no longer an independent organisation. The chief inspector has openly stated that the purpose and function of her organisation is to implement the Department's policy. As a consequence, and in the climate of area planning, it is

perceived that schools are being treated differently on the basis of those plans. In addition, and because of the high-stakes nature of inspections, there is concern in our schools that some members of the inspection teams do not have the knowledge or experience to enable them to properly evaluate teaching and learning in context.

NAHT suggested to the ETI that some of those problems could be overcome if there was a two-way exchange of information prior to an inspection. In other words, pen pictures of members of the inspection team would be provided. However, that suggestion has been strongly resisted by the ETI and the Department of Education (DENI). NAHT finds that difficult to understand because, in the past, everyone in education knew Ivan Wallace, John Birch, Marion Matchett and Stanley Goudie's educational background. Why is the educational experience of the present inspection teams not shared?

NAHT Northern Ireland is also very concerned about the use of free school meals as the formula through which either funding is allocated or value added is assessed. It is evident from statistics provided by DENI and the experience of those of us working in education that the uptake of free school meals is dependent on a wide range of factors, including where a child lives and their cultural and religious background. In other words, it is a very blunt instrument that cannot be relied on to allocate resources or measure achievement. It is of concern to this association that, despite being aware of its limitations, the ETI continues to use that measure to assess achievement in our schools.

DENI has encouraged all schools to expand their vocational programmes and express their commitment to the promotion of vocational education. It has evidently not communicated that message to the ETI. Children are not all the same. That is a good thing for Northern Ireland as a society. In addition to the doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, dentists, businessmen and businesswomen and MLAs, our society also needs electricians, plumbers, painters, mechanics and builders. It is of concern to this association that the ETI devalues the skill courses that prepare children for skill-based careers. We believe that that is just one of the reasons why some schools appear to achieve less, despite the best efforts of teachers and school leaders.

NAHT Northern Ireland argues that, in the total absence of coherent structures and support, it is actually remarkable that most of our children continue to receive a quality education. Indeed, NAHT believes that that can be attributed to the quality, dedication and commitment of the teachers, school leaders and support staff who work in our schools. Therefore, we were very concerned that the chief inspector chose to present her report in a negative manner. She would surely have been aware of the impact that that would have on the morale of staff working in splendid isolation in our schools, as well as on parents and their relationship with the schools. One might also ask why the chief inspector chose to ignore the chaos that exists in almost every other aspect of the service. We could speculate, but there would be little advantage in doing so.

In conclusion, NAHT as a professional association and union is convinced that if we are to create a first-class education system, all of the stakeholders within that system should be held responsible and accountable for the role that they play to ensure that every child in every school receives the best education available.

Mrs Clare Majury (National Association of Head Teachers): I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Committee for looking into this issue. As some of you will know, I am a serving principal, and my school has been inspected relatively recently — within the last three years. What I have found is that every principal event that I have attended in recent years has at some point involved colleagues discussing their concerns regarding inspection. That simply did not used to happen, so it has become a major issue for our schools.

I would also like to reiterate Fern's comments. At NAHT, we consider that all schools should be accountable for the education that they provide, purely because we deal with children, and our children deserve the best possible education that we can give them. We accept that inspection is a necessary part of that, but inspection and the climate in which it occurs have changed. In a time of area planning and rationalisation of our schools, inspection has become much higher staked. The ETI needs to accept some of the responsibility for the effect that inspection is having in our schools, namely on the health and well-being of all school staff.

I regularly hear from our members, and they all report very similar experiences in relation to inspection. What alarms me about this is that their experiences appear to be same, regardless of the grade that they achieve. Principals in our very good and outstanding schools report on the negative effect of the stress that they and their staff undergo in the run-up to inspection and during the

inspection itself. They comment on extreme physical and mental exhaustion, and they give examples of varying degrees of ill-health that occur during and after the process — and, on some very worrying occasions, hospitalisation of staff members following inspection.

Being judged to be very good or outstanding should be a cause for celebration. Very often, however, the staff in those schools are just too exhausted and emotionally drained to feel anything other than a very strange sensation of anticlimax. That should not be the case, but yet we hear this time and time again from our members and our colleagues. We have a duty to ensure that all our children have the opportunity to attend great schools, and we need a system that evaluates our schools, but we should not do that at the expense of the staff who are employed in those schools.

