



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Education and Training
Inspectorate and School Improvement Process:
Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and
Gaelscoil na bhFál

27 November 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Robin Newton
Mr Sean Rogers

Witnesses:

Dr Micheál Ó Duibh	Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta
Ms Áine Andrews	Gaelscoil na bhFál
Ms Róisín Brady	Gaelscoil na bhFál

The Deputy Chairperson: You are very welcome. Members, we have Dr Micheál Ó Duibh, Áine Andrews and Róisín Brady. We have a very tight schedule, less so for your presentation than for members' questions. I have just discovered that we will not have a quorum after 12.00 noon. I need to move quite quickly. On you go, please.

Dr Micheál Ó Duibh (Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta): A LeasChathaoirligh agus a chomhaltaí Coiste, cuirim fáilte roimh an deis seo fianaise ó bhéal a thabhairt daoibh inniu, agus tá mé buíoch díobh as sin.

Chairman and Committee members, we welcome this opportunity to present oral evidence and to thank you for the invitation to present to the Committee. We want to state at the outset that we value the work of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and recognise the importance of supporting and improving Irish-medium education (IME) and that various bodies are required so that there is constant improvement in our schools. We also acknowledge and recognise that the ETI has inspectors with expertise in the Irish language and in immersion education, and we also note that Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) has a good working relationship with the ETI. That said, we want to present to the Committee today in the spirit of improvement and in the best interests of children. We have general observations, and we then want, considering time constraints, to look to address the recommendations that we forwarded in our submission.

I will start with our general observations. We realise that the inspectorate, in improving its own processes, should ensure that there is a sufficient pool of inspectors to service Irish-medium schools and the inspections that they carry out. There should be specific expertise and language acquisition in immersion education, which informs the inspection process, and a general awareness and

understanding of the distinctive features of Irish-medium education and, indeed, of immersion education. I will put it at its simplest level: I wonder whether any member of the Committee would be happy to have children in English-medium schools if inspectors inspected the school without an ability to speak English. I wonder about your opinions on that. We have to be conscious that this is about children, and, if children are not improving at schools, that is dependent on the inspectorate. The inspections that are carried out should make realistic recommendations, but there are barriers that we need to address.

I will move to our recommendations. It is important that the central place of the Irish language in the planning and development of literacy and numeracy and across the spectrum must be recognised in the Department of Education (DE), the education and library boards and the inspectorate. It is about improving Irish-medium provisions and outcomes. Generally, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and I feel that the education system has displayed a lack of awareness at all levels about Irish-medium education. We have a good working relationship with all bodies and endeavour to improve and inform, but I feel that we are always coming back to explain what Irish-medium education is about. To address that, I feel that the inspectorate has to ask itself a question about its understanding of immersion education and Irish-medium education and how it can use and improve its processes to aid school improvement in Irish-medium schools. If we do not do that, we will continue to disadvantage Irish-medium children in schools, and no children should be disadvantaged because of the language and education that they choose. It goes back to parental choice and its importance.

I have a number of points, but I am conscious of time. I will try my best to go through all of them briefly. There is an added value in bilingualism and bilingual education. We feel that it should be assessed and documented through the inspectorate, which it currently does not do. I am conscious that the most recent report by the chief inspector did not specifically mention Irish-medium education other than general comments about general schools, and the previous chief inspector had a section specific to Irish-medium education. If we are to benchmark and improve Irish-medium education, we must have a starting point, and we have to assess and document on a routine basis. That is not happening.

What about broader structures and managerial structures? With Irish-medium units in English-medium schools, it is important that the management has appropriate levels of understanding, expertise and experience in Irish-medium education. We feel that the inspectorate has a role to ensure that it has that level of expertise. Every School a Good School places an importance and emphasis on governors to manage a school effectively. If schools have Irish-medium pupils with specific needs, they need expertise at board level to address that. Currently, there are no requirements on boards of governors of English-medium schools to ensure that they have the necessary competencies in Irish-medium education or in immersion education. The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the board and the education and library boards need to address that in Irish-medium schools in the Catholic maintained sector and in the controlled sector. We feel that there is a gap in leadership and management that needs to be filled with a systematic overhaul of the current policy for Irish-medium units and Irish-medium controlled schools. The ETI has a very important role in that and should take a leadership role in the best interests of children.

If we address the teaching appointment committees of education and library boards — this is more historical, when new Irish-medium schools come in as controlled schools — there are no Irish-medium assessors for appointments. It is also important that the ETI has a say in the assessment and ability of principals and management to meet the needs of Irish-medium children and the issue of necessary recommendations. With coordinators in Irish-medium units, there are no conditions or critéir riachtanach —

Ms Áine Andrews (Gaelscoil na bhFál): Criteria.

