



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Education and Training
Inspectorate and School Improvement
Process: Professor John Gardner

5 March 2014

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Chris Hazzard
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Robin Newton
Mr Seán Rogers

Witnesses:

Professor John Gardner University of Stirling

The Deputy Chairperson: You are very welcome to our meeting. We look forward to hearing what you have to say. We are also very grateful for your submission. You have 10 minutes in which to brief the Committee.

Professor John Gardner (University of Stirling): Thank you very much for inviting me. It has been a while since I did any direct research on school inspections, but I keep my hand in as far as reading and the general aspects of the field are concerned. I hope that I can contribute something to the deliberations of the Committee, but I leave that to you to decide.

If I may, I will structure my presentation on the terms of reference of the inquiry. I will do that during the 10 minutes and will refer to the terms of reference directly.

The first point of the terms of reference is about the effectiveness of the Education and Training Inspectorate's (ETI) approach to creating or contributing to improvement, and what value is added to schools that are possibly at the lower end of their student attainment profiles. The second point is about identifying key issues that impact on schools like that and any gaps in the kind of provision for them, either through an ETI review process perspective or from the perspective of the Department and the education and library boards (ELB). The third point relates to the models of good practice elsewhere, and the fourth is about the priorities and actions to improve the ETI and its approach.

I want to start off by saying that, from my perspective, which is more academic and related to the research end and the knowledge of what happens — if you like, the evidence — it is not possible to draw any direct relationship between the inspection process and any improvement in schools. That is a step too far. That is because the improvement and, indeed, the decline of schools are subject to so many influences that picking out one is not appropriate or sensible.

It is clear from what we know and from common sense that, generally speaking, if somebody talks to us about our performance in something, it has the effect of making us reflect on what we are doing. It is then up to us whether we improve or even accept the advice. As far as schools are concerned, I think it is pretty clear that, without this kind of independent, objective and external input, they would have to rely, more or less, on their own devices or on the devices of other provisions that might come from, for example, the education and library boards or some other arm of the Department. That is the first thing.

The other thing is that this particular term of reference relates to low attainment in schools or lower-attaining schools. I want to point out that attainment is not the only objective that should be considered for a school. There is a wider range of objectives. When an inspection team goes into high-performing schools, I would suggest that they will always find room for improvement in other dimensions of what those schools provide. Sometimes the very best attaining schools are very limited in other areas of preparing young people for life after school.

On the second issue of schools of lower attainment and the kinds of issues that impact on them, I would suggest that the literature and the experience — perhaps even for us here, and it is certainly my experience and it is more of a public experience and not one that is just in the research literature — show that leadership is a key factor in schools. A school could be attaining at low levels for its pupils or its pupils could be attaining low levels, and sometimes you find that the school up the road with broadly the same kind of catchment is doing much better. That kind of thing makes you question the reasons for one being better than the other. It sometimes comes down to the organisational aspects of the school, the quality of teaching and, very often, the quality of leadership.

Resources is the most bandied of the issues that impact on schools. Very often, the cry that comes directly from principals is that they do not have the resources to deal with the problems that they have. It is very easy to say that, and it may well be true in many cases; we are always constrained by the levels of resources that we have for anything that we do. However, I would suggest that that is less of an issue than being more positive and approaching the problems and challenges by making the best of the resources that are available. Well-endowed schools will often complain about the levels of resources that are available to schools that have lower attainment outputs. That creates a little bit of tension in the system as, obviously, they are managing with a lower unit of resource. Having said that, I do not think that there is any doubt that the unit of resource for schools in low attainment situations is clearly linked to a level of resource. I am not saying that it is not; I am just saying that we can use them better.

One of the resources that I think needs to be looked at — I am a bit of a broken record on this one — is the level of staffing in schools. There is not the space in schools that have those kind of challenges to allow staff to really get together to try to sort out problems internally. The pressure of 9.00 am to 3.30 pm is such that there is no time for reflection, and it is very difficult in the longer term of the year to develop strategic or even tactical responses to the challenges that they have.