Accountability is a double-edged sword. Schools should be accountable. Firstly and most obviously, we are in receipt of public funding, and we should be able to justify that. Much more important — and the reason why I went into education — is the impact that we make on the lives of our children and young people. Good schools can turn things around for our children. However, ETI should also be accountable. Inspections should not put schools under so much stress that they find the experience to be more negative than positive, even if they receive a positive grade. Let us not forget that most of our schools are very good schools. If a school is good, inspection should affirm that, and it should support the process.

I will hand over to Jonathan Manning, who is the principal of Edenbrooke Primary School on the Shankill Road. He will tell you about his recent experience of inspection.

Mr Jonathan Manning (Edenbrooke Primary School): As Clare said, I am principal of Edenbrooke Primary School on the Shankill Road, in an area of over 80% free school meals, and the fifth most socially deprived ward in Belfast. I am here to give you an idea of our experience of the inspection process.

To say that it was devastating would probably be an understatement. It was confusing and heartbreaking. Instead of turbo-boosting and accelerating school improvement, it succeeded in knocking the stuffing out of a school that was showing improvement. There was a real buzz of curriculum development and learning in our school before the inspection process started and before the inspectors arrived. It succeeded in taking the hard work and good practice of committed staff who were working in difficult situations and discounting it all.

I will give you a bit of background about the years previous to that. The inspection happened in March 2013, when I had been in the school for three years. One of the first things that a principal does when they take over is to assess and establish the quality of staff in the school. I had gone in to watch a number of teachers teach throughout the school and, to my benefit, I was very happy to see that we had no weak links in the school — a very high quality of practitioners.

On that basis, we still followed a system of curriculum development, which was a fairly intense self-evaluative process, over those three years, putting in place curriculum development and a system of baselining and target-setting for individual pupils. We monitored our progress on a six-weekly basis — very tight — to make sure that the pupils that we were teaching were progressing in line with their cognitive ability and IQ. We also plotted literacy and numeracy scores against IQ scores to ensure that our children were not underachieving. Over that three-year period, the majority of our children were moved into an area where, I suppose, they were exceeding their IQ scores in literacy and numeracy.

We had very clear evidence to show that our children were progressing. We had clear baselining samples and evidence of improvement samples in the school. For any children who were deemed to be underachieving, we put systems in place to move them out of those areas and to address that. We had evidence of that over the past three years. Our end-of-key-stage levels had also risen sharply. Before the inspection process started, as a school, we felt that we were ready to welcome any inspectors into the school. We felt that we were in a good place. As a school, we felt that from our self-evaluation process, but we also felt it because it was confirmed to us through members of the Belfast Board. An inspection survey had taken place the previous year looking at dyslexia in the school, and that also commented on the positive, high-quality work that was taking place in the school. Not only that, but we had a monitoring visit from a former inspector before our inspection process started, which confirmed that the evidence that we had showed that we were moving those children on and that those children were progressing at their level.

With regard to the experience of our inspection process, it was a two and a half day inspection. Before the process started, I asked all my staff to keep an inspection logbook on every single comment that was made to them. Our senior management and the board of governors did the same. In the two and a half days of that inspection we had filled five or six file pages of positive comments on the quality of work that was taking place in the school — comments that were made to teachers after lessons that had been observed, comments to me as principal and comments to members of the board of governors and to the senior management team.

To give a snapshot of some of the comments that were made, at the end of the second day of the inspection, one of the inspectors said to me, "I just want to let you know how things are going. Your teachers are teaching great lessons. Your teachers know your children. They are targeting the children effectively and implementing programmes to meet the children's needs. There is some great improvement in writing. I just want to let you know that things are going very well." I am sure that you can imagine that we were very happy with that, and we felt that some of the good work that was taking place in the school was being recognised.

One of the associate assessors sat with me for two hours on one occasion talking about the great staff that we had and the positive ethos in the school, and said that she would quite like to have taken some of our good practice back to her own school, which we obviously accommodated. So, during the week, the impression that we were given was that we had a good school. We knew that, and we were confident in that. However, the overall grading that was given to us in the feedback on the Friday afternoon was "inadequate". It was given right at the very outset. To say that we were shocked, gobsmacked and devastated would be an understatement. We were angry as well, and certainly felt a sense of injustice and immorality about the grading.