Dr Ó Duibh: — that assure that coordinators in Irish-medium units are on the senior management team of English-medium primary schools. How do we assess the special educational needs of Irish-medium pupils and everything else so that Irish-medium education goes through an entire school as English-medium education does. If you do not have that representation at managerial level, there is a weakness, but I feel that there is also a role for the inspectorate to ensure that that happens and that there are processes in schools that ensure what is in the best interests of Irish-medium pupils.

We need guidance and an engagement between the inspectorate and the Department of Education on the specific needs and requirements of Irish-medium education in formulating guidance for Irish-medium governors, which was highlighted in the review of Irish-medium education. Áine might comment on this later: we have Irish-medium preschool statutory units, yet the criteria do not allow for

a preference for Irish-medium pupils. This is very clear in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. In the context of the sustainable schools policy, if we attract pupils into statutory Irish-medium units and those children transfer to the English-medium side, that questions the sustainability of the school. It leaves stand-alone schools and Irish-medium units in English-medium schools in a position in which they cannot have a prerequisite that those children need to transfer from preschool into primary school, which is reflected in criteria. We need guidance and linguistic continuity from preschool to primary to post-primary.

The ETI also needs to address the immersion environment, which is essential to the delivery of a quality bilingual education on that linguistic journey. There is a formal and an informal approach, and this is probably more relevant to Irish-medium units in English-medium schools. If Irish-medium education is about linguistic acquisition through immersion education, as well as educational outcomes, we have to ensure, to the best of our ability, that we have an environment that promotes and encourages that. There is no guidance. It is up to schools, management and governors to ensure that that happens. We feel that we have no evidence and that we need evidence. We feel that the ETI is probably best placed to provide that evidence, and it needs to address the issue.

The question of special educational needs is ongoing. The review of Irish-medium education identified that as a need. We feel that we need specific units, most likely in Belfast, Derry or Armagh, and the ETI has a crucial input.

Specialists — speech therapists and psychologists — are employed by the education and library boards, and they provide advice. They could provide advice because, in their opinion, a child, for whatever reason, may not have the ability to go through Irish-medium education because it would be challenging enough for that child to learn one language, and it would be equally if not more challenging to learn two languages. That is a lack of knowledge and expertise. Those specialists may have expertise in speech therapy and psychology but not necessarily in immersion education. If Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta were to provide that information, people could be sceptical. There is no reason to be sceptical, but one may be. If the ETI provided information and guidance, that would be hard evidence for all speech therapists and psychologists connected with the education of Irish-medium pupils that there is a lack of knowledge that needs to be resourced at every level. The ETI is probably the only body that can deliver that, but I do not see it happening at the moment.

From the workings of the group on literacy and numeracy and Irish-medium education, and through our forums, including the Irish-medium principals' forum, our education committee and at board level, we have recommendations about the inspectorate and how it conducts inspections in Irish-medium settings and the level of expertise and fluency required. I mentioned that at the start, but it is important to come back to the issue. We look at judgements, how they are based and the indicators used. As I understand it, that is based on a model of best practice in English-medium education. Mainstream education, whether through the medium of English or any other medium, it is not the same as immersion. Therefore, the way in which we address and assess Irish-medium pupils will be different because it is a different system of education and a different language. If an inspectorate does not have an adequate knowledge or understanding of bilingualism, immersion education or the language itself, that will create difficulties for children, which is unacceptable.

I realise that I cannot expect all inspectors to be fluent Irish speakers by tomorrow and to be able to communicate through Irish and English, but they should at least have an understanding and awareness of immersion education and its pedagogy. If they do not, they need to question it and raise that awareness to this Committee and the Department of Education. This is about improvement. These recommendations have been brought forward with the aim of improvement. We are not here to criticise. I do not think that it is productive to criticise, but we want to identify the needs, the areas, the bearnaí —

Ms Andrews: Gaps.

Dr Ó Duibh: Gabh mo leithscéal, Irish is coming to me today. Hopefully, Hansard will be able to pick that up

Those are our general comments on the inspectorate. We continue our working relationship with the inspectorate, but we welcome the opportunity to give oral evidence and to answer your questions. I will pass over to Áine, who will give the Committee a greater understanding of the inspection process in Irish-medium schools.

Ms Andrews: Thank you very much. I have been working in the Irish-medium sector for 35 years and am principal of Gaelscoil na bhFál. It is worth adding that I have played an active role in many of the policy curriculum and assessment initiatives relevant to the Irish-medium sector over the years. I am chair of the regional Irish-medium early years support organisation and led the development and delivery of a certificate in immersion education in association with the University of Ulster. I am a board member of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and the GTCNI.