The other area in which schools need to improve is community engagement. There are lots of examples of schools doing that really well, but I suggest that it needs to be done on a much more comprehensive basis. When you look at successful schools around the world, you will find that they are well integrated into their communities. Of course, if somebody tries to close a school here for whatever reason, usually because of the number of students it is taking in, you will suddenly get the kind of community reaction that is not there in the more developmental or challenging aspects of the school. It is there only in a crisis. I think that a lot more has to be done to develop that community pressure and community engagement in the day-to-day running of a school.

I think that there is a weakness in some aspects of the inspection process. Certainly, schools perceive that the ETI spends too much time looking at the data on attainment and, somehow or other, making judgements on that. I know from my dealings with the inspectorate that it is much more complex than that, but, very often, the perception is that the inspectorate does not take into account the type of catchment, the level of intake or the performance of pupils at the school. I think that the inspectorate needs to spend a great deal of time convincing schools that it takes a broad view of the attainment profiles. That said, there is the move, and it continues, to use value-added measures, which are seriously flawed and can be seen to be flawed all over the world, particularly in the United States. In the United States, the behaviours that are created in schools by the value-added motif mean that all kinds of students are dislocated from the main enterprise of the school, which changes to focusing on how we can maintain our resource base from the Government. In the United States, of course, money is withdrawn from schools if they are not performing at a particular level. So, there is a much greater pressure to create that value added and to evidence it. There is a bit of the tail wagging

the dog here, in the English context, of value added. If we introduce value added in a significant way, we will have a reaction in respect of school behaviours, which I do not believe would be to the benefit of Northern Ireland. It has to be considered, of course, but it is not a measure that I would place sanctions on a school for, unless it was handled very, very carefully.

The next one is the international perspective. I would like to argue that our inspection process is more or less in tune with what you would expect in the European context. In my paper, I quoted some aspects of it for the Netherlands, Sweden, Scotland, England, Ireland, Austria and the Czech Republic. We do the same thing, more or less. We do it on a cyclical basis, and we visit all schools. We look at whether value for money is being received. The Government are spending this kind of money; are we getting value for it? Primarily, though, we look at whether the schools are doing a good job. All those inspectorates do the same thing. They define what a good school is, and that is a collective thing; it not just the inspectorate saying that. It is society issue. The inspectorates also define the statutory requirements. That is a government issue. Then, the inspection team goes in to see whether, in fact, that is what the schools are doing. They do that through a cycle of visits, some of which are thematic and some of which are to the whole school. Some of them are based on risk. In other words, if a school has been identified as having problems, they will choose that school within the cycle to do those things.

The key issue is the distinction between that kind of audit role and a developmental role. In Northern Ireland, we have a reputation for emphasising the latter. Sometimes, that swings backwards and forwards with people complaining that the inspectorate is too audit-related, and sometimes you might even get complaints that it is not doing enough auditing and that it is too developmental. My view is that the best thing about an inspection is the kind of feedback it gives, the areas of weakness and strength that it identifies and the notion that expert input from outside helps a school to generate its own process.

With regard to improving the ETI approach, there is no alternative to the ETI concentrating unlimited resources on making sure that its inspectors are sensitive to schools. You can give the best advice in the world, but if you give it in a manner that schools find too authoritative, nasty or whatever it may be, that just kills that benefit. Most of the inspectors who I worked with do not do that, but there are horror stories all the time, so they have to keep working at that.

I do not believe that the whole notion of an announced inspection is of any worth whatsoever. If you were running a cafe at the bottom of the street and the health inspectors told you that they were going to inspect you in three weeks, what does that tell us? Inspections need to be unannounced. That will benefit schools by reducing the stress of preparing for one. It will also give an authentic picture of the experience of students in that school.

Work needs to be done on how feedback is given to parents and pupils. A lot can be done using the social media techniques that are around. That feedback has to be published in plain English and without the codes that have grown up within the institutions, particularly the inspectorate, where words are a little bit devious in what they are trying to convey instead of saying directly that there is a weakness. I mean that there should be more direct, plain English.

When a school is being inspected, the community should know who that inspection team is, what its competence is and what its experience is, and that should be built into the fabric of the process so that the public are confident that there are people going in there who know what they are doing and can give good advice.