When it goes into the following aspects of the inspection that has taken place, even though the overall grading was "inadequate", looking through the report and the comments that were made, it said that most of the teaching was "good" or better — that is, 85% of the teaching was "good" or better. None was below "satisfactory". Although the summary of findings that was given on that day said "good" for leadership and management, on the actual report, it said "satisfactory". Special needs was "very good", pastoral care was "good", yet achievements and standards were "unsatisfactory". So, we were hugely devastated and confused, and there was a sense of injustice and immorality about the outcome and a certain sense of hopelessness and despair from me and the senior management team and from our staff who felt that we were doing a good job and were able to show evidence of that in our internal data in the school.

We felt that there was an overemphasis and weighting placed on end-of-key-stage levels over a four-year period. Comments like "The inspection came too soon for you" were made, and there was a lot of toing and froing over the overall grading with the chief inspector on this. Reports on the feedback included, "This grading does not sit well with us". Someone said, "We would be laughed out of the Public Accounts Committee if we gave you anything other than 'inadequate' in relation to the end-of-key-stage levels that you have had over a four-year period". I suppose that made us feel that if our overall grading was based on end-of-key-stage levels, why even come into our school? Why inspect us? Why watch our teachers teach? Why look at the self-evaluation processes that we have in place? Why look at our file of evidence and our data, which show internal progress, if, at the end of the day, you are going to come out with an overall grading of "inadequate"? That is not only our experience, but the experience of a wide variety of schools teaching in a similar area to ourselves. The overemphasis on the end-of-key-stage levels drags down all the other good work that we are doing.

We went through a formal complaints procedure with ETI, and that procedure is done internally. It was stated through that formal complaints procedure that, regardless of the other areas that you show that you are doing in the school, the overall weighting is very heavily on achievements and standards. For instance, if your teaching and your leadership and management are good, but your achievements and standards are not at a certain level, that line in the sand — that certain percentage of level 4s — your grading is brought down a level, regardless of the work that you are doing.

What is the outcome of that? The outcome for teachers in our school is that the teachers and principals in areas like ours feel a sense of hopelessness and despair that, regardless of the amount of work that we do — including self-evaluation, school improvement and tracking of pupil progress — unless we reach a certain level, we will still be classed as "inadequate".

We also feel that there was a lack of transparency. Where did the grading come from? After going through that formal complaints procedure, which was done internally, we were still not clear about the

criteria that was used to give us that grading. We were told that there were a number of aspects of pupils' achievements and standards that were looked at. They talked about pupils' books, end-of-key-stage levels and interviews with pupils. My question at that point was that our end-of-key-stage levels are not at the level that you want, yet the work in pupils' books is outstanding and the talking and listening of the pupils is outstanding. Will that bring up the end-of-key-stage levels? We were told that it is not as scientific as that. So, we were not sure what criteria was used to give us that overall grading.

At the moment, we are going through the formal intervention process. We were told that we did not really need to change our action plans. We asked, "What could we have done to have got a different grading?" and told, "There was nothing more that you could have done." We asked, "Where do we go from here?", and were told, "Just keep doing what you are doing. We will be confident that we will be able to come back in six months and tell you that you are doing a great job."

I am sure that you will agree that it is very difficult for us as a school to accept those sorts of findings when it was very clear at the time that not only in six months will we be able to be told that we are a very good school, but we felt at the time that we were a very good school and doing a good job.

I also feel that good inspectors' hands are being tied by the current system, where schools are classed as "good" or "bad" based on the achievements and standards, and not necessarily on the practice that is going on in the school. Currently, it seems to be the situation out there with colleagues that if your pupils are achieving good levels, regardless of the quality of teaching and the leadership in the school, that school will not be given anything less than "satisfactory" because your pupils are achieving, regardless of the teaching in the school. Whereas in schools like ours, in areas of social deprivation where the children are coming in at a very low level and we are having to put in lots of innovative teaching strategies to try to move those children on, regardless of all those strategies that were put in place, if we do not get those children to the line in the sand that we need to get those children to, we will be classed as "inadequate".