In immersion education, children are educated through a language that is not the language of the home. It is a unique process in which children have not only all the benefits of learning in the context of the home language but the benefits from the advantages of bilingualism and the intellectual benefits of learning a second language in their early years.

Irish-medium education deals with all the challenges and issues facing English-medium education. However, Irish-medium practitioners face many additional challenges. Some are intrinsic to an immersion learning context. Other challenges relate to the way in which agencies responsible for supporting or interfacing with us respond to our needs or fail to do so.

One of the agencies that has not quite grasped the specific demands of Irish-medium education is the ETI. I do not have time to give you a detailed exposition of what is a complex teaching and learning environment that requires a sophisticated, complex and multilayered approach. I will try to give you a broad-brush overview of some of the main differences between Irish-medium and English-medium education, and I will concentrate on my area of expertise, which is early years and primary. Most of what I will say will focus on issues relating to language for the very simple reason that language is the engine that drives the curriculum. Language is central to learning. It is through language that children access and engage with the curriculum, process their experiences and express and develop their ideas and knowledge.

Language development involves building competence layer on layer, enabling children to engage with learning experiences and concepts of increasing complexity and sophistication. In the English-medium context, those skills are developed within and outside school. Most children in the English medium come to school with fairly well-developed skills in the language of instruction, and their general environment is English-rich.

The Irish-medium context is different. Irish is not usually the language of the home, and the children may have little or no exposure to Irish in the broader linguistic environment. Irish-medium education involves the creation of a learning environment in which children successfully acquire a second language. That, in turn, requires an approach that offsets reduced exposure to the language outside school. Consequently, the Irish-medium approach to language development is more structured and more systematically planned than in the English-medium context. To be successful, it requires substantial oral output from a teacher and a much higher level of teacher-directed activities than would be usual in the English-medium context. How teachers use Irish in verbal interaction with children is also different, involving more sustained repetition, use of non-language clues, more teacher modelling of language and specific questioning techniques to support language production. In primary school, there is a much greater emphasis on practical, hands-on activities. Those techniques change and evolve in different ways, from foundation stage through to key stage.

One important issue that I cannot overemphasise is that the milestones of children's progress in Irish literacy do not mirror those in English literacy. For example, you would expect to hear most children using English at all times with the teacher and their peers in the early years of primary education. However, in an Irish-medium context, sustained and spontaneous use of Irish develops over time. Sometimes, even when children have the ability to speak the language, they may choose not to do so. In quality Irish-medium education, we develop skills and habits in the children's use of Irish through sophisticated, well-thought-out strategies and approaches. That example raises the broader question of what inspectors should be looking for and looking at when they are inspecting an Irish-medium school. I will give you some examples of criteria specific to the Irish-medium sector that are less crucial in the English-medium sector.

How do teachers and the school plan for language acquisition? What approach do teachers and the school take to integrating planning for language acquisition with other areas of the curriculum, and, equally importantly, how do they integrate planning for other areas of the curriculum with language acquisition? What strategies does the school adopt to promote language enrichment and language accuracy? How well are children progressing along the continuum of Irish-language development — receptive, productive, spontaneous use, accuracy, variety and breadth of language use — and how are those competences manifested across the curriculum? What strategies are used to promote

children's use of Irish not only in the more formal classroom environment but spontaneously with one another in the informal, social and recreational aspects of school life? How successful are those strategies? Does the school nurture a culture of in-house Irish-medium resource development to support teaching and to promote children's progress along the continuum of increasing Irish-language competence? How well does a school support parents, particularly those who do not know the language? How does the school approach the issue of continuing professional development for teaching and support staff in relation to immersion methodology? All those suggestions are reasonable and logical. However, there is no evidence that the ETI has incorporated any of those considerations into its inspection templates. You can find inspection reports that do not refer to a single one of them.

I believe that the ETI also needs to reflect on a number of other key issues, the first of which is end-of-key-stage assessment. The importance that the ETI attaches to end-of-key-stage assessment has come up a number of times during submissions to the Committee. End-of-key-stage assessment in the Irish-medium sector has additional critical complexity. How do inspectors assess or interpret achievement on the basis of end-of-key-stage assessment in Irish-medium schools? The data against which Irish-medium schools are measured are collated largely from the monolingual English-medium sector, based on English and maths. Irish-medium schools do three subjects: Irish, English and maths. How do you come to an equitable judgement of achievement when some schools are measured by achievements in one language and other schools are measured by achievements in two? I am not saying that there is an easy solution to the issue, but I am saying that the ETI does not appear to have considered it. There is a further question about standardised tests. In English and maths, these have been standardised to a monolingual constituency and can skew results. Tests in Irish literacy are still being developed.

