



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Education and Training
Inspectorate and School Improvement Process:
ParentsOutloud and Sir Robert Salisbury

8 January 2014

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)
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Robin Newton
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

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| Dr Liz Fawcett | ParentsOutloud |
| Ms Roisín Gilheany | ParentsOutloud |
| Sir Robert Salisbury | |

The Chairperson: I welcome to the Committee Dr Liz Fawcett, the Northern Ireland representative of ParentsOutloud; Roisín Gilheany from ParentsOutloud; and Sir Robert Salisbury, who is a consultant to ParentsOutloud and someone with whom we have worked previously. The subject will, no doubt, continue to be a matter of debate and discussion in 2014 following on from a number of reports. It is lovely to see you all. Thank you for taking the time to come and see us, and, at the outset, I wish you a very happy new year. We look forward to a useful and worthwhile exchange this morning.

Dr Liz Fawcett (ParentsOutloud): Thank you very much, Chairman and members of the Committee, and a happy new year to you all. We should first point out that Sir Robert is here to talk on his own behalf and not as a consultant to us. However, he shares a number of our concerns.

We thank you for the opportunity to give this oral submission on what we consider to be a very important issue. I will present a summary of some of the key points from the written submission that we made to the inquiry on behalf of ParentsOutloud, and Sir Robert will then make some comments of his own. Roisín will interject later on, but for the sake of time — we know that you do not want to spend a lot of time on the presentation, Chairman — I will talk on the first bit.

We greatly welcome the Committee's inquiry. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) has always maintained a very low public profile compared with its extremely well-known counterpart Ofsted in England. Part of the reason that Ofsted is so well known is because not all teachers like what it does, and it has had some criticism. However, it has also made a great effort to be very proactive in communicating, on a positive front as much as anything, and that has engendered a level of public

debate about school inspections in England that we really have not seen over here. Therefore, we are hoping that the Committee's inquiry will help provoke a constructive public debate about school inspections here.

In our view, school inspections are absolutely vital, because every child gets only one crack at a school education. Children, however, have a very limited voice. They have a limited ability to know whether the teaching that they are receiving is good or bad. Parents hear only at second hand from their children about what goes on in school. Moreover, if they do have cause for concern, it can be a very daunting process to go to the principal or the board of governors. Schools have a great deal of autonomy. Therefore, it is absolutely vital that schools get regular, robust and consistent inspections that treat all schools in a fair way. It is also important for parents to be reassured about the quality of their children's education.

Parents also have a right to good, up-to-date information about the quality of provision in each school. How else are parents supposed to make an informed decision on which is the best school for their child? It is a great disappointment that the current official guidance for parents choosing a post-primary school does not list inspection reports as one of the sources of information to which parents should refer. We ask why that is. Finally, it seems very unfair to good schools that parents are unable to consult an up-to-date report on a school and may instead have to rely on an out-of-date one that does not do justice to the school. Moreover, where there is a vacuum of good, recent information, it is much more likely that parents will rely instead on gossip, which is hardly fair to any school.

We raise a number of issues in our written submission, and we are not going to have time in the next 10 to 15 minutes to go through them all. However, we hope that at least some Committee members have managed to look at our submission and will ask us questions on some of the other aspects. We feel that they are all very important, but we are going to pick out three to talk about. One is the content and breadth of inspection reports. The second is the frequency of those reports. The third is the resources available to the inspectorate.

We will look first at the reports' content and breadth. We are impressed with the clarity, consistency and quality of many of the comments in the inspection reports that we looked at. In that respect, the reports compare favourably to Ofsted. Our concern really lies with the limited subject focus of the reports, particularly at primary level, and the limited comments on a number of other important areas. We are concerned that ETI does not appear to carry out full standard inspections of primary schools. Instead, it seems to focus on specific areas of schools' provision in both primary inspection and focused inspection reports. We believe that that is entirely inadequate. We carried out two analyses of 20 recent primary school inspection reports. We are told now by ETI that this is all changing, but there were five categories of primary school inspection report last year, which is a rather bewildering array. The closest thing to a full inspection report seems to be in two categories: primary inspection and focused inspection. Those are the ones that we looked at. All 20 reports focused on the provision of literacy and numeracy, but eight focused mostly on achievement and did not really look properly at teaching quality in those specific subject areas. Only 14 reports commented on information and communication technology (ICT). Just one report — one out of 20 — looked at the provision of science and technology, which we feel is a vital subject area that all primary inspection reports and post-primary reports should look at and comment on. Only four reports commented on physical education. A number said that there were opportunities for physical activity during break times, but we would expect that anyway. We are especially concerned about the importance of physical activity, given the current high level of child obesity. It is quite inadequate for ETI's comments to be limited to things such as, "The kids can run around at playtime". If the inspectorate is there, it could quite easily look at the provision and comment on it.

We have been unable to carry out any proper analysis of post-primary school reports because we are volunteers and have not, I am afraid, had the time. However, we are concerned at the apparent lack of sufficiently rigorous attention accorded to the quality of teaching across the full range of subjects in those recent post-primary school reports that we have examined. We welcome the fact that recent reports generally, although not always, contain detailed assessment of the quality of teaching in two or three subject areas, normally including English and maths. We would like to see that assessment extended to include a wider range of key subject areas. In addition, there appears to be little or no specific comment on the quality of teaching at sixth-form level. We think that every post-primary report should look at sixth-form teaching and comment on it.

We have comments in our written submission about parental communication and student involvement. Those are important aspects that we feel should be properly looked at by all inspection reports. We have comments in our written submission about parental input into inspection reports and the fact that

there is little, if any, summary of parent and student views. Again, we can come back to that, Chairman, if you wish.

We should say that, on 6 December, we requested information from ETI on many of the points that we raise in our submission. We received information from ETI at 5.45 pm yesterday. ETI states that it looks at literacy and numeracy in all primary school inspections and at other areas. However, it is not really clear whether it looks at those other areas properly. It is certainly not commenting on them. I think that ETI has also given a response to the Committee pretty much to the same effect.

I move on now to the frequency of school inspection reports. Look at Ofsted: if a parent in England wants to find out how often inspection reports happen, Ofsted provides clear information in its parent information leaflet about their frequency. No such information is evident on the ETI website. However, on the basis of the available evidence, we believe that ETI's full inspections are far too infrequent. We looked at the frequency of inspection reports for 10 south and south-east Belfast schools and for 13 schools in the Omagh area. We excluded short, specialist and follow-up reports — we wanted those that most closely approximated to full inspection reports. We asked ETI whether our Belfast research had missed any reports. At 5.45 pm yesterday, ETI said that all its reports were on the website and available through the search facility, which is what we used. The most recent available inspection reports for two Omagh primary schools date back 15 years and 14 years respectively. One of the two schools recently amalgamated with another, and, as far as we are aware, that new school has not been inspected either. To get the closest approximation to anything approaching a full report, you have to go back 15 and 14 years respectively. There is no full inspection report available for a well-known Belfast grammar school on ETI's website. In the version of the written submission that you have, you can see that we said that there was one 12 years ago, but it looked only at pastoral care. When we carried out this analysis, we found that the most recent available inspection reports for a further four Belfast and Omagh area primary schools dated back nine years. A full inspection report from one primary school has just gone up on the website. That inspection was carried out in November of last year. Where previous inspection reports are available, there are gaps of up to 11 years between them. All of that is in our written submission.