Sorry, I probably went over 10 minutes.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you very much; you were very thorough. I have numerous questions, and I am sure that others have, too. You started with the rather depressing point that there is insufficient evidence to show improvement. You talked about the situation internationally and countries such as the Netherlands and others. Is there anything different that they are doing that shows improvement? There must be different ways of getting a general idea.

Professor J Gardner: That was a technical research point that I was making, in that you cannot get the causal relationship. You can get the associations and even the common-sense dimensions, which is that, if somebody goes in and questions a particular activity, that causes people to reflect and, hopefully, improve on it. However, I would rule out the causal relationship between this inspection and this level of improvement. It would be ruled out in any of those countries and it is certainly ruled out here because the teaching could improve, the leadership could change or improve or the parental

engagement could improve. There is a myriad of factors that would contribute to improvement, and the inspection could be associated with only the stimulation of that, not doing it. So, it is a technical point.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you. There is also the issue of resources, which is always raised with us. On the levels of staffing, you talked about the need for space and more time. The one thing we see all the way through all schools is the constant pressure. Part of it is the resources of money. They are very limited regarding whether they can employ new teachers, classroom assistants and others. I get the impression when we go into schools that they are all being squeezed so tightly that resources become the absolute key issue, and it is about trying to get more into them. I am getting mixed messages from you. One is that resources are not key, just pure money, but, at the same time, they do give the flexibility that allows a school —

Professor J Gardner: I have to say that Northern Ireland is particular in some of its problems, in the sense that we are doubling up in the school system in many ways. We have two different school systems serving the same population.

I have been a resource manager in my role for a long time. It is never as simple as needing more or better resources. It is about how you use them.

A particular flaw in schooling in the UK is that we do not really have the models that have grown up elsewhere. I am thinking of China or the United States, where the management of a school — its resources, administration and so on — is by one particular type of person and the academic activities are handled by someone from the teaching side of things. There are various names for them, but I have stood in schools in Cuba, where someone from the Communist Party was running the school and the head of the school on the academic side was a teacher, who never saw anything to do with resources. I am not suggesting that that is a good way to do it or a good model, but, around the world, there is a distinction between how the resources are used and brought into a school versus the academic endeavour. If head teachers in Northern Ireland were concentrating solely on the academic improvement of pupils, that would make a considerable difference to the way that some schools are able to perform. There is no magic bullet. I do not think that we could introduce school managers tomorrow. However, I have seen the effect on the university sector, where an academic is the department or school head. Rarely have they any competence whatsoever in how to manage resources or budgets. They can learn to do that, but it diverts them from their more obvious activity.

The Deputy Chairperson: Wherever we go, the principals and many others seem to be working all the hours of the day, past 3.30 pm, just to manage the scant resources they have so that they can give leadership.

Professor J Gardner: Leadership gets squeezed into the weekends somewhere.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you for your briefing. You raised the question of whether the process of inspection causes improvement in schools. We certainly know on this Committee that that is a wide topic.

The Deputy Chair touched on my first question, and you went into it in a bit of detail. I was going to ask whether you were aware of the work that has been done in the UK and abroad and of how inspections can directly cause improvements. However, you covered that fairly well.

You said later in your briefing that it is reasonable to argue that inspections can promote reflection and change in teaching approaches and the organisation and management of the school. How, then, in your view, should change be effected following an inspection? What approach should the inspectorate take?

Professor J Gardner: Inspectors should follow up on any advice that they give a school through the follow-on inspections that would be normal in most countries. They are risk-based. There is a scale of issues that they have given advice on, some of which will require a fairly immediate return to the school and others will require something that is given more time. The improvement of schools is squarely a school issue. It is the teachers and managers of schools who can do the improving. Nobody else can do the improving. What is needed is some kind of support structure to do that. In bygone days, the education and library boards would have done that in a significant way. I am not entirely clear what resources are open to education and library boards at the moment, but, in bygone days, they would have sent in a team to help with a particular aspect of the curriculum; for example,

boys' reading or health and safety. They would have had experts who spanned the community of schools that they oversaw, but I do not think that it is for the inspectorate to do that. The inspectorate has more of a role in being that independent expert voice in advising what needs to be done or mandating it if it is an issue of legislative compliance. How it does it is all about leadership. You take the report, you sit down with your team in a school and you say, "We are the only ones who can fix this. We have got to get on with it".