I want to talk about the make-up of the inspection team. The optimum inspection team in an Irish-medium context should be made up of inspectors who are competent in the language of instruction, have practical experience in an Irish-medium context, have an understanding of the complexities and challenges of the Irish-medium sector and the differences between it and the English-medium sector. This combination of skills, competences and knowledge rarely, if ever, comes together in Irish-medium inspections. These shortcomings are further compounded because of shortcomings in the internal ETI documentation, which guides and supports inspection teams in gathering and interpreting information and arriving at evaluatory descriptors.

Objective, informed and consistent judgements can be delivered only through an evaluative framework that is fit for purpose. Such a framework should provide a clear rationale and an evidence-based justification for the evaluations of a school in a way that stands up to scrutiny and in which schools can see and understand why they have been given one grade as opposed to another. This should include a differentiated rating scale. We believe that the ETI has no such framework for either English-medium or Irish-medium schools. However, English-medium schools are slightly better off because the current documentation, although demonstrating serious shortcomings, at least acknowledges the existence of the English medium. It makes no reference to Irish-medium education, and I refer to one astonishing example of this, the management and recording information system (MARS) report. The MARS report is a document used during inspections. It incorporates over 80 statements or questions relating to school effectiveness. Against each one of those, a school is given a grade. The rationale by which a school gets one grade or another is not clear. The MARS report contains no specific references to Irish-medium education. There are approximately 26 questions/statements relating to literacy in English but none relating to literacy in Irish. I believe that there is an urgent need for a proper dialogue between the ETI and the Irish-medium sector, a dialogue in which the ETI will, for a change, actually listen to experienced and knowledgeable practitioners.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak to you, and I hope that you will have some influence on how the inspectorate conducts itself in future.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you, Áine, and thank you, Micheál. We definitely need that conversational dialogue. I can see exactly where you are coming from. Before you joined the meeting, we were discussing what is the best comparison for knowing how immersion works. A major issue seems to be that no one else is using that as a language technique. Where would you point us to to find out more to learn and compare?

Dr Ó Duibh: We can look at what is local to us and what is near to us. We look at the Welsh-medium experience and the experience in the South of Ireland. To a certain extent, we look at the experience in Scotland. On the question of what is good practice and what has worked and has not worked in the immersion educational experience, it occurs to me that it is common sense to look across to Wales

while understanding, perhaps, the differences between the experience in the South of Ireland and the North of Ireland. It would be better to have that conversation.

Ms Andrews: I certainly support that. One of the questions that we asked under freedom of information was about how inspectors were trained. I do not know whether they still do, but a lot of their trips took them to places such as Estonia and the Basque country, and no doubt those experiences will give broad-brush information on immersion and bilingualism that is not to be disregarded. However, in these islands, we have Wales, we have Irish-medium education in the South and we have Gàidhlig-medium education. When you look at those, you have to take into consideration the linguistic context of immersion education in these situations. In Wales, for example, a significantly high proportion of children still come from Welsh-speaking homes, although that is dropping. There is also the Welsh Language Act, which rigorously supports and promotes the Welsh language. Scotland is a bit more like us in that the heartlands in which Scottish Gàidhlig is used are decreasing. The growth of Gàidhlig-medium schools in urban areas parallels the growth of Irish-medium schools here. Scotland and here are quite close to one another with development: Wales is quite a significant distance ahead of us, but Scotland and here are quite close.

During submissions, the Scottish approach to inspections came up a couple of times: namely the balance between self-evaluation and policing and accountability. I have seen some interesting support material from Scotland. A differentiated rating scale has been mentioned. Scottish inspectors provided some extremely useful information on the road towards excellence. They indicated that they have a very comprehensive quality framework that has subdivisions.

Interestingly, in Scotland, you can look at the quality indicators and what would be given a level 5. If you take the curriculum or some aspect of teaching or learning, for example, there will be a demonstration of what a level 5 looks like. They can tell you what a school that attains level 5 in the inspection process will look like and what a school that attains level 2 will look like. That gives benchmarks to those who are inspecting at the upper and lower ends of excellence.

What Scotland is doing with English-medium education is tremendous. The inspectorate at the Gàidhlig-medium end of things seems to be a bit more on the ball about what it is, how it should be supported, what the issues are and how best to deliver.

From my contacts with Scottish colleagues, it seems that a lot of these issues are coming up in Scotland. I am not saying that everything is hunky-dory in Scotland, but Gàidhlig-medium education seems to be being addressed in a much more comprehensive way than Irish-medium education is being addressed by our top-down initiatives.