Therefore, it now appears that the issue is not the inadequacy of ETI's search facility, which is what we had stated might be the case in our original written submission, because ETI is simply telling us to use that search facility. Therefore, it seems that it does indeed represent the long period between full inspections, and, in some media comments today, that appears to be the case. ETI does not seem to be saying that we have got it all wrong. Either way, the paucity of regular and comprehensive inspection information is, as far as we are concerned, quite unacceptable. We note that the Department has told the Committee that, until 2010, ETI "aimed" — that is perhaps a pretty important word — to inspect every school once every seven years. However, it seems that there is now no stipulated maximum period between inspections and that a risk-assessment approach is used. We do not consider that to be acceptable.

We also provide figures in our most recent written submission, in which we looked at how many full primary and post-primary inspections took place within the most recent 12-month period. Going on the reports published, the figures show that just 7.8% of primary schools received the nearest equivalent to a full inspection. At that rate, every primary school can expect to receive a focused or primary inspection just once every 13 years. The picture is only a little better in post-primary schools. Only 32 full inspection reports were published in 2013, which represents just 14.9% of all post-primary schools. So it seems that each post-primary school can expect to receive a full inspection just once every seven years. Those figures contrast sharply with the rate of Ofsted's inspections. In a recent 12-month period, 27.5% of maintained schools in England, which is more than a quarter, were inspected in a single year. Therefore, on average, each school in England can expect to be inspected once every four years. Ofsted does not have short inspections, and we do not include certain follow-up or monitoring visits. The figures are for its equivalent of full inspections. As far as we can see, Ofsted has a much simpler approach to how it goes about things.

We would like full inspections once every three years, and there are two reasons for that. First, teachers and principals can move on, and things can change in a school quite quickly, whether it is a good school or a bad school. Secondly, we live in a very fast-changing society, and it is very important that our young people are being prepared properly for the changing needs of society and employers. We believe that, in a society in which technology and so on are changing ever faster, it really is important that there are regular and frequent full inspections. We would like them to happen once every three years. We know that some teachers here feel that inspections are a real ordeal, but surely they would be less of an ordeal if they happened regularly and schools had all the paperwork and so on that they needed. Now, we come on to the level of resources. In one of the media articles

out today, a school principal suggested that the issue is probably down to resources, and she may well be right. The resources available to ETI to undertake its role properly are crucial, and we are aware that ETI has told the Committee that its budget is, rather unbelievably, being reduced by 20% between 2011 and 2015. We were appalled to learn that that is the case, when the evidence that we provide strongly suggests that more resources need to be invested in ETI. Moreover, this is in the context of an annual budget that is only £5 million, which is 0.3% of the whole education budget. Indeed, we understand that two or three large schools might typically have a joint annual budget of £5 million. Some Committee members will probably know about that better than us, but there are 1,200 schools in Northern Ireland, and two or three of them might have an annual budget of £5 million, yet the body inspecting them, and supposed to be monitoring and ensuring the quality of education in all of them, is getting a budget of only £5 million. To us, that seems quite wrong.

We would like to emphasise that, as far as we can judge, the quality of inspection reports and the overall system now in place has been improved in recent years. Although we have touched on the most important issues, which we raised in our written submission, there are other areas of concern in that submission, and we ask the Committee to consider those with care.

We also want to highlight the fact that a long gap in inspections does not mean, automatically, that a school's provision is going to be poor: it could be quite the contrary. We would like to highlight the response to an Assembly question for written answer which suggests that many schools that have been inspected in recent years were not judged by ETI to be particularly good, and we forwarded that information to the Committee; I am not entirely sure if the Committee has that yet. It is broken down in percentages by board and shows that, in 2011-12, the percentage of schools that were judged to be good or better ranged from 10% to 23% depending on which board area you are looking at. Let us just turn that around for a minute. It means that the percentage of schools judged as being less than good ranged from 77% to 90%.

In very stark contrast, the most recent Ofsted annual report published very recently shows that 78% of maintained primary schools and 71% of maintained secondary schools in England are now judged to be good or better. Surely, that is a truly stunning contrast. It may be that Ofsted's inspection regime is much kinder to schools in Northern Ireland, but we think that that seems unlikely. We suspect that Ofsted's more frequent inspection regime is a significant factor, and we believe that all the points that we raised are worthy of very thorough investigation by the Committee. We hope that the Committee will take the trouble to read our written submission and further investigate all the issues that we raised. I will now hand you over to Sir Robert.

Sir Robert Salisbury: Thanks, Liz. Good morning everyone. I have some very brief notes, and you will have heard me say many of these things before in Committee.

It seems to me to be fairly straightforward that if you want to raise standards in a school, you have to concentrate on what happens in the classroom, and you have to concentrate on improving the quality of teaching and school leadership. All the evidence shows that you need to raise the expectations of everybody in the school, and you need to have some inspection process, whether internal or external, to make sure that that is happening.

One additional point that I want to put on to what Liz's report has said is the need for the encouragement of greater self-evaluation in schools. It is very cost-effective, and it seems to me that good schools should know more about their organisations than any external organisation. They should have practical things in place, such as what constitutes a good lesson. Do they have regular mini-reviews? Do they have lesson observations? Do they have teacher appraisal? Do they talk about the quality of teaching in the place? It seems to me that, if schools have clear strategies for self-evaluation, external evaluations become more of an audit than a criticism. It seems to me that a lot of work is needed in Northern Ireland that would be very cost-effective.

In the case of schools where the audits are very comprehensive and accurate, I see a future where you could have light-touch inspections. You could go along and see that everything is in place. That could be done very quickly and economically. Ofsted found that schools are very good at assessing their positives and less good at assessing the negative side of things. So you would have to have almost a carrot and stick so that, if schools are not evaluating fairly and honestly, an external inspection ought to be triggered automatically. Therefore, my first point is the need to encourage the growth and development of self-evaluation in schools. Part of the process of running a school is knowing exactly what is happening inside it and having plans to put things right.

As Liz said, it is unacceptable that schools can go many years without inspections. In my view, we should shorten the timescale for informing schools that inspections are pending. It seems to me that it creates a lot of stress. Teachers and head teachers have said to me that they are working night and day and every weekend because an inspection is coming up. My question is this: what are they doing that they should be doing anyway? What is it they are doing when an inspection is threatened that you ought to have running in an ordinary school every single day? It was put incredibly succinctly by one of my three sons. Their post-primary school was being inspected, and my youngest son, who was then 11, asked, "What's all this inspection stuff about?" The older one, sage-like, said, "Don't worry about it, son. If there's a suit at the back with a clipboard, you're in for a good lesson." That says it all, does it not? If it does not represent what happens in a normal school, it is pretty pointless.