I believe that the current system is immoral and unjust, and schools in socially deprived areas, where our aim is to progress the cohort of children that we have to reach their potential, not that line in the sand that they are asking for, are going through this hopelessness and despair, and it is palpable among the Shankill principals' group that we meet with. Everyone is in exactly the same place. We are doing everything that we can to move those children on, yet we are still being told that it is not enough, and that if you do not get those children to a certain percentage of level 4s, you will be classed as inadequate. For me as a principal of a local school and the rest of the principals, there are many who are in exactly the same situation. They are saying that they are doing everything that they can, yet if they do not reach that line in the sand, it is not good enough.

The inspection process used to work alongside schools to achieve school improvement, but now I believe that they are destroying schools. I believe that our context was not taken into consideration, and it did not recognise the significant progress that had been made with the cohort of children that we have. We had evidence to show that, but that was discounted in the overall grading.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. Jonathan, your final comments are the most telling of all that we have heard. That is not to detract in any way from anything that has been said by Clare or Fern. Having visited the school and spoken to the Shankill principals, I am well aware of the concerns that exist in the area.

Ms Turner: Mr Chairman, that is why NAHT was totally determined that we would have Jonathan in attendance today. This Committee needs to hear what is happening in schools.

The Chairperson: It is very sad that the comments that are made in the inspector's report do not add up. I always thought that, if you put two and two together, you would end up with four. That was the case when I left school, and I do not know whether that has changed. If you have a report that has the school as "good" or "very good" and you come to an end point where you have to make an overall assumption, in what is a very objective process, how can you come to the position of it being graded as "inadequate"? Last week, the representatives of the inspectors, your Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) colleagues, said to us in their written submission:

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

Clearly, Jonathan, you are saying that the verbal feedback had the school as "good" and that something then happened. It is what that something was and where that somewhere was that changed the final outcome. That is why that comment last week and Jonathan's comments today raise very serious questions of the ETI and of the Department, let alone the concerns that many principals may have about the issue of area planning and whether that is another method to try to get some schools to fall off the edge of the cliff.

I will not ask any questions but go straight to members because we are very constrained for time. I do not want the issue of time to result in the importance of what we have heard to be overlooked.

Mr Rogers: You are very welcome, and I declare an interest as a former member of NAHT. It is good to see you again, Fern. As a former principal, what I heard from Jonathan is devastating. When those inspectors leave and that report is published, you have to try to build your teachers' confidence again. You know that those teachers are doing good work and whatever else. On the Chair's point, there are some things that we do know. The level of deprivation at this school — 80% of its pupils receive free schools meals — and its culture has not been taken on board at all. The publicly produced report does not give the context of the levels of progression. As you and we all know, the next P1 intake will be different to the present one and so on each year. Do you feel that the inspectorate can contribute to school improvement? Fern, you mentioned the recent and relevant experience of the inspectorate, and, let us face it, if you left teaching 25 years ago, you would find that the culture and so on in schools had changed and that so many things had come in. Last week, we heard from the inspectors' union that they are under so much pressure and they seem to get very little staff development.

The other point that you made was about evidence-based reports. If there is a particular issue, the evidence-based reports would be very helpful. In fact, as Jonathan said earlier, you get a bad report and are left with it. It is simply this: how can the inspectorate effect school improvement in its present form?

Mr Manning: Over the past three years, we spent time going to a number of schools and sharing practice. Those schools had been given outstanding and very good gradings and were from a similar sort of area — well, they were considered to be from a similar free-school-meals band, but they were very different schools. We put in place an awful lot of the strategies and ideas that they had used. I also sat down with one of the inspectors last year and showed him the system of self-evaluation that we had in the school and asked him what he thought about it and what more we needed to do. He gave me some suggestions that we put in place. The following year, the inspectorate came back and saw everything that we had put in place, yet it came up with the grading of "inadequate". It does not make sense, and it certainly did not make sense to us.

The inspectorate can have an input into school improvement. The inspector whom I spoke to had been an inspector for a number of years, and he told me that things had changed. It used to be that inspectors were more like critical friends who came alongside schools, there were regular visits and they provided more of a helping hand. It has changed, and they now come with a big whip and tell you that you are not doing this or that.

We would love to see more input from inspectors in the sense of helping with school improvement. We would also love them to come and look at what we are doing with our self-evaluation or what we are looking at in a particular year and ask them what they think and how well we can move on with it. However, it is very hard to do that in the current system. Inspectors could come in one year as critical friends and crucify you the next, regardless of what they have done to help you.