Mrs Dobson: Towards the end of your briefing, you brought up the "What do they know anyway?" attitude of some of the teaching profession towards inspection reports. I was interested when you spoke about the community knowing who the inspectors are. That might alleviate that fear and dread of the inspectorate. What steps do you feel need to be taken to ensure that teachers and parents can understand the recommendations of inspectors? It would take away that fear if they fully understood the recommendations and knew how to take them forward. What do you think can be done from that aspect?

Professor J Gardner: It depends on the recommendation. If it is something complex such as poor engagement between different subject areas in a secondary school, that can be quite complex for a parent to understand because it is almost structural or organisational. However, if the laboratories in a secondary school are not up to scratch in respect of resources, upkeep or modernisation, that is something that a parent can understand easily. So, there is a range of things. The inspections rarely get down to that sort of detail. They tend to talk in the generality of where improvements can be made. I would argue that it is the plain English dimensions of that, such as, what does it mean when they say something like, "This school has a good familial approach to the treatment of students but is weak on curricular breadth."? Parents are just going to look at that and say, "What does familial mean?" and "What does curricular breadth mean?" It needs to be unpicked much more in plain English so that parents will know that they look after the kids really well, but they are not giving them a good education. I believe that it has to be much more in plain English.

Mrs Dobson: Finally, you suggest that the reputation of the inspections is key to how the public interpret reports, and you have gone into quite a lot of detail about that. How do we convey the expertise from inspectors to the public? What is the best way to do that? Is it school-led? The uncertainty is out there. If the public were better informed, and you said that the community know the inspectors, how do we get that detail out there?

Professor J Gardner: If I had my way, I would have unannounced inspections, so you could not tell the public beforehand. Afterwards, the report would detail the competence, and I do not mean in great detail but just sufficient to give people the confidence that their school was visited by experts, and they are experts. It is undeniable. The whole process of creating an inspectorate of 60 people, by virtue of that, is bringing in people with expertise and a great deal of experience.

The reporting of the inspection can be improved. It has to go through the schools; I do not think that the inspectors would have the resource, and it would not be wise for them to directly communicate to parents, so it has to go through the schools. It has to be through whatever medium the schools use to communicate with parents, and it should be well set out so that you know who has done the inspection, the competence they have and what they said about you. That is the sort of thing that I would recommend.

Mr Lunn: Thank you very much for your presentation. You come from here, so, if I say that you did not miss and hit the wall, you will know what I mean. It was very frank and rightly so. I am interested in your preference for unannounced inspections. Do you mean in all cases?

Professor J Gardner: No, not in all cases. You can do a whole-school inspection on a cycle. I was going to say that I would do it differently. It depends on what country you are in and where it is being done, but schools are becoming good at whole-school self-evaluation. In the sector that I am working in all the time, we would prepare a self-evaluation of an area of work in the university, and we would send it out to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). The QAA would come along with a team that would look to see if we were actually doing what we said that we were doing in the evaluation. That is an audit-type approach that is about saying, "OK, you say that you are doing this. We will just have a look to see if you are".

In the QAA context, it is very collegial and positive. It is about people from other universities and with other expertise in the sector doing that. Similarly, with schools, I believe that if you have schools providing a report of what they do, you could go along and see how well they are doing it. However, I

would keep a cycle of unannounced inspections that is relatively random and risk-based. You would have a random selection of schools to be visited, along with a risk list of those that have to be visited. There is then this third group, which is whole-school or thematic. If we want to know how sport is being done in schools, we will want to dip in, in a systematic way, to how it is going on.

Mr Lunn: Is it fair to say that, if a school had not performed particularly well on a pre-planned inspection, the next inspection should perhaps be unannounced?

Professor J Gardner: Yes. Definitely.

Mr Lunn: We had this in the Public Accounts Committee with nursing home inspections, where the cycle had to be announced then unannounced, and that could not be varied. So, any nursing home that had an unannounced inspection knew that the next one was going to be announced. I think that that has changed because it was not regarded as being a good system.