There was a lot in the literacy and numeracy review about the importance of informing parents and listening to the parental voice. I fully endorse all the things that Liz and the report said about that.

There is one further point, which, I think, has been overlooked. There is a lot of very good practice in schools in Northern Ireland. There are some exceptional teachers in Northern Ireland, and it seems to me that we have a wasted opportunity here in not using their good practice by disseminating it to other schools and other teachers. One of the key things that an inspection service should do, in my view, is identify where there is excellent practice and make sure that it is spread around to everybody else. Again, that is a wasted opportunity to do something very cost effective. We have good practice. We have exceptional practice in some schools, and it is not being disseminated widely enough, in my view.

There has been a marked improvement in London schools. One of the things that struck me when I looked at why that was the case is that there is no satisfactory category in England now. The categories are either good or outstanding. I am talking about post-primary schools. If a post-primary school falls below 40% attainment of five A to C grades, it automatically triggers an inspection of some sort. So, for every school that does not get 40% or above, an inspection is triggered to have a look at what is happening. There are three categories in that 40%. The first is schools that require improvement: the school may be working in the right direction and improving, but it still requires improvement. Secondly, there is a category to which we give notice to improve, if the school seems to be going nowhere. Lastly, there is the category for which there will be special measures, if the school is deemed to be in dire straits. In all three of those categories, schools are given very short timelines to bring some action into effect.

I looked at the figures for Northern Ireland just out of curiosity. If you applied those measures to post-primary schools here, you would see that 87 out of 215 schools would require some action of that sort, which is pretty staggering. I also thought, when we wrote the literacy and numeracy review, that there would be importance in creating a value-added measurement for schools. That is still ongoing. A subsidiary element of that is that inspection services look at specialisms, particularly in primary schools. It is my suspicion that there may be some smaller primary schools where there is no mathematical specialism, so it should also be part of an inspection report to see what the team's capacity is.

One last key point from me is that, if you inspect schools, it is vital that there is a follow-up to that. As you know, many moons ago, I took over the seventh-worst school in the UK to see whether it could be run in a different way. After two months of being the head of that school, I came up with 20 key things that we needed to do. We set off doing them. Almost two years in, I was clearing away some old papers. There was an inspection report from five years previously that I had never seen before. Its 20 recommendations were almost identical to the ones that I had come up with. I asked this question: what was the purpose of an inspection if nothing had happened since to ensure that its recommendations were carried out? A very powerful point is that you must have follow-up for all inspections and it must be time limited to make sure that some action happens.

I think that we also need to change the culture of inspections. The system is often seen as threatening for schools. We should turn it on its head and make it seem like a positive audit such as those that you have in the commercial world, which come along to endorse what you are doing or to suggest areas for development. I think that we have somehow got to change the notion that exists in the minds of teachers, governors and leaders of schools so that they see inspections as an external audit that is helpful to, rather than critical of, what they are doing.

Finally, we have to build a culture of self-evaluation, have more frequent and searching inspections that are triggered at short notice, have more rigour in the terms of the follow-up process, and, in short,

create a culture where every school operates every day as though it were being inspected tomorrow. Once you get to that, the inspection service externally will become less of an issue. Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. I suppose, as in all these matters, it is about where you start with the wide remit of many of the issues that are raised in the report. The fact that the Committee for Education has embarked on this particular inquiry is a reflection of our belief as a Committee that there are issues that need to be raised. Certainly, on the basis of the responses that we have received to date, it is very clear that there are issues about the inspection process, in both its approach and application, to which we need to pay attention and get some resolution.

Sir Bob, you made a comment towards the end of your remarks that is really, for me, one of the crucial issues. That issue is the purpose of inspections. That is why, as a Committee, I think that we were right to link inspection and school improvement. Is there a correlation between the process of inspection and the improvement of outcomes in schools? We have been gathering information about the purpose of inspections. It is interesting that ETI, which does not recognise the culture of fear in schools that are being inspected, has become very fearful of this inquiry. We have seen correspondence from the inspectorate to organisations that have responded to this inquiry, yours being one of those. Clearly, it is becoming nervous about being itself inspected. There is a correlation between those two things. If the inspectorate feels nervous about us inspecting it, then, clearly, schools must feel nervous about being inspected.

Sir Bob, do you believe that self-evaluation could lead to a place where inspection of what we currently do in Northern Ireland is no longer required? Finland is taken as the great example of how education should be delivered in other jurisdictions. It has no inspection regime at all, but depends heavily on self-evaluation. How do we square that circle to convince parents? Liz has been key about the role of parents. How do we convince parents that what they are being told is an adequate reflection of the value of that educational provision?

Sir Robert Salisbury: It is a gradual process that you have to move towards. As I said earlier, the best school leaders see evaluation of their own schools, the publication of those results and the interactions with parents about those results as being part and parcel of the job. It is quite dangerous to compare systems in Finland with ours, because there are other things that you miss out. Most teachers in Finland are given a sabbatical every two years for retraining, and their qualification levels are higher. It is not quite a straight comparison.

I believe that, long term, the way forward is to have the very best self-evaluation schemes that we can have in schools. As I said earlier, that has to be about practical things such as looking at what teachers are doing, appraising them and working with them about how we all collectively improve. You can then start to have more light-touch inspections. However, in the culture that we have at the moment there is still a need for an external inspection service, particularly to look at those schools that are clearly underperforming in some way or where there is dissatisfaction from parents. That needs an external body to look at what is happening.

In the very best of schools, where self-evaluation is absolutely part and parcel of the daily running of the school, an external inspection becomes almost an irrelevance and a helpful external audit and is not seen as threatening. The more data-rich schools become, and the more that school leaders know their schools, it is very challenging for an inspection team to go in and say that the school is not doing things right because the evidence is usually there to challenge what they are saying. When they came to the school where I worked, inspection teams said to me personally, "It is very challenging coming in here, because everything we say, you challenged and you show us the data." That is the thing we should aim for in the future of a healthy organisation. In essence, if they are doing their job properly, no one should know better about what is happening in a school than the governors, the head and the teachers.

The Chairperson: Do you think that, in order to have confidence in that process, it would be better to have an inspectorate that is independent of the Department to which it is responsible? There are concerns about the Ofsted model. To date in the inquiry we have picked up a concern from a variety of respondents that we would move too much towards an Ofsted model. One recurring issue is the independence of the inspectorate. The Department says that it is the arm of the Department, so it is there to carry out the Department's wishes. Is it more a case of the inspectorate evaluating a school on the basis of what the Department has set out as the norm rather than what is really the best for that school in the context and circumstances in which it finds itself? That is allied to the issue of added value, because added value is hardly taken into consideration in any of the inspections. That can

really distort the outcomes and the perception that people have of the report that is ultimately published on that school. Should the inspectorate be separate from the Department?