Ms Turner: One of the concerns of the NAHT is that the system ought to be open and transparent. In other words, it ought to adhere to the Nolan principles. However, that is not happening at the minute.

Jonathan's experience was that there was communication between the inspection team and the Chief Inspector, who had never set foot in the school. We have other situations with other principals in which we have evidence of the Chief Inspector communicating with unions. We also have evidence of the Chief Inspector relaying conversations with unions to the Department and the inspection teams. That is not an acceptable system or process.

Mr Rogers: Apologies, I have to leave now. Before I do, I have another question along the same lines. There is no help from the inspectorate, but I am sure that you also feel that there is a lack of help and support from the Curriculum Advisory Support Service (CASS) etc, because of the way that the budget has been cut.

Mr Manning: As far as I am concerned, we have an excellent CASS officer and excellent literacy and numeracy link officers. They have been great support to us in the past three years. However, there is certainly more evident support now that we are in formal intervention. That is maybe the issue: more support could have been given at an earlier stage. At the same time, we know that we had very good practitioners who were doing a good job, and we put an awful lot of curriculum and staff development in place over the past three years.

I take on board what you have said. More CASS support would have been great, but we felt that we were in a good place for the inspection.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you all very much. I have heard it often from you all. In fact, when I started, my first visit was up the Shankill Road where Jonathan very much painted this picture for me. At that time, you told me that two or three principals were ill. Is that still the case?

Mr Manning: No. They have come back.

Mr Kinahan: What is the area planning situation? Where does Edenbrooke Primary School fit into that at the moment?

Mr Manning: That is a good question. I think that the suggestion was that Edenbrooke Primary School might amalgamate with Malvern Primary School, but I am not sure whether that is still the case.

Mr Kinahan: Are you quite strong in your position? Do you feel confident of that?

Mr Manning: We have good numbers. Our numbers have increased in the past three or four years. When I arrived, we had around 175 or 180 pupils, and we now have around 220. The school is in a strong position.

Mr Kinahan: I really only asked that because I am trying to understand what on earth the agenda is that is hiding behind all this, given that you have a successful school and the numbers are right.

Clare and Fern, you talked about an independent assessor. That point was raised earlier today, and one of the grammar schools called in a company to look at how they were doing things. Will you expand on the ideas that we should be looking at for how we assess the assessors.

Ms Turner: Basically, we are talking about 360-degree evaluation and assessment of the whole system. Every stakeholder has a role to play, ultimately, the role that they play will impact on the quality of teaching and learning and the education that is provided to our children. When we look at what is happening in a school and the quality of teaching, we also have to look at the support that is being provided by that school, how that school has been assessed, and the expectations and policies of the Department. The system as a whole needs to be reviewed continually.

None of us, including our inspectors, are infallible. Therefore, when there is genuine concern in a school about the outcome of an inspection process, and that concern is relayed to the ETI, it needs to take it on board. It needs to evaluate what school leaders and teachers are saying to it, and, in situations where there is no agreement, there has to be an external process and an independent investigator who can look at what the school and the ETI are saying and evaluate a response.

Mr Craig: Fern, you will not be surprised that there is no disagreement between you and me on the questionnaires issue. I am not asking you to set union policy or anything like that, but a suggestion was made earlier that the schools need to do something in that area by conducting self-evaluation. If a standard was set, on an ongoing basis, that was more accurate, it would do away with the need for this daft questionnaire.

I described the questionnaires as gripe sheets —

Ms Turner: It is a gripe sheet.

Mr Craig: — because, inevitably, that is what they become.

What are your thoughts on that self-evaluation being done by the boards of governors and senior management teams on an ongoing basis?

Ms Turner: My biggest issue with the questionnaires is that, even when serious issues are raised, those issues are not shared with the school and individuals are not identified. So, regardless of the seriousness of the situation, the school cannot deal with it. Asking parents and staff to fill in questionnaires and not providing the school with the opportunity to deal with them raises expectations. Those people believe that something will happen, and, when it does not, they are disappointed.

We have evidence of those questionnaires being used on an individual or a group-organised basis to sort things out. That is simply unacceptable. School leaders have a difficult job. For example, they have to manage redundancies, deal with unsatisfactory teachers or other issues that impact on the working of schools. Those questionnaires provide a get-back clause.

Mr Craig: Jonathan, it must run in the name. Welcome to my world. I ended up in the same position as you. In some respects, the less that I say about it the better. Did you get any impression that there was outside interference in what was in the final report?