Mrs Dobson: I was going to ask why you feel that immersion methodology provides a better way of teaching students, but you covered that in quite a lot of detail and are obviously very passionate about it.

Are you aware of the cost implications of the ETI, the Department and the board facilitating the Irish-medium sector administratively and financially? Is that significant? Do you have any detail on that?

Ms Andrews: I do not have any knowledge of that. There are roughly 60 inspectors in the inspectorate, and the team that inspects Irish-medium schools is quite small. The people on that team also inspect in the English-medium sector.

The whole system in Scotland is different: nobody would inspect a Gàidhlig-medium school who did not have Gàidhlig. That just would not happen. We are in a different situation. I agree with Micheál that we really need to go in the direction of ensuring that all our inspectors who are inspecting the Irish-medium sector have all the skills and competences needed. Maybe in the short-term, that is not possible, but we need to go in that direction.

A situation could arise whereby someone who does not have Irish is inspecting an Irish-medium school. The reporting inspector should always have Irish. For anyone else in the team who does not have Irish, there should be some clarity about what they can and cannot inspect. You can see certain things when you go into a classroom. You can see whether children are engaged in their work, but you will not know how terribly interesting the work is. You can see a teacher taking a class, but you will not know how well prepared the class is or anything about the pace of the lesson, and you will not know anything about how well the teacher communicates with the children. If you look at the children's work, you will not be able to judge the quality of what they write or the quality of the verbal

interaction between children and staff. So, there are lots of things that you cannot inspect properly if you do not have Irish. Without putting English speakers or people who are not fully competent in Irish out of the picture entirely — in the short term anyway — I think that their role should be indicated to them more clearly, as should the shortcomings in that role.

Dr Ó Duibh: Just so that I understand your question, are you asking whether significant costs would be incurred?

Mrs Dobson: No, I am just trying to explore the implications. You have been very detailed in your description.

The Chair touched on, and Áine mentioned, the ETI routinely assessing and documenting the added value of bilingual education. I was going to ask about examples in other countries, and you highlighted Wales specifically. Do you have any indication of the cost of adopting your recommendations for inspecting the immersive methodology?

Ms Andrews: My understanding from this Committee is that there will be a review of how the ETI inspects anyway. I would imagine that that will come into the picture as part of the overall review. In any case, if this is to happen, there will be an overall cost, no matter what recommendations are made or begin to be implemented.

Mrs Dobson: Do you have any specific figures?

Ms Andrews: I think that it is very important to facilitate dialogue between the ETI and those in Irish-medium education who have the knowledge and expertise to carry out such a role. So, I am not terribly sure.

Mrs Dobson: That is fine.

Dr Ó Duibh: May I add to that? We need a discussion on how we forward plan what is in the best interests of Irish-medium education. It is not just about a solution that we can all agree and sign up to tomorrow; it is about Irish-medium education here, where it is going in the future and how we develop it. The cost for an inspector with the ability to deliver through the medium of Irish language to come in would be exactly the same as that for an inspector with the English language. It is about education and encouraging our current pupils to go through a system. Incentives may be needed — whatever they may be, they will certainly be minimal — to engage them in that field. We realise that a level of expertise is required in an inspectorate — no one is questioning that — but if the inspectorate is to provide a service that we can all buy in to and agree on, that will be in children's best interests.

The cost of that is a linguistic cost. The question is whether we upskill, which is something that everybody should be doing in all their work, no matter what they are involved in. We should be upskilling constantly. If you can encourage current inspectors who have an interest in improving their linguistic skills to do so, that is fine. However, whenever inspectors are recruited, we need desirable criteria and essential criteria to encourage that side of it. We must recognise that, just like in anything else, you have to carry out a risk assessment and a needs analysis in your own organisation. If you identify that there is a need, you address that need and recruit accordingly. To me, it is rather simplistic. What we need first, before we even have that recruitment process, is a recognition of the needs. I think that this conversation is serving to be very helpful, as will our further engagement with the inspectorate, in identifying the needs in a sector that is continuing to grow and in addressing them accordingly.

Ms Andrews: I think that, in some respects, if this Committee's work moves the inspectorate or the process of inspection towards a more supportive model where less of a deficit model is in action, that dialogue will become part of the process. Currently, it is not. It is very much a them-and-us situation: inspectors are carrying out inspections on us. However, if the purpose of this is to increase dialogue, increase communication and share experiences in a way that is to the benefit of the inspection process, of improvement and, ultimately and most importantly, of our children, I cannot see how the additional issues of Irish-medium education cannot be easily incorporated in that process.

The Deputy Chairperson: We can read that all the way through the inspection process of every school.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you.