Dr Fawcett: From our point of view, it probably should, ideally. The one thing that would concern us — Sir Robert may take a different view — is that the situation at the moment seems to be so serious, with such massive lengths between full inspections, that more resources are needed. If you are trying to set up a separate body at the same time, there are always going to be teething problems and a run-in period with a new organisation. From our point of view, it is really urgent that schools that have not been fully inspected for many years get an inspection as soon as possible. In theory, yes, it would be desirable, but our fundamental concerns are about the gaps between inspections, what has been inspected when they are there and the resources. The fact that there is a 20% cut in budget is crucial, we think.

The Chairperson: To conclude, before I go to the vice Chair and then to members for questions, the issue of the frequency does not take into account the role of the district inspector. If there is one thing that we have picked up in this inquiry it is the value of the district inspector in the process and the relationship between the schools and the district inspectors, who have an idea of whether there are particular issues or problems in the schools under their remit. That is one issue in terms of how you deal with the frequency of inspections.

On the other issue about resources, the briefing paper provided by the Assembly's research service — we will make it available to you if you do not already have it — clearly indicates that we in Northern Ireland do not have the lowest level of resource per head available to our system. It is £17.80 per pupil in Northern Ireland. In Scotland it is £12.68, in England it is £19.26, in Wales it is £27 and in the Republic of Ireland it is £11. So, in relation to other jurisdictions that have larger school populations than we have in Northern Ireland, we are not at the bottom of the league in terms of the resource.

The issue, for me, is not so much the resource but how that resource is being used and the information that comes out of the inspection. Is it valid and useful, and does it give us a clear indication of whether that school is deemed to be a satisfactory school or good school? Sir Bob's comment about the post-primary schools is the most worrying. Take the London Challenge process, the way that it has changed and the outcomes resulting from that. If you were to use that model and apply it to Northern Ireland, you would have 80-odd schools that fall below that threshold. We have seen that in other indicators, where there are schools that have particular challenges.

Dr Fawcett: We appreciate that there is a role for district inspectors. The problem for us, as parents, is that it is not a transparent role. The only information that parents have is the published inspection reports. I will highlight some of the information that ETI sent us last night. As you will be aware, it has had short inspections as well as those that are not full inspections but what are called focused inspections. It said that the focused inspections — the ones that we were looking at — were typically carried out over five days in a primary school, and inspectors typically spent two days on a short inspection. The inspectorate said that that system was replaced in September 2013, and it now has one category of primary school inspection.

Chairman, you think as I do about that, which is that we are now not told how long inspectors spend in a school. There is now a single approach to primary school inspection, with the differentiation being two days for low-risk small schools and five days for higher-risk larger schools. In other words, some inspections labelled primary inspections will last for only two days; others will last for five days. We will not be told.

Our submission asks for much more transparency in the inspection reports: how they were done; how many lessons were looked at; how long the inspectors were there; and how many inspectors took part etc. That is what happens with the Ofsted reports. We are concerned about this. ETI said that, by the end of the current academic year, almost 90% of primary schools and 97% of post-primary schools will have been inspected within seven years. I do not know how it will do that, and in what sense will they have been inspected? Will there have been a full inspection?

Perhaps the Committee will feel that we are being unrealistic when we ask for inspections every three years. Until fairly recently, Ofsted carried out full inspections every three years. That is what we want because we believe that even an outstanding school can fall below par. All schools can change, and any improvement should also be recognised. Ofsted now inspects all schools rated below "good" once every two years, and that is a full inspection. It now fully inspects every "good" school once every five years. For outstanding schools, it seems to be more a matter of assessment. Even that

system would be better than what we have now. Seven years, if that is the inspectorate's aim, is, in our view, too long. That is what the inspectorate in Scotland had been doing, and it seems to have moved to doing even fewer. However, it may be quite convinced that all schools are self-evaluating really well in Scotland. We take on board what Sir Robert said, but there would be some differences. As parents, we feel that there has to be a transparent process, and, ideally, we would really like a proper, full inspection every three years.

The Chairperson: It is interesting that, since we launched the inquiry, we have had correspondence from the Department on changes already being implemented and brought forward. Call me a cynic, but I suspect that that may be as a result of this inquiry.

The availability of inspectors was raised. On the day when their union representatives came here, no inspectors were available because they were busy. However, when others came to make representations to the Committee the following week, an inspector found time to be in the Public Gallery to take notes. I think that we are now being inspected by the inspectorate, which is healthy and the reason why we embarked on the process. We value the comments made in your submission.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much. This has been very useful. Like the Chairman, I am very pleased that we are inspecting the inspection system, and you have given us a load of extremely good points. Sir Robert, you talked about self-evaluation, but teachers tell us that they have no time. One school that we went to had 39 different forms of consultation and review going on. From what you have seen, do we have good self-evaluation? From what I have seen, we need a complete change of culture so that schools have more time to do it properly.

Sir Robert Salisbury: It is good in some schools but non-existent in others. I have always thought that there are some very cost-effective, practical things that all schools should do that do not take time. As I said, there is the establishment of what constitutes a good lesson in a school: all teachers should agree what that is and what elements every lesson should have. Those elements should be fully understood by every teacher and every student. Where that has been done in schools, you can instantly see an improvement in the structure, preparation and delivery of lessons. It seems to me that that is a question not of time but of getting together and deciding what every good lesson should be and of talking about the whole business of teaching and learning.

There are many such practical strategies that I think can be brought in quickly and easily. It is a mindset. It is an easy get-out to say that we have no time to do that, but in my view, it is an essential part of what should happen if you are a teacher and a leader in a school.

Mr Kinahan: Time is very real to all of them, so it may be something that comes from the Department rather than from the inspectorate. Is that what we should be pushing for now?

Sir Robert Salisbury: I think that we should be pushing for it. I agree with Liz that a lot of schools now need inspection anyway, but long-term there is a solution to this if the best leaders and schools really demonstrate how effective self-evaluation can be. It can be, and is, very effective.

Mr Kinahan: Liz, if I could move on, I want to play devil's advocate slightly. I agree that more inspection can happen only if it is done in the right way and in the positive form that Sir Robert mentioned. However, have you come across any evidence that things are going wrong in the schools that are not being inspected? We discussed the district assessors, who are giving a fairly good link, but is much evidence coming forward to you that shows that schools need more inspection? That seems to be the right thing to do, but we do not have much money and need more resources. Have you seen any evidence of that?

Sir Robert Salisbury: There is quite a lot of evidence from Ofsted, particularly in the early years, that, when an inspection is looming, it is like a see-saw. Performance comes up, displays are better, and everything is better. When the inspection is over, and as teachers often say, "We got away with it", performance often then drops to lower than it was before the inspection. Do you know what I mean by that? I think that that is the real danger with having a long run into an inspection and almost a wedding-day attitude to the inspection week.

That is why I keep coming back to saying that, as part and parcel of the everyday culture of the school, you need to have the whole notion of assuming that it will be inspected tomorrow and of having the structures in schools, whether they are mini-reviews or teacher observations, that go on daily. That means that, long-term, the external inspection then starts to be irrelevant.