Mr Manning: It is certainly something that we have thought about. We had a couple of days of inspection, received positive comments and were told that things were going well. We arrived on the Friday expecting at least a "good". I was ready to argue if we were given a "satisfactory"; I was ready to argue that we were better than that. So, that was something that was in my mind. In addition to the comments that were made, there was a lot of toing and froing over the overall grading. Again, I am quoting what was said to me and am not making my own judgements on that, but there was a feeling that that was the case.

The inspectorate brings a graph of your end-of-key-stage levels over a four-year period. That is what was shown to us during the feedback, and it was very much the evidence for our achievements and standards being unsatisfactory. So, that was something that we had concerns over.

Straight after the report was given to us, I said, "After what you have said to us over the last two and a half days, and after what you have seen in this school, there is no way you can say that our school is inadequate." That is what I was able to say at the time.

So, our concern is that that may have happened. We obviously have no evidence to suggest that it definitely did, but it is something that we were very concerned about. It did not add up for us. For leadership and management, we were awarded "good" in the summary of findings but "satisfactory" in the draft report. That did not make sense to us. How can it be good here and then satisfactory in the report? When you read the report on leadership and management, it is not even satisfactory or good: it sounds like it is very good or outstanding. So, a lot of it did not make sense. Certainly, there were thoughts in our heads that that might have happened.

Mr Craig: Clare and Fern, a statement that was made to me by a senior inspector really concerned me. I shared it with the Chair a long time ago. Have you any evidence that inspections are being focussed on one sector?

Ms Turner: There is certainly a perception in the system that one sector is being more harshly judged than another. We do not have the evidence to support that, but the perception is there. Whether it is the reality or not, it is an issue that needs to be taken on board, and it is an issue that we need to deal with.

Mr Lunn: Thanks, ladies and Jonathan, for your presentations. Jonathan, I will come to you in a second. Fern, you said that you suspected that the ETI devalued certain skills courses.

Ms Turner: Yes.

Mr Lunn: Is there firm evidence for that?

Ms Turner: Yes there is. We have been contacted by a number of our non-selective secondary school principals who have copious evidence that the skills courses that they run in their schools are not valued in the same way as academic courses. I find that very confusing, particularly as the

Department has pushed for the development of the skills courses. So, my concern is that, on the one hand, it is pushing this agenda and, on the other, it is penalising schools that follow its direction.

Mr Lunn: That is a complete nonsense, is it not?

Ms Turner: It is.

Mr Lunn: Are you saying that, when the ETI assesses the overall performance of a school by looking at the results, it gives a lower value to those courses officially?

Ms Turner: Yes.

Mr Lunn: This country has gone down the tubes.

What level of representation can your union provide to a head teacher who has been the subject of a damning report and may have been suspended and so on?

Ms Turner: I do not normally mention individuals —

Mr Lunn: I do not want you to, please.

Ms Turner: I am happy to do so in this case. Annabel Scott from Crumlin, who has featured in many of the newspaper reports, has been destroyed as a consequence of the way that the Department of Education managed the situation in her school. It is an extremely sad case. Only two weeks ago, Annabel and her family had to leave their home and move in with family and friends. To leave any individual in the situation where they are subjected to that sort of treatment is absolutely deplorable. What makes this whole situation worse is that Crumlin was a high-achieving school for its type. It was scoring above the Northern Ireland average. It was maintaining pupil numbers and, in the past three years, it has been destroyed as a consequence of the inspection process.

Mr Lunn: Yes, my general impression of unions is that they will give whatever support they can to their members. I really did not want to talk about a particular case and still do not. In terms of —

Ms Turner: Trevor, one of the things that the procedure states is that unsatisfactory staff should be provided with an opportunity for training and an opportunity to demonstrate that they can improve. Unfortunately, in the case that I previously mentioned, the principal was removed from her school and was never given the opportunity to demonstrate improvement, if that improvement had been necessary.

Mr Lunn: Jonathan, with due respect to the two ladies, I am so glad that you came here. I was up at your school, it must be a few years ago now because your predecessor, Betty —

Mr Manning: Betty Orr, yes.