Professor J Gardner: Definitely not, yes. The unannounced visit is about getting an authentic picture of the ordinary, day-to-day experience of pupils. It has all the features of an inspection, such as talking to pupils, looking at their work, and talking to teachers, to the principal and, sometimes, to parents in the schoolyard at the end of the day; that kind of thing. However, it has to be unannounced, in my view, if you are going to get a proper picture of it.

I gave a relatively tongue-in-cheek version of one that came out of a London school, but there are always dimensions of that in Northern Ireland schools. I have been in many Northern Ireland schools, and, unlike the inspectors, because I was visiting students, I was not announced. So, it was relatively unannounced, if you know what I mean. The students and people with them would have known. I saw all sorts of things. If Danny decided to go to a local school and just look at the toilets, without mentioning that he was coming, he may find that, in that school as in some other schools — I do not know where you are from, Danny — they do not put any toilet rolls there. That is because the kids push them down the thing and block them. However, toilet rolls would be there if there was an announced inspection. That is the distinction. I know that that is a tongue-in-cheek one, but it makes the point about preparation and getting everything absolutely right — putting the posters up, painting the walls, getting toilet rolls in the toilets and that kind of thing. I know of parents — some of you may have had parents write to you — who said, "Look, I have to get my child to come home at lunchtime to go to the toilet".

Mr Lunn: I remember that, when I was at primary school, some parents would not allow their children to go to the toilets, because the toilets were so gross. I will be in trouble for saying that. *[Laughter.]* A headmaster told us yesterday that he ran his self-evaluation and assessment programme as if the school was to be inspected the next day. Surely, that is a good approach to take.

Professor J Gardner: It is an interesting issue, Trevor, because the work that I did back in 1999 had the concept of Trojan Horse, which was about the head teachers and senior management of the school using the prospect of an inspection or, indeed, the announced date of the inspection as the big stick and saying, "We have to change this because look who is coming", instead of taking an actual leadership role, which would be, "I think that we should change this; let's all talk about it and do it". That kind of thing is not unusual. It is not entirely negative, of course, but it is a little bit of a cheat in the way that a school changes its processes.

Mr Lunn: We have the associate assessors here, as you will know. What do you think of their role, their input and their value to the process?

Professor J Gardner: I think that they are valuable. It is a mechanism for extending the size of the team. I am not entirely sure how well it extends the expertise of the team. That needs to be looked at. Ofsted has used the process for a very long time, and it is part of the deep unhappiness of schools in the Ofsted process that they consider that some people who have come in either have baggage of some kind or another — some kind of vested interest — or do not have the competence that they would have expected HMI, when it existed, to have. As I say, we expect our inspectors to have the competence, the professional expertise and the experience. I am not necessarily sure that the public are confident in associate inspectors, even though most of them are head teachers and things like that. I do not think that the public really understand that role.

Mr Lunn: It is fair to say that the associate assessors do not feel sufficiently valued in the process, yet the inspectorate says that it values them very highly, their input is taken on board, and so on. Somebody is wrong. It sounds to me like a good augmentation of the system, if for no other reason than it gives those head teachers — it is normally head teachers — the experience of an inspection, which will be valuable to them when they come back to their own schools.

Professor J Gardner: There are lots of positive dimensions to it, but how valuably it is perceived needs to be looked at, because, I think, people see it as just a way to extend the team and not to extend the competence. It is that kind of humbug thing of, "Oh aye, you cannot get enough inspectors so you just get somebody else from somewhere else".

Mr Lunn: You have been fairly direct in your opinions about the inspectorate.

Professor J Gardner: I am a fan of inspection.

Mr Lunn: The scale that is used for summing up in the inspector's report goes from excellent to good to satisfactory and adequate and to unsatisfactory and whatever is below that — firing squad maybe. Where would you place the inspectorate if you had to assess it?

Professor J Gardner: Personally, I think that it is more than satisfactory. It does not handle its outside perspective well. That may be about resource or about a kind of institutional arrogance through which it thinks that it is top of the tree and does not need to explain who it is. However, in the context in which it works, it does need to explain that. It needs to establish just how important its work is and how expert it is. I would say that applies to all of them in that I do not know of any weaknesses in the inspectorate team. However, it possibly needs to work at its public image. I would say that it is more than satisfactory.