Mr Rogers: Fáilte romhaibh. You are very welcome. The inspectorate has moved from having an advice and guidance role to an inspecting role, which poses particular problems for a relatively young sector. You rightly make a lot of comparisons with what happens in Scotland, where self-evaluation is very well embedded in the system. Is the template for inspections in Irish-medium schools the same as that for inspections in other schools? What discussions has the Irish-medium sector had with the Department about adjusting that? For the Committee's information, what percentage of the inspectorate has a working knowledge of Irish? What opportunities are there for the inspectorate, through staff development, to obtain a working knowledge of Irish?

Dr Ó Duibh: I will address your first question about the level of engagement that the Irish-medium sector has had with the inspectorate. It has been an ongoing engagement. The one thing that you can say about the Irish-medium sector is that we are not shy; we are quite happy to express our opinions, and we are delighted to do so. I jest. We meet the inspectorate on a regular basis. My engagement with the inspectorate is at chief inspector level. Given those meetings and what is reflected in the view of Irish-medium education, as well as the impetus at departmental level, inspectorate level and in the sector, it is still clear to me that there are challenges that we have not addressed accordingly.

You mentioned the comparison between the inspection template in an English-medium school and that in an Irish-medium school. If nothing else, logic would determine that, where there are two different educational systems, that template cannot be fit for purpose. You mentioned the Scottish experience. If I were the inspectorate, I would like to engage with the sector there and ask how it dealt with those challenges and what its processes were.

Ms Andrews: Currently, the only forum for this sort of discussion for practitioners is at the point of inspection. That is not the best place at which to engage with inspectors, because the inspection dynamic does not allow it. It is a very stressful situation. For teachers, it is very difficult to have to defend, for example, the balance of teacher-led activities, which are different in an English-medium context to those in an Irish-medium context. You will see that at the lower end of the school as well, where the lower, or younger, end of the school is all about honing children's skills and about language enrichment. Ours is about language acquisition, so there are a lot more teacher-led activities.

A teacher may be questioned about that in an inspection dynamic, and the inspector may disagree and say, "I think that you should be using more open-ended questioning here", but that may not fit in with the methodology that is most effective at that stage. It is very difficult for a teacher to defend a methodology in that context, and teachers should not have to. Teachers are regularly finding themselves in a situation vis-à-vis an inspector who has a particular take on how things should be done. The experience in the sector is that that is not necessarily the most effective way of doing it, or perhaps a debate about it is needed.

Practitioners need a forum. There needs to be a forum whereby practitioners can express the concerns that have been collated over quite a number of years. There is a commonality in the experiences, as well as the negative experiences, in Irish-medium education that many Irish-medium practitioners have. I think that there must be some way of bringing that experience and that concern so that it allows a discussion to develop. However, that should not happen in an inspection dynamic, because it is totally the wrong dynamic for such a discussion.

Mr Rogers: Just to follow up on that, is there any opportunity at the pre-meeting between the inspectorate, your governors and you to discuss the interpretation of the template for inspection? Obviously, it needs a slightly different interpretation.

Ms Andrews: To some degree, the problem is that people are not usually aware of what the inspection template is. In submissions that have come forward, people want to know what is happening and how inspectors inspect. That is coming forward through this inquiry. Most schools actually do not know. We accessed information for a particular reason, and it was quite astonishing for us at one level to see what the documentation did and did not entail. Most schools do not know that; most schools are not aware of the underpinnings of an inspection. So, they are not really in a position to say, "Look, I do not think that you should", or "Why is this particular aspect of Irish-medium education not being factored in to how you assess our school?", because they do not know.

The Deputy Chairperson: Maybe they do not want you to know.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agaibh. Maidin mhaith. To go back to that, and also on the back of Jo-Anne's comments, from your reports and from listening to you today, it is quite clear that the inspectorate has simply failed to grasp the strategic value of immersion as a theory in itself and even aside from Irish-medium education. Even the dynamics that are at play here with Irish-medium education and immersion in our own system and the fact that there was not an Irish-medium section in the inspectors' report speaks absolute volumes. The fact that there was the use of the immersion report out in the classrooms with no real focus on the importance of immersion of Irish-medium education speaks volumes. I think that this is a real opportunity to make sure that, whatever review goes forward, we address some of the problems. Jo-Anne's point about cost is completely irrelevant; the cost of not doing it is huge. So, it is an opportunity that we have to look at.