Dr Fawcett: I think, Danny, that you are asking whether Roisín and I have circumstantial evidence that schools are not always satisfactory when they have not been inspected for a long time. Is that correct? We have some circumstantial evidence that we cannot relate directly to whether a school has been inspected for a long time.

One issue that concerns us is that the revised curriculum came in in 2007, but we have circumstantial evidence that not all primary schools are implementing it fully. That really concerns the elements outside literacy and maths. I do not know whether you want to say anything on that, Roisín. We are not going to start naming schools, if you do not mind, Chairman.

Ms Roisín Gilheany (ParentsOutloud): Once we started to look at some sample schools and their reports, it was evident that there was no proper evaluation of what was being taught through the revised curriculum. That narrow focus that Liz mentioned seemed to be the only thing that was being assessed.

The other concern is in the tables. Some schools that were looked at had gaps of 14 years between inspections, and it was impossible to assess what was happening or for a parent to find out any information about the quality of the school. Quite a few schools had that lengthy gap between inspections. Maybe there were a couple of inspections in that time, but one was perhaps just a short inspection, so one page of an evaluation could not in any way give a clear picture of what was happening in that school.

Dr Fawcett: The information that we have highlighted to the Committee about the recent proportion of schools rated good or above in Northern Ireland and how very low that is compared with England says a lot. That information is also easily available for Ofsted. When Ofsted's annual report says that a large percentage of primary and post-primary schools in England is rated good or above, it does so on the basis of the latest inspection report, which is fairly recent in all cases. That is collated information included every year in the annual report, which you can find easily on the Ofsted website. We should have a comprehensive picture. You should be able to go onto the ETI website and see clearly what the gaps are between inspections and the comprehensive picture of how good the education is. However, you cannot do that because so many inspections are out of date. For example, I am trying to pick a post-primary school for my son. On the one hand, you have a school that had an inspection in 2013 and does at least rate the school in English, maths and science; however, there is nothing comparable for the other schools. In the case of another school that I might be looking at, there was an inspection in 2001 that looked at pastoral care; another inspection in 2005 also decided to look at pastoral care plus ICT. There was a follow-up inspection in 2008, which was five years ago. That is all there is for a well-known grammar school. Parents are entitled to that information. To ensure that there is good-quality education and to provide it for parents, we must have full regular inspections.

Mr Kinahan: It seems vital that we need more resources so that we can have much more inspection. You commented on what more we can tell parents. There seems to be a great gap, with nothing available for parents. Do you want to expand on that?

Dr Fawcett: When parents are choosing a post-primary school, the Department's guidance does not even suggest that they look at inspection reports. Perhaps that is because it knows that so many of them are hopelessly out of date. Many parents are not aware of how to access inspection reports. Again, that is circumstantial. We would like ETI to play a much more prominent role in public debate and be much more proactive. That is as much about disseminating good practice as anything else. We raised this issue in our submission. We would like to see more thematic reports and more publicity around them. Very few schools seem to be judged outstanding, as far as we can see. When a school is judged to be outstanding, we would like ETI to shout about it. We totally concur with Sir Bob that there should be more dissemination of good practice. If there were more publicity generally, one would hope that more parents would make use of inspection reports and would be much better informed as a result.

Mr Craig: I listened with interest to what you said about the frequency. I sit on a number of boards of governors, and I concur with you. For one school in particular, I think that it was almost 12 years between inspections. I do not know how anybody justifies that, to be quite honest.

I have a huge question mark over the quality and detail of the reports' conclusions. We need to be honest with ourselves about what parents will actually look at. Will they bother to read through the book that is produced? My guess is no. They will do what everybody else does: they will read the conclusions. There is a lack of detail in conclusions at the minute. Given those facts, do you still

stand over the view that all reports should be made available to parents at this point in time? There is a major issue in that regard. If it is infrequent or, say, 10 years out of date and if there is little or no detail in the conclusions, which is the part that most parents will actually read, is there any real value in having a look at that?

Dr Fawcett: For the sake of transparency, we certainly do not believe that any inspection report should be taken off the website. Roisín, you came across one example where there was nothing at all. There are certainly schools for which it is hard to find even the previous full report. Possibly, it is not on the website because it predates 1998 and is deemed a work of history at this stage. We really need ETI, as quickly as possible, to get round all the schools. We need a plan of action. We are really concerned that it appears that its intention is to do a number of short inspections, rather than full inspections, for all primary schools. Perhaps one thing that could be done, Jonathan, is for the inspection reports that are really old to be labelled as such. Perhaps some sort of warning should be put on the website by ETI that a report may well be out of date. That would only be fair to the school. Roisín, again without naming names, you know of a school that has improved hugely but has not been inspected for years.

Ms Gilheany: Yes, there are quite a few examples. One is that of a school that has not been inspected for nine years. When it was inspected, it did not get a very good rating. In a lot of cases, those reports do not have very clear bands or even any grades, so you have to read between the lines. That seems to be a problem with a lot of the older reports. That school looked like it was way beyond unsatisfactory, but I know, circumstantially, that the reputation of that school has much improved since then. It seems totally unfair that that school has a report that gives it a very poor rating. On the other hand, there are schools that, as we mentioned, have experienced a gap of 14 years since a full inspection. They were given a rating below good, and they got a short inspection eight years ago that resulted in the school being rated as satisfactory. If a school is rated as satisfactory, there should be more follow-ups. More action needs to be taken to improve that school. The length of time since the inspection has to be looked at. It is totally unacceptable. The information is just not out there.

Dr Fawcett: Is ETI's proposal for short inspections in some cases — it will decide which — and for fuller ones in others fair to the schools? Is it fair that the inspectors come in only for two days at certain schools? Maybe some schools would be much happier if that is all that happens but, at the end of the day, it is not as robust an investigation. I am sorry that we are labouring this point, but we are really pushing for full inspections for all schools, ideally every three or four years, or perhaps every five years if that is more feasible in the near future.

Sir Robert Salisbury: You raised an excellent point about communication of the outcome. It seems to me that a summary, written in straightforward language, ought to be at the front of all reports so that the key findings are shown and you can go on to read the detailed report if you want. That would be a good move.

Mr Craig: I accept what you are saying, and I think that warnings should be posted about the length of time since a report was done. If we had that and a more detailed summary of what is in a report, it would become a very useful and informative tool for parents. I worry that we do not have that.

You touched on another important issue: the interaction with the inspectorate when it comes to a school. How does it interact? Obviously, it interacts with the teachers and the senior management of the school in particular. I do not think that it interacts very well with the boards of governors. On an ongoing basis as a governor, I have met the inspectorate about three times, and that was only because a full inspection was going on in one of the schools whose board I am on. I am chair of the governors, so I was legally obliged to meet them. That is the only interaction that there has ever been with the inspectorate in my 11 years' experience of sitting on three boards of governors. That is fundamentally wrong. The inspectors are an incredibly useful tool with regard to understanding the finite detail of what is actually going on in a school. Is it your opinion that they should interact better with boards of governors, the people who are given the responsibility or burden to ensure that schools are operating efficiently?