Mr Lunn: You would give it a "satisfactory" and a repeat inspection.

Professor J Gardner: There are things that it cannot control even if it did want to improve them.

The Deputy Chairperson: I am intrigued. Do we focus too much on maths and English in schools in our inspections? Should we be looking at them in a broader way? One or two district inspectors said that we do not seem to inspect on other subjects enough.

Professor J Gardner: There are two ways to answer that, Danny. One is that we must focus on maths and English, and the other is the extent to which that kind of focus might preclude other important issues. I think that you are asking whether we do too much of it. In some circumstances, maybe we do, but there is no question in my mind that basic literacy and numeracy are the keystone to any kind of progress in future learning and in engaging in society properly.

I think that the way in which it is engaged with is also problematic. We have had diagnostic tests in Northern Ireland for some time. I have looked in some depth at and reported on them, and they are not good. There has been a change in the past couple of years, which I have not looked at, but the previous types that we had did not do much good. They looked at mathematical and English literacy. I think that they caused confusion in schools. The inspectorate saw that confusion, reported it and, to some extent, used the results to determine the advice that was to be given to schools. That was perhaps done a little bit too much for maths and English in comparison with other aspects in schools.

Mr Rogers: You are very welcome. I have enjoyed listening to your comments so far. Going back to your opening comments about the link between school inspections and school improvement, you talked about it being a step too far to link the two. If you had a free hand, what would you do to ensure that there was a positive correlation between school inspections by ETI and school improvement?

Professor J Gardner: I have to say, Seán, that it is really complex. If a school is inspected and advised that there are serious weaknesses in its mathematics provision and the school then remedies that by providing extra training for teachers, recruiting new teachers or whatever, the extent to which the inspection did that is limited. Inspectors can only say, "Mathematics education is weak for x, y and z reasons, and we think that you need to improve that, so here are some suggestions for how to do it". If there were a direct correlation between the suggestions that the inspection made, the action taken by the school and an improvement a year or two on, you could start to draw very strong associations between the inspection and the improved outcome. It is all about evidence-gathering.

To some extent, one of my points is that there needs to be much more evidence of the change initiated subsequent to an inspection, so that a more forensic approach can be taken in looking at how the dimensions of the inspection worked their way through to the dimensions of the improved outcome. I think that it is very complex. It is not well done anywhere, because there are so many variables in that. If the way in which, for example, mathematics education was developed was, for very precise reasons, wrong, not appropriate or not successful and a very specific recommendation were made to change certain aspects, and if the school, not the inspectors, then changed those aspects and a follow-up inspection determined that they had been improved, you would have your link. However, it is complex.

Mr Rogers: It is complex. You understand the situation here, given that there are just 60 inspectors in Northern Ireland. Taking the maths example further, do you believe that a stronger link between the inspection team and the providers of staff development would help to improve the link between inspection and improvement?

Professor J Gardner: There should be a collegial link, with the sharing of experience and issues. A more formal link would, I think, begin to disturb the independence of the inspection and the inspectorate. The factories inspectorate no doubt goes along to gatherings of support associations for factory health and safety and shares its experience, but I suspect that it has to maintain its independence from being part of it or directing any aspect of it. I think that there is an independence issue.

Mr Rogers: You mentioned value added in America and said that you would not like to see value added here go the way it has gone in America. Will you elaborate a wee bit on that?

Professor J Gardner: The sorts of value-added systems that are around start with a baseline. That baseline could be either the school baseline or some kind of external baseline. In the United States, it might be a state baseline, a federal baseline, or whatever. In England, there are baselines that are related to the school's previous performance, so it is about moving from there to there, and that is the value added. It is difficult, but I will try to explain the complexity of the big problem with that. If you are at one level and want the school to get to another level, there is a lot of opportunity for improvement. If you are at a higher level, there is very little room for improvement, comparatively speaking. Actually, with the amount of improvement that you make, if the value added is in any way related so that the little bit in one school is considered not as good as the big bit in another school, you have a wrong analysis, in my view. You have a situation where one school can improve a lot and the other school cannot improve a lot.