Mr Lunn: I have been agonising over her surname for the past hour. Betty was very proud at that time — I am probably going back five years — of the progress that had been made at Edenbrooke. With the difficulties of the area and all the paramilitary nonsense that was going on up there at that time, she had good reason to be proud. She retired, you took over, and you have done three years of good work and can see progress, so you have had some kick in the teeth from the inspectorate. That is not a question; it is a fact. That came across in the way that you made your presentation. I am not asking you a question; I am just saying that we acknowledge, or I certainly do, what has happened to you. It is good for us to hear from the chalk face an actual example of what happens during an inspection.

Mr Manning: The difficulty, again, is transferring that to the staff who, on hearing something like that, are devastated. I am principal of the school and trying to ensure that everything is in the right place, but the staff are the people who actually do the teaching. You have to be a very good teacher to teach in a school in our area. Unfortunately, that is not taken into consideration by the inspectorate either.

Mr Lunn: This goes back to many a discussion that we have had about what is achievement. From the perspective of their starting point, one person's D or E is a terrific achievement, but the inspectorate does not seem to acknowledge that at all. It is a results game.

Mr Manning: An example of that is that, when we had the inspection process last year, our end of Key Stage levels had gone from 20% to 70%, which was quite an improvement. The following year, there was a slight dip to 59%. Looking at a graph, it would be easy to question what happened to cause us to go from 70% to 59%. The reality is that we did a much better job with those children who reached 59% than we had done with those who had reached 70%. Yet, that was not taken into consideration, and when you look at a graph on a sheet, you see that it is still not. Our achievements with the children who reached 59% were much greater than they were with those who reached 70%, yet that is not considered.

Mrs Dobson: I also thank you for a very powerful presentation. I was busy writing down everything that you said, particularly Jonathan, when you said:

"The inspection process used to work alongside schools ... but now ... they are destroying schools."

It has been good to hear directly from you. I am incredulous about the position that you seem to be put in. In Scotland, we learned that inspectors there are more like mentors. I am sure that you agree that we are a long way off getting to that stage with ETI inspections. If you were to wave a magic wand as quickly as possible, what would you do to repair the damage that so evidently has been done? How would you set about it?

Mr Manning: Do you mean with the inspection process or our school?

Mrs Dobson: No, it is obvious how well you have done with your school. I mean with the inspection process. I think that you referred to a "critical friend" a few times. I said last week in Committee that, with friends like that, who needs enemies? What would you do to repair the damage that has been done?

Mr Manning: Obviously, the inspection process needs to be rigorous. Schools need to be inspected on the job that they are carrying out. That is important. That has to be there. I would like inspectors, when they come out to inspect schools, to look at individual children the schools are dealing with. They should look at the improvements that are being made with those children. We baseline internally with a sample of work, have targets in place for the children, move them on, look at the improvements that have been made and evaluate those. In the process of an inspection, the inspectors should look at the job being done in the school and the process that you are using to move those children on. If progress is taking place, a school is doing a good job.

Mrs Dobson: They need to individualise rather than having a one-size-fits-all approach based on results.

Mr Manning: That is the problem at the minute. A lot of our internal data that showed progress did not have an impact on the overall grading.

As far as the critical friend notion is concerned, if your reporting inspector or district inspector called in a number of times during the year to see how things were going and to make suggestions, it would change your attitude towards inspections. There would not be that fear. In many ways, there would not really be a need for the inspection. If that inspector knows the school, is in regularly and knows the work that is taking place, we would be much more willing to share things, but it is totally different now.

Mrs Dobson: There is a fear factor and a heavy-handed approach.

Mr Manning: There is. The inspectors will say that it has totally changed from what it was.

Mrs Majury: Fern mentioned the lack of transparency. It should not be a surprise to a school. We all self-evaluate. You should know roughly what grade you are at; you think that you are "good", "very good" or whatever. The problem is that the inspectors mark against the Together Towards Improvement framework, which is very vague. It gives a quality indicator and a bland statement. It

would be much more helpful if that was broken down to show what that looked like in an "outstanding" school, a "very good" school, an "inadequate" school etc. The fact is that schools really do not know what they have been marked against. They really do not understand why some of the judgements have been made. Jonathan made that very clear. I would like to see more transparency in the process.

I was very fortunate because I went to Scotland last year and got to speak to a lot of Scottish head teachers who had been through the Scottish inspection system. What struck me most of all was the fact that they were very laissez-faire about it. There was no concern. They could not understand why we thought that that was an issue that caused stress.