Sir Robert Salisbury: It certainly would be my opinion. I did not get the chance to say earlier that an independent inspection service would be my way of going forward. You find that Ofsted often says things that the Department in London does not want to hear, and it says them very forcefully. I think that an interaction with the governors, such as saying, "Here are 10 key points that you ought to be

looking at" would be very useful. It is done as part of the Ofsted inspection process, and I think it should be done here too.

Dr Fawcett: Can we just add that we would also like to see better interaction with parents, with regard to what has happened with recent inspection reports? That is another point that we brought up in our submission. ETI has some sort of parental survey and it reports the proportion of parents who respond. In very recent reports that we looked at, that proportion has been very low, and ETI states in the reports that this is because it is trialling certain methods. Those methods are clearly not working. An average of 15% responded to the reports that we looked at, which is far too low. If the new methods are not working, ETI should go back to the old method. It must find some effective way of surveying parents' views.

In addition to that, we have highlighted that what Ofsted was doing as best practice, it sadly does not do any longer. It printed the 13 questions to parents that were always asked at every inspection, and then it printed the results for each question. We think that that is really important. To be honest, we think that the older-style Ofsted reports from a few years ago were of better quality than the ones that are currently produced, which have been slimmed down because Ofsted's budget has been cut quite considerably. We take the point that perhaps resources can be managed more efficiently. If it needs more resources to get all this in place, so be it. From our point of view, children have only one chance at school, so we ask you please to invest resources.

The Chairperson: On your point about resources, I have seen the website and there are 11 organisations, technically, that ETI inspects. It is not just education, and that is another issue that impacts and impinges on the delivery and the organisation. I think that that is very starkly presented when you see the 11: alternative education provision; Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure; institutes of further and higher education; initial teacher education; independent schools; post-primary schools; primary schools; pre-primary schools; special education; work-based learning; and youth. That is a huge task for any organisation, and it is an area which we need to clarify with ETI as to how it operates its inspectors.

Dr Fawcett: We asked ETI about the budget specifically for primary and post-primary inspections, and it did not give us a separate figure for that. Education for Scotland has also replied to that question and provided a figure. We must ask why this cannot be broken down.

The Chairperson: Liz, I meant to say that we are happy to supply to you the information that we have received and, equally, if there is information that you have —

Dr Fawcett: We will forward this to you, Chairman, most certainly.

Mr Lunn: Thank you very much for your presentation. You have answered most of my points. I indicated that I want to speak about an hour ago.

There are just two things. Let me follow on from what you were saying about the input from parents, Liz. You mentioned a figure of, I think, 15% for parents responding to the questionnaire. Is that so bad? Going by other fields of work, 15% might not be regarded as being too disappointing, particularly as that 15% are probably the parents who think that there are problems and the ones that you want to hear from. You could assume that a fair proportion of the 85% who did not bother to reply to the questionnaire are reasonably satisfied.

Dr Fawcett: One would hope that the way in which the inspectorate communicates with parents encourages those with positive views to respond as well. We looked at some reports before the trialling system was introduced, and the percentages seemed larger there. We would expect at least a third, and preferably over half, of parents to respond. If that is not happening, there is an issue with effectiveness.

We looked at the percentages of teachers and teaching support staff who responded to survey forms, and they were not always as high as one would have expected. We would have thought that, if the inspectorate is surveying teachers and teaching support staff in school, surely they should all be required to respond purely to ensure the quality of the entire process and to ensure that their views can be taken into account. Would it be acceptable if 15% of people voted in elections?

Mr Lunn: We are getting close to that.

Ms Gilheany: It is 15% of a sample of parents who are being questioned. We are not sure how that sample is picked.

Mr Lunn: The online questionnaire seems to be the way that Ofsted has gone. That would reach more parents.

Ms Gilheany: It would if all parents were made aware of it.

Dr Fawcett: The questionnaire is sent to each parent. Sorry, there is a letter for each parent. Oh no, there is a letter sent to each parent directing them to the online questionnaire: sorry, that is exactly what happens. It is not a sample, though. Every parent is told about the inspection and is directed to an online questionnaire. Are you agreeable that if only 15% of parents are responding —

Ms Gilheany: That is very low.

Mr Lunn: Let me get the procedure right: all parents get a letter to say that there is to be an inspection and there is an online questionnaire that they complete if they would like to respond in advance of the inspection. Is that correct?

Ms Gilheany: Yes, that is what we have just been made aware of.

Dr Fawcett: That is what we have just been told. That said, the ETI said in its very recent inspection reports that it was trialling various methods, although the Committee would have to take that up with the ETI.

The Chairperson: We will have to write to the Department to clarify the position on that.

Mr Lunn: I may slightly be playing devil's advocate, but, if I were the inspectorate, I would prefer to see the responses online for ease of analysis. You could say that, instead of sending the parents a letter directing them to an online questionnaire, you could just send them a questionnaire. However, you would get paper back, which we are trying to do away with in the modern world — witness what is before me. There are two ways of looking at it. As you said, perhaps they are just trialling that approach.

I do not want to go into the frequency of inspections, because no one would argue that the current regime is anywhere near satisfactory. However, the notice given for an inspection is an interesting area. I read in your submission, or in the Committee Clerk's summary, that the Republic operates a one-day notice. I remember the Public Accounts Committee looking at a different inspection regime, namely the RQIA inspection of nursing homes. That revealed some interesting stuff, which, put simply, meant that an unannounced inspection could not be followed by another unannounced inspection: the next inspection had to be announced. So, if you had an announced inspection that produced problems, the result was an unannounced inspection. If there were still problems, the next inspection had to be announced. That was daft, and I think they have done something about that.

Perhaps you could tell me what Ofsted does. Is there a compromise between the notice that schools get at the moment, a three-week notice, a one-day notice or perhaps no notice at all? If I was the principal of a school and was told that I was getting one day's notice of an inspection, it might not be conducive to a really efficient inspection. Effectively, I would not have had any time to prepare for it. I wonder about the one day's notice.

Dr Fawcett: We have suggested a compromise. Shorter school inspections are conducted in the Republic of Ireland with no notice, and Ofsted now gives schools just one day's notice of full inspections. We urge the Committee to look at how it is that such systems can work for schools in England and the Republic but not in Northern Ireland.

We have suggested that the ETI should provide schools with one day's notice for full inspections and no notice for shorter or follow-up inspections. However, to allow schools time to prepare the necessary paperwork for full inspections, we have suggested that there should be at least three months' notice. So, at the start of term, the ETI could tell a school that it will be inspected at some time during that term.

It really goes back to Sir Robert's point that, at the end of the day, all schools should have all the paperwork in place. If they operated all the time as if there might be an inspection and inspections were more frequent, inspections would not be so stressful in the first place.