The Minister gave a statement yesterday about the greater cooperation that goes on nowadays North and South between the two inspectorates. They are doing collaborative work on a whole range of issues, such as numeracy and literacy, and two reports are coming about. On the back of that, to what extent is that work looking at immersion and Irish-medium education? Are you aware of the inspectors working together? Are we reaching a point, if I can put it bluntly, where there should be a team of inspectors North and South across the island who are so well versed in immersion and Irish-medium education that they can go into a school anywhere on the island and whose skills base we can use here in the North to go right round the island?

Dr Ó Duibh: I think that collaboration from any source is always good. I very much go with the principle that it is good to talk and to learn from experiences, no matter where they come from. The benefits of immersion education and sharing that experience on a North/South basis because you have a common language are certainly advantageous to the process. I think that if you look at it from an east-west point of view, you see that it is equally important to learn from that immersion experience. To narrow it down, we can see similarities with the Irish-medium sector and the Welsh-medium sector. Also, if you have Gàidhlig-medium and Irish-medium, you see that the languages are quite like each other. However, I will not bore the Committee with my opinions on how close the languages are. However, where that experience and how to develop it is concerned, I imagine that it would be good for the Gàidhlig-medium schools to learn from us, but it appears that we are actually learning from them. That, in itself, is worrying.

On the question of whether you should have North/South collaboration and whether the inspectors should be a part of that, it should not take something like a committee or a recommendation to encourage that. To me, that should be a part of good practice and good sense; it should be the norm. Certainly, it would be helpful if the Committee could bring forward recommendations that would encourage that level of engagement, which should be engagement at very senior level. If you have local and regional inspectorates, they should also work more closely with each other, and that would certainly be to the benefit of Irish-medium education.

Ms Róisín Brady (Gaelscoil na bhFáil): Fundamentally, any process, whether it is English-medium or Irish-medium, needs to be clear, open to scrutiny and reviewed regularly. We cannot have a body that just acts independently. Áine already touched on the fact that, if you have clear processes, you are also providing support to the school. It is not about just inspection; it is about how you follow on from an inspection, how you support a school and where you go from there. So, fundamentally, that is what is needed.

The Deputy Chairperson: The inquiry will hopefully bring that out as one of the key recommendations.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Mhichíl, for your presentation. Maidin mhaith to you. You talked about what should happen in future. I know that we are talking about the ETI inspection, but other bodies could assist. In paragraph 2.3 of your presentation you talk about the teaching appointments committee of the boards and how it could assist or do more. You declare that it would be important that the ETI accesses:

"the ability of the Principal and management to meet the needs".

Where do you see the need for that? Obviously, there is a greater need for that to happen. Where do you see the boards in all that? How would they assist you?

In paragraph 2.4 you state that it should be mandatory that the coordinator is on the senior management team so that the Irish-medium unit is:

"considered systematically throughout school practice and procedure."

Where do you see the role of the boards in that?

Dr Ó Duibh: It is rather easy to say that we should have a joined-up approach in all that, but I appreciate the challenges of such an approach. Áine mentioned that that goes wider than just the inspectorate. Certainly, we need to facilitate a sectoral discussion about where the needs are. That does not mean that people have to agree with us, but there should not be a reluctance to listen to the sector. We have the likes of Áine as a principal of a long-established Irish-medium school, and we have principals with a wealth of knowledge. Indeed, Irish-medium principals are working in the inspectorate. We should use that expertise and harness it for the benefit of everyone, including children.

The education and library boards, CCMS, CnaG and the Department all have different but specific roles. It occurs to me that, in the appointment of staff to the education and library boards, it is, to a certain extent, like somebody appointing me as CEO of Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta without being able to judge my ability to speak Irish. I imagine that the appointments committee would find that rather amusing. Likewise, if we were to assess Áine applying for a job in her school on her ability to speak Irish, one would question that. We also need the inspectorate to be involved as a key stakeholder in that development process and to bring forward recommendations. That also means that the inspectorate has to go down a certain journey to be in the position to be able to deliver that type of guidance and expertise.

This is not going to be resolved overnight, but we need to start somewhere and to plan. I suggest that we have an engagement about where people's specific roles are in all this, and I feel that the Department of Education can lead that. I also think that it can easily be facilitated through the review of Irish-medium education and the role of the monitoring group, which has not sat in a number of years. It can look at those specific needs, have an engagement with the appropriate people around the table and deliver. We have brought forward a recommendation to the Department of Education, and we have various work streams to implement the recommendation on Irish-medium education. One of those is the crucial role in assessment. If we look at the Department and its vision to encourage or assist children in reaching their full potential at every stage of their development, we can see that we all have to be a part of that. So, to deliver that, we need the appropriate expertise in all parties.