It is a bit like examination marks. If I am already scoring 90, it is very hard to get to 95; but if I am scoring 60, I have a lot of opportunity to get to 90. The value added in that kind of difference is, in essence, still good, but the problem is where the comparisons come in. The value-added systems in the United States, and, to some extent, in England, are such that, if you have not improved much, your resources will be limited, but if you have improved a lot, your resource base will be improved. It is that kind of notion of rewarding performance on a rather simplistic basis that is problematic.

Mr Rogers: It is probably value added for the school rather than value added for the students.

Professor J Gardner: It is the school profile that is generally used. In the United States and in England, there is lots of published work on the games that schools will play to keep particular groups of students out of the value-added calculations. They will be ill or will be sent somewhere. I am not saying that all schools do that by any means — I do not want to impugn schools — but there are games to be played when there are high stakes in relation to resources, and, I am afraid, the nature of those things is that some schools and some leaders in schools will play those games. I would not be able to say what proportion, but there is published work on it.

If you apply that kind of process, it creates a different kind of behaviour, which loses sight of the actual activities of the school, which are to improve learning and to enable every student to reach their full potential. There are actually lots of students who are kept out of that, for whatever reason. Some of them are exempted by lobbying, such as in a school that has a particular proportion of transient students, for example, who might be part of a local army base, or here in Northern Ireland, it might be a Travellers' community. There might be an argument that they cannot count the whole basis of their group for the value added because they are in and out. There are lots of reasons why it is not a particularly good system.

Mr Lunn: I want to come in on the discussion of value added. You talked about the 60 level versus the 90. One of the main complaints about the inspectorate here is that, if a school begins an inspection with a baseline of 60 and, the next time that it is inspected, it gets that score up to, say, 70 — which is a big improvement — the school is not acknowledged in the inspection report for having made that improvement because it has not got the score up to 90. That is it put in simple terms. Recently, we heard evidence from a headmaster who was absolutely distraught at those circumstances. The improvement that his school had made over a three-year period had not been acknowledged and the school received an unsatisfactory report. He said that he would have complained had the school been given a satisfactory report, on the basis of what was said to him during the inspection. He was outraged.

Professor J Gardner: I understand that. Let me emphasise what I said earlier. This process is all about sensitivity. It is just too easy to dismiss something that is, within the context in which it happens, a very significant thing. That happens because the inspectors might have a view of where it should go to, and — as in the example that you talked about — they do not acknowledge what has been achieved. To me, that is a lack of sensitivity, common sense and a developmental approach to the process.

Mr Lunn: Do you see that as a commonplace occurrence?

Professor J Gardner: No, I do not. When you read inspection reports, you see a whole balance of things. To some extent, the reports are a little bit too marshmallowy. Instead of going to the issues straight — and, indeed, going to the positive issues straight — the report is all couched in coded language. I think that a principal might say, "You have not said clearly that we have done brilliantly in bringing up the mathematics, the reading of boys" or whatever it might be. Because of that, it is about presentation rather than intent.

Mr Rogers: Do you believe that the role of the district inspector is important?

Professor J Gardner: I have to say, Seán, that I am not terribly au fait with the present structures. I have been out of the system for a few years. The district inspector would, presumably, have charge of a district —

Mr Rogers: Yes, a particular area. They would maybe visit schools in that area frequently. They probably have more of a pastoral role. They know the context of the schools.

Professor J Gardner: I see. OK. They would call in, have a chat and say, "I will be here next week". That kind of thing is excellent. It is a way of being more collegial, more advisory and more developmental. It takes out the audit dimension. However, that said, there would, very rarely, be instances of inappropriateness. I am aware of that happening. An inspector might say, "I am here to have a chat about such and such. Do you mind if I just walk over to the football pitches and have a look at the classes?". That might be because there was a problem with sport facilities in a previous inspection. That kind of thing has created some really incendiary situations with head teachers in the past. A visit is supposed to be a call-in and a chat, but then the inspector might say, "I am just going to pop over. Would you mind?" How could a head teacher say no?