I visited a primary school in Devon to look around it. I arrived at 10.00 am, and the school's secretary told me that they would only be able to give me 20 minutes to look around the building as inspectors from Ofsted were there. She told me that the Ofsted inspectors had turned up at 7.30 am. I said, "Oh my goodness. Was anybody here? Do you mean to say that you got no notice?". She told me that they had not been given any notice, as Ofsted does not give notice, but of course they were all there at 7.30 am anyway. They were all so calm and unruffled, and it was no problem. That school got an outstanding grade, Chairman. It was clear that the inspection was no hassle whatsoever.

Mr Lunn: Sorry, Chairman. This is my last question. We know about the mechanics of the one day's notice of inspection in the Republic. However, we do not really know how effective it is, and maybe we should look at that. The Committee does not know whether that produces a better system, better inspection reports, better outcomes and better improvements than other systems, including what we have at the moment.

Sir Robert Salisbury: It goes back to the Chairman's earlier point about the purpose of an inspection. There is a feeling that, in some schools, a short notification period is in order to catch you out in some way, so it is clearly threatening. However, if it is seen as a positive audit of what is actually happening day by day, it seems to make sense. If you do not have the relevant papers in place that you should have, there is a question for you. It seems to me that shorter inspection notification periods are much better, because they give more realistic views of what schools are actually doing.

The other point — it goes back to the point that I made at the beginning — is that a school that has excellent self-evaluation will be talking to parents anyway. They should be interviewing all the parents. We used to use a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis so that all parents could see what those were in the school, and it was a very ordinary and normal part of the procedures to invite groups of parents in to challenge what we were doing. Getting opinions from parents is part and parcel of what you should be doing anyway. I include in that opinions from students. How often do inspectors ask the students, who are the key people who should be asked, about the quality of lessons they receive? A good school that does self-audits should teach students what the composite parts of a good lesson are, so that they can have a proper opinion.

Dr Fawcett: To follow on from what Sir Robert said, another issue that we raised in our written submission is that very rarely is there any summary of parental and student views. In fuller inspections, inspectors talk to a sample of students, but we are not told what they think. Why should the students and, indeed, the parents be so silent in all of this? We think that it is important that a summary of views is provided.

Mr Lunn: Just to finish, Chairman, I completely agree. I do not see any point in doing consultations or interviews and not reporting the opinions expressed in whatever detail is appropriate. It just does not make any sense. Why would you do it? If there were problems, I absolutely think that the follow-up visits to a full inspection should be unannounced. There should be no notice whatsoever, and that goes back to the nursing homes thing.

Mr Hazzard: Thanks, guys, so far. To go back to that last point about students and parents: I agree with the caveat that we need to find something shrewd to avoid this becoming a rate-the-teacher exercise. I have no doubt that pupils would be nailing teachers left, right and centre for a wide variety of issues. Parents, no doubt, have their own bugbears as well, which would come out in all these surveys. So, we need to be creative and careful about how we do this. When we talk about Ofsted, one of the changes would be to drop the word "satisfactory"; schools are either "good or "not good". Perhaps, you could talk about that. Is that something that we should look at doing? What is a "satisfactory" school? Rather, is it either "good" or "not good"?

Dr Fawcett: I think that Sir Robert would probably agree with us that it is the case that all schools should be looking to continually improve and be on the road to doing so. Perhaps we should let Sir Robert speak on this. From our point of view, we certainly do not feel that it is good enough, as Roisín said, for a school that is judged "satisfactory" to be left alone for, perhaps, eight years. Is "satisfactory" satisfactory? I think that there should be a clear path to the next level up, so the inspection report should perhaps state, "OK, you have got 'satisfactory' this time, so here is what you

need to do to be 'good' or better". You would like to hope that the school would commit itself to ensuring that it is working towards that.

Sir Robert Salisbury: I have always thought that "satisfactory" is a pretty damning indictment of what you are doing, is it not? If 40% of youngsters are getting five grades A to C, then 60% are not. If you spin it round to say that, then you clearly need movement.

There should be a "good" or "outstanding" category, and all schools should be moving towards that. It seems to me that we should not be satisfied with the notion of being a "satisfactory" teacher. In schools where parents are consulted, informed and brought into the school and where students are asked their opinions of teachers, it is, by and large, positive, and they will definitely defend their school totally when an external inspection comes. I found that the difficulty was that you could not get parents to say negative things to Ofsted although some negative things needed to be said: they were just loyal. So, it is again back to the culture of the school and how you interact with parents.

I have forgotten in which review we said — I think that it was on literacy and numeracy — that there is an enormous area for expansion in Northern Ireland for working with parents in schools. In some schools it is done excellently and in others they are almost kept at a distance. There is a massive resource there of using parents in partnership with the school. That, too, must be part of an inspection.

Mr Hazzard: Liz, you talked about the need to ramp up publicity around inspection reports. To play devil's advocate again, I have a fear in and around competition and market forces within and between schools and communities. If that is the case, when the league tables come out, schools in challenging circumstances suffer under the weight of such publicity. Is that the danger of that publicity? Do we need to be careful in and around that?

Dr Fawcett: We think that there should be as much publicity about good schools and outstanding schools. One of our main concerns is that outstanding practice is currently going under the radar.

Sir Robert mentioned value added earlier, I think — or was it the Chairman? That subject came up, and we stress that in our written submission. At the moment, whatever your view of academic selection, there is absolutely no doubt that many parents feel that grammar schools are good schools and every other type of post-primary school is bad, full stop. That is incredibly simplistic and is why we would like to get more up-to-date, thorough inspection information out there. We think that that should be value-added. There is absolutely no doubt that there are schools that are perceived as poor that do excellent work, and that is not being recognised. It is impossible to avoid the bad publicity when a school is judged by the inspectorate to be not up to scratch, and there is probably very little that you can do about that given the media's news values. However, if a very proactive effort was made by the inspectorate — thematic reviews would be one very good way of doing that — to really emphasise the good practice and to engage parents in the importance of that and the importance of the value added, that would really help.

Sir Robert Salisbury: You raise a very good point, and it is crucial for some schools when they are just moving on that improvement. Once it is under way, the evidence suggests that, even if a report is not glowing, the impact is very short term as long as it shows movement in the right direction. People will read it but, a week later, they have forgotten — if they recognise that the school is working. What matters most is that your youngsters are coming home and saying that they had a great day, the lessons were interesting and that we are moving forward. That is the key thing in a school. However, you raise a key point for some schools that are in very tough circumstances. The school that I ran — it is a long time ago now — was seventh worst in the UK, and whatever you said in the early days, people just said, "It's that place".

Mr Hazzard: I have a final thought. I agree that there needs to be certain changes to the inspection process, and I do not think that we are in the position of the culture in Finland, but I am a great believer that it is about the culture, the teacher training and the continual professional development of teachers. For me, the development of good middle leadership in schools is very important here too. I am not sure who said it, but we can weigh a pig as much as we want but it will not get any fatter — it is that idea that we need to look at the culture behind it. So I would be wary about concentrating too much on giving the inspectorate sharper teeth and portray what we are doing here as that, when so much resources need to be put in to the other side of things. To me, a lot of international examples seem to display that. Am I right in thinking that, or can you point to examples of where that sharper

inspectorate that you seem to want — that is how it has come across at times today — is a better idea?