Mrs Dobson: That is certainly a position that we need to be in, but we are such a long way off it.

Have you looked at inspection processes and relationships between teachers and inspectors in countries other than Scotland? Is there any best practice?

Ms Turner: We looked at a number of countries, including Finland. It is tempting to say that we will just do without any inspection process. The NAHT, as a professional association, believes that there has to be a level of accountability. Schools value the fact that their work, commitment and dedication can be rubber-stamped, but there has to be faith in the system. At present, there is no faith in the inspection system.

Mrs Dobson: Those comments are echoed in my constituency.

Mr Manning: On that note, a number of us have been in a number of different schools. I have been in a number of different schools and through a number of inspections. There was one inspection quite a number of years ago in which our school was given a "very good" rating. However, the current practice in our school is better than it was when we received a "very good". So, in essence, what we are doing at the moment is not being inspected. What is being inspected is the level that the children get to, and that is the problem.

Mrs Dobson: I can certainly understand your frustrations and teachers' demoralisation.

Ms Turner: I equate going into an inspection process to doing a driving test. As Clare said, before you go into an inspection process, you ought to know exactly what is required of your school and where your school is. It is the level of — I will use this word — secrecy about the process and about how schools are evaluated that adds to the fear and distress, because people honestly do not know how they are going to be judged.

Mr Newton: I will be very brief. I asked a question earlier about openness and transparency, and I was told that the inspection process was fully displayed on the Department's website, so I do not know how people do not understand it.

It seems to me that the ethos that you describe is wholly contradictory to all my experience in assessment — NVQ assessment, Investors in People assessment and so on — and that the ethos of those assessments is completely contrary to the ethos of the ETI, particularly in how — I will not bore you with the details — the Investors in People assessment is carried out. That seems to me to meet very good standards internationally.

I will make only one comment. I concur with recommendation 3.6 on school closures and amalgamations. I represent East Belfast, and to describe area planning in East Belfast as a shambles is, I think, an understatement. You said that that is the case for your school, too.

In your recommendations, you suggest that the process in area planning is fundamentally flawed. If that is the case, and if there is a case for smaller schools, how do you address the common curriculum formula in the context of smaller schools?

Ms Turner: If we look at the inspection reports as our evidence base on this one, we see that they make it clear that small schools actually do very well in delivering the curriculum, but they then go on to comment on the adverse impact that that has on individuals, teachers and school leaders in their schools. The reality is that, if you talk to most teachers and most school leaders, they will tell you that they would much rather have a job than no job. The reality is that small is sometimes beautiful. A

small school can have a special link with the community. There is no evidence that children necessarily suffer as a consequence of a school being small. In fact, it can be a great advantage.

Obviously, with secondary education, if we are talking about delivering a range of courses and about the numbers required by the Department, we need to look at how that can be managed. I see no reason why there cannot be cooperation between schools and why schools in an area cannot work together.

We are extremely concerned about how the area planning process has been rolled out. Initially, when they talked about sustainable schools, they identified six criteria. However, when they went out to assess schools, they reduced that to three, not because the other three criteria were not important, but because it was more difficult to assess the impact of those criteria. We either decide on what constitutes a good school and use that criterion or we do not.

In addition, they initially talked about looking at the school resource in total and evaluating the provision that was needed in an area. They quickly decided that that was not going to be done, so we ended up in a situation in which sectors were looked at individually. That does not constitute good value for money in anyone's book, and, again, we have to ask why. The reality was that individual sectors mounted a good defence of their own position, and the needs of the children and society were ignored. As a consequence, if the plan rolls out as envisaged, we are going to have children travelling huge distances and families being severely inconvenienced because of the plans that are being put forward.

The Chairperson: Clare, Fern and Jonathan, thank you very much. You have given us a lot of food for thought in your submission and in your oral evidence. We are glad that we have embarked on the process regarding the inspectorate. I think that some questioned whether this was the right thing to do. As I said earlier, it is a very strange place to be when the inspectorate is getting very nervous about being inspected. The comments that have been made here this afternoon will not be lost on the Committee. We look forward to producing a report, which we believe will be to the benefit of our system rather than merely having an inspector that is to its disadvantage, as it is seen by many in the system at the minute.

Ms Turner: I thank the Committee very much for its time and consideration.