Mr Hazzard: John, thank you very much. That was a very thought-provoking presentation. We visited Scotland and were much impressed with Education Scotland. I felt that we were maybe concentrating on trying to marry inspection with improvement. We were trying to change the focus, and we even thought of renaming the inspectorate to reflect that it is more about an improvement process than inspection. I do not want to put words into your mouth, but I get the feeling that you are saying that the two are distinct: there is a need for a competent, professional body of experts to inspect and that is what it is for; an improvement process is something that is linked but different; and we should be careful about trying to marry the two. Am I right in taking you up that way?

Professor J Gardner: Broadly, Chris. There are two dimensions: audit and development. Northern Ireland has had a reputation for many years of being on the balance of development. Over the years that I have been involved, when schools have gone into "special measures", it has always been as a last resort, because processes were trying to address things up to that point.

You need to be careful. You need the independent expert voice, and you need the improvement. That improvement has to be from within the school, and it has to be supported in some way. There

are dimensions of that support, some of which include the feedback and developmental advice of the inspectorate, which has come in to look at what is happening and wants to make suggestions about what should happen.

Mr Hazzard: Should that body be statutorily independent of the Department?

Professor J Gardner: Yes. Maintaining that independence can be tricky. We have seen, over time, the HMI in England basically destroyed by the intervention of Government and a very polarised school inspection process led by Ofsted. That is not to denigrate Ofsted, which does lots of good work, but the fundamental relationship is too close to political whim.

Mr Hazzard: That is interesting. Recently, we held Ofsted up in here for being independent, and later that week, the head of Ofsted was sacked by the Secretary of State for Education. That was quite funny.

On community engagement, you made the very important point that too often we see a school being marked for closure and the community then becoming involved. By that stage, it is too late. You mentioned the better use of social media in the inspection process and how the community can be tied in. Are there examples, perhaps internationally, that we could be looking at to see how community engagement works and what types of characteristics and dynamics we should be looking to foster in a school?

Professor J Gardner: I would not like to pick one out, because fundamentally I would not know them well enough. I am a reader about, rather than a visitor to, those places. We are not all that different. In fact, we have much that could be considered as better: we are smaller, more in tune with our schools and able to develop a programme of inspection that, despite its strains due to what you can manage with a small team, is integral. The inspection process in France is much more robust and distant. The inspection process in Sweden is probably a bit more arm-in-arm, although there is an issue in Sweden about statutory compliance: some things have to be done first and foremost. So, there is that sort of audit inspection to mention there too.

I would not look to anywhere in particular. I would look to the places that do not have inspection: it is worth looking to them. The one exception might be Finland, where schooling is considered to be very good. However, there are many differences in Finnish society that contribute to that. So, my answer is, "I'm not sure."

Mr Hazzard: No problem. Thank you very much.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thanks very much for your masses of points, which are food for thought.

We were touching on diagnostics. Are there any tests in particular that you felt were too diagnostic?

Professor J Gardner: I am the wrong person to ask, Danny, as I have no particular faith in the way that diagnostic testing has been done or in the kinds of systems that are available. They have too many commercial interests in them and are based on very dodgy educational principles. Nobody knows a student better than the teacher who has taught them. The more we rely on professional judgement, the better. You reach a ceiling with the objectivity in relation to high stakes, and that is where you have to draw in the objective examination.

On that spectrum, we probably should spend a bit more time trying to augment the professional judgement of teachers, which is very good. If you go into any teacher's class, ask them to rank their students from one to 30, and give the students any test you like, it is most likely that their scores will rank in a similar order to that given by the teacher. So, they do know their children.

They may not be able to articulate it, and you certainly do not want them taking part in the silliness that I have seen over the last number of years where they are sitting down with a parent and saying, "Here's the graph of your child's performance". Awful stuff. You want to create a culture where the professional judgement of a teacher is considered to be good and appropriate for a parent to hear, without all the graphs and numbers.

The Deputy Chairperson: John, you have given us a mass of good points to think about. I have learnt more today than I have from many of the other presentations. Thank you very much.

Professor J Gardner: Thank you. Some of the things I say are unpopular in schools. There is no magic bullet; it is all about a society improving all the time, never mind schools.

The Deputy Chairperson: I understand that. Thank you very much.

Professor J Gardner: Thanks very much.