It is about planning, identifying the needs, addressing and reviewing them and identifying further needs. There will constantly be needs in the Irish-medium sector, which you would expect in every sector. It is about a positive engagement. It is not about saying, "There is the fault with that body". It is about identifying the need and coming up with solutions that we can all buy in to and work together on. There has been a lack of that engagement until now.

I do not know whether that answers your question.

Ms Boyle: That is fine. The question was particularly about the teaching appointments committee and addressing the gap in its regulations that you alluded to. That covered it, so thank you, Micheál.

Ms Andrews: Bilingualism is an immersion education. The systems are different. We are on the edge of Europe, and we are not really familiar with the concept or ideas of bilingualism or the need to speak another language. So, the whole concept of bilingualism in this part of the world is a wee bit difficult for us. There are additional problems on top of that. We are slightly outside the box, and, when you have an education system such as ours, people who are outside the box can sometimes stay outside it or find it very hard to find space for themselves.

The issue about the ETI is not the only issue that the Irish-medium sector has. There is not, in general terms, a factoring in of the needs of Irish-medium education through a whole range of initiatives. I have been involved in the revised curriculum, for example, but that had to be revised again for the Irish-medium sector. So, we had to make a case for the revised curriculum to be revised. When the InCAS method of assessing children came in, again, we had to make a case for Irish-medium issues to be taken into account.

There is a whole rake of other issues, such as extended schools, for example. That is another area where the specific needs of Irish-medium education were not taken into account. Again, a case has been made in the extended-schools initiative for the very specific needs of Irish-medium education.

So, we have those tremendous, valuable initiatives, but Irish-medium education is not factored in from the word go, which is not in line with the recommendations that the review of education made. That means that we frequently find ourselves at a certain point, having to find a way to either renegotiate or reformulate policies and to find room for the Irish-medium sector. That causes delay in, for example, the revised curriculum, because a case had to be made that Irish needs to be taken into account. The training for the Irish-medium sector was delayed for all of that sector.

So, it is not just about the ETI; it is about a broad range of things. I think that we have to have joined-up thinking, as Micheál said, across all the agencies that have a support role or that interface with Irish-medium education. We will never get 100% consensus, but the problem is that the debate is not going on. Sometimes it is going on in small patches, but it is not going on in a more systemic way that will address our needs.

Dr Ó Duibh: To add to that, I think that Áine is right. It is about all bodies and agencies in the world of education understanding that there are two different systems of education here. You may have anybody working in any agency who is monolingual. I find it very hard to believe that everybody out there has some sort of grudge against the Irish language. I think that it is something more simplistic, such as a lack of knowledge and understanding. If people have that understanding, and if that is facilitated through all bodies, issues such as this should not really arise.

Irish-medium education is not only a sector: it is a part of a different educational system. People may think that it is as simplistic as saying, "OK, right, we have that in English, so let us translate it into Irish and that will meet the Irish-medium sector's needs". It is not like that. Immersion education is different from mainstream education. When you have an understanding of how those educational systems work, you see that everything that we do — at departmental level, board level and with the inspectorate — is done with an understanding of mainstream education and how it works. Everything is facilitated and made for it. If you looked at the equivalent or likewise understanding of Irish-medium education, you would see quite easily that what meets the needs of mainstream education does not meet the needs of immersion education. When you look at all that through a bilingual eye, you can identify the difficulties. To me, it goes back to need: you identify the need of the organisation and then deliver likewise. You need the expertise in those bodies and agencies to provide that advice.

The Deputy Chairperson: I think that we very much see it as a different world —

Ms Boyle: I am hearing you loud and clear. It is a battle a day.

The Deputy Chairperson: It is. If I had learned French through immersion education, I would probably have remembered some and would be able to use it today. Instead, I have no French, despite doing it for eight years or whatever it was at school.

Ms Boyle: It is never too late to learn, Chair.

The Deputy Chairperson: The brain has to work.

Dr Ó Duibh: I think that that proves our argument that immersion education as the system by which to rear bilingual children is better than the current system at post-primary level.

Ms Andrews: There is an additional problem for the Irish-medium sector in one respect. At a certain point, people will recognise the value of bilingualism. Nobody will dispute its value. Usually, if it is bilingualism in the context of a majority language, such as French, German or Spanish, people have absolutely no problem with it. However, the idea that people would choose bilingualism and espouse a fragile minority language is part of what contributes to the issues and challenges that we have with some of the agencies that support us and that we interact with.

The Deputy Chairperson: I very much take your points. Today, in a way, you have highlighted so many of the other aspects that other people did, because it is that much more specific to the Irish language. So, it has been very helpful.

I think that we have got work to do. The meeting has been very useful for us. Thank you very much indeed.

Ms Andrews: Thank you, Chair. Go raibh maith agat.