Sir Robert Salisbury: It is a matter of timing. You need a sharper inspection service initially to make sure that whatever service you offer is up to standard, but I agree with all that you say about developing middle managers and the internal cultures in schools. As that develops, you can reduce the external and turn it into an external audit, as I said earlier, rather than a threatening process. That is already happening in parts of England. I think that the Ofsted process in the early years was too harsh. It was almost silly in the first few years. I remember some coming into the school and looking at what was in all the drawers. I thought that that was just pathetic, but they have eased off from that sort of role. It is a matter of timing, and you need a sharper service initially. However, as the culture changes, you can start to ease off.

Mr Rogers: Thanks for your presentation. You are very welcome.

We have heard sound bites this morning about how many years it has been since inspections took place, but, for me, the reason that we are all here is to improve the quality of teaching and learning and to improve experiences for our children. There is a distinct difference between a school that had an inspection eight years ago and has a culture of continuous improvement and a school that had an inspection eight years ago and is failing. That is a very serious situation.

I go back to Chris's point about developing a culture of reflective practitioners. Our young teachers come out of their teaching practice and are expected to do an evaluation at the end of each lesson. A lot of work is needed to develop that culture within a Key Stage or a department. Confidence needs to be built so that another teacher can come into your room and you can perhaps mark each other's homework and all that sort of thing, going up to heads of departments and the principal. It is about asking this question: what did I, as a school leader, get wrong and what did I get right? It takes all that. Particularly where there has been a long gap since inspection in schools that are not achieving, there is no link to effect improvement. It has been mentioned to some extent that to effect improvement we need good-quality staff development at every stage.

You talked, Sir Bob, about it not being the same in Finland. You made a couple of interesting points about our teachers being qualified to masters level and about taking time out for professional development, and so on.

Our Chair made an interesting point about the impartiality of the inspectorate. It is, I think, quite difficult for the Department to be completely impartial in its role when, on the one hand, we all know that we need better staff development but, on the other hand, another section of the Department decides to cut £15 million from the staff development budget. That is a key area. Self-evaluation is a culture that you need to develop over two or three school development plans over eight or 10 years. That is a major concern.

You talked quite a bit about Ofsted. Do you have any experience of what is happening in Scotland? In Scotland, the self-evaluation process is perhaps better embedded, and more is put into staff development and that type of thing.

My other point is something that I am very passionate about and that scares me: science in primary schools. When I asked the Minister how well science is embedded, I was told that science comes under The World Around Us, is embedded and is inspected. However, you are telling me that there was one school. How? We know where science is in primary schools: it is buried. That is a major concern for us all.

Dr Fawcett: It is a major concern for us, as parents, especially as we have children who are quite keen on science, or who would be, if they got it at school.

Part of the problem in primary schools with the revised curriculum — we believe that the Association for Science Education (ASE) highlighted this to the Committee a number of months ago — is that now, instead of science, we have The World Around Us. It really seems to leave very vague exactly what schools are supposed to do on science. We are talking about circumstantial evidence, but we feel at the moment that there is certainly good circumstantial evidence that primary schools really are failing pupils when it comes to science — not all primary schools, but some. We believe that that should be looked at.

There are science aspects of The World Around Us, and we believe that the inspectors should ask the question of every school. We understand, having heard on the grapevine, that the inspectorate has just started carrying out some specific The World Around Us primary school inspections, presumably with a view to writing a thematic report. However, that is still going to be for only a few schools, if that is the case. We think that every school should be asked what it is doing in science. Most importantly, Chairman, we think that the inspectorate should look at whether children are learning by doing. We talk about the need to develop certain skills. It is not enough that pupils are given a few worksheets on certain science issues. It is absolutely important that experiments are undertaken and that the kids are getting out, doing nature trails, getting into the forest or whatever. We would like the inspectorate to look at whether The World Around Us and science especially is being dealt with properly and whether there is a proactive, learning-by-doing approach.

Sir Robert Salisbury: There is one thing that I wish to add. I mentioned right at the beginning in passing the importance of school leadership, and I hesitate to say that you should do a review of the training of school leaders in Northern Ireland, but I really do think that that is crucial. If you have a school leader who sees the importance of self-evaluation and of continuing with training teachers under them, that will be a key role. It has certainly been a key factor in Finland and in Scotland, and it should be here. We need a review of the training of school leaders in Northern Ireland pretty urgently. I am talking not about the initial training of teachers but the practical how-to stuff for leading a school in the year before you take up post.

One key thing would be around how you build self-evaluation in a school and how you keep training going for all the people in your team. The best measurement of the best leaders may be how the people under them in a team grow as professionals during their leadership. If you look at good schools, that is what is happening. If you look at poor schools, it is not happening. As I said, you perhaps need to do another review after this one.

Mr Sheehan: Liz and Sir Bob, you both said that in an ideal world the inspectorate would be independent of the Department. I can see some reasons why that might be a good suggestion. One of you mentioned Ofsted, which is inclined to say things that the relevant Department does not like: when the inspectorate is tied to the Department, maybe you do not get that. Can you elaborate on why it would be completely better than the current system here? Who would fund it? How would it be funded?

Sir Robert Salisbury: That is a good question.

Dr Fawcett: How would it be funded? It would be funded by the Department of Education as an independent agency. You could look at how Ofsted operates, but, as we said, our priorities are that we have the resources and the management of those resources in place and that all the things that we are asking for happen. That will be our priority.

Sir Bob certainly feels that independence is important, but as to why it is creating problems now, there are a number of reasons. The very fact that ETI changed its policy on the frequency of inspections in 2010 and has had another change recently that we are finding out about only through asking questions leads me to wonder why all of that was not publicised. Why were we not told about the fact that there is a 20% reduction in ETI's budget? Why was there no public debate before that happened? Why do we not know about the actual frequency of inspections? From our point of view, it appears that, if the inspectorate were independent, one would hope that it would tell us about those things. One has to wonder, if it is in the Department, did the chief inspector want to tell people? Perhaps she might have liked to. She told the Committee about the 20% cut in her written submission, but if there were an independent agency, and it was told that it was getting a 20% cut, it might feel moved to make a public statement about that straight away. It is only a suggestion, but to deal with the practicalities, we can only direct the Committee to look at Ofsted.

Sir Bob, I do not know whether you want to add anything to that.

Sir Robert Salisbury: You might need a halfway house in Northern Ireland to move from one to the other over time — a compromise.

The Chairperson: Yes. It could take a while to get that.

Mr Hazzard: It could be 80% independent.

The Chairperson: Yes, 80% or 90% that way. I am not going there.

Thank you, Liz, Robert and Roisín very much for your submission. Thanks for your contribution thus far in the debate. I have no doubt that you will continue to pay attention to and take an interest in the inquiry as it unfolds. Thank you for taking the time to see us today.

Dr Fawcett: Thank you very much. I really appreciate the opportunity.