



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Education and Training
Inspectorate and School Improvement Process:
General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland

11 March 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)
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Chris Hazzard
Ms Maeve McLaughlin
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Robin Newton
Mr Seán Rogers

Witnesses:

Mr Colm Davis	General Teaching Council NI
Dr Carmel Gallagher	General Teaching Council NI
Mr Bryan Jess	General Teaching Council NI

The Chairperson: I welcome to the Committee Dr Carmel Gallagher, the registrar for the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI); Colm Davis, principal of Tor Bank Special School; and Bryan Jess, principal of Carrick Primary School in Lurgan. It is lovely to have you here, and thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to be with us. I also thank you for the immense amount of information that you have supplied to us. It is very much appreciated, as is the professionalism with which it is presented.

Carmel, if you are ready to make your presentation, please begin. Members, I ask you to reserve your questions until the presentation is over.

Dr Carmel Gallagher (General Teaching Council NI): Thank you very much, Chairman, and thank you for organising this special meeting. We have tried to meet a few times and are really grateful to the Committee for making this extra time. I am glad of the support from my council colleagues, Bryan and Colm.

As you know, we are the professional body for teachers: we represent 27,000 registered teachers and respond to all kinds of educational consultations on behalf of the profession. We endeavour in our responses to take a research-informed approach. In our submission, 'Striking the Right Balance', we presented a literature review of available research in response to your terms of reference. However, we had only anecdotal evidence reported at a series of face-to-face meetings with principals about the overall views on the issues highlighted in your inquiry. So we felt that it was incumbent on us to provide a channel for the profession to voice its view on each of the terms of reference.

You may have noted in 'The Guardian' yesterday that Michael Cladingbowl, the director of Ofsted, recently surveyed the profession in England. He has written articles in 'The Guardian' indicating how much he welcomes genuine insights into the issues raised by Ofsted from staff rooms around the country.

The Committee Clerk told me that I would have 15 minutes to present, so I will spend five minutes or so talking about the nature of the survey. I will outline its strengths and, in particular, acknowledge its weaknesses. I will then give you a quick overview of the findings and talk about how the key messages resonate with wider research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the EU and changes going on elsewhere, such as those in Scotland and now England.

The survey used a simple online format using free software called SurveyMonkey, which you may know of. That is the kind of open consultation that happens all the time in education. I stress that it is not a technically designed random sample. Rather, it is a total sample approach — a straw poll — to garner the overall perceptions of the profession. Random samples are usually taken because of a very diverse population, whereas we had a "captive" population, all of whom have similar characteristics in that they are teachers, so a random sample was not required.

In response to concerns expressed by the chief inspector and NISRA, we were asked by the Department of Education (DE) to engage with NISRA, which we were happy to do. I will briefly highlight the concerns that NISRA raised, outline how we responded to them and leave it up to the Committee to weigh up the evidence and the extent to which the general outcomes merit attention and resonate with other evidence that you have heard.

We asked for at least one response from every school and got 1,677 responses, which, in education, is phenomenal. As you know, schools are not always the best at responding to surveys. As we received more than one response per school, the sample was judged by NISRA not to represent schools as such but to represent teachers as a whole, of which there are 19,000 in service. So the 1,677 represents only a 9% sample. As you know, a 10% sample is the usual benchmark.

NISRA's view was:

"Findings (both quantitative and qualitative) are not considered a robust measure of teachers' perceptions".

However, it acknowledged that it was:

"Unknown whether they are representative of schools".

NISRA's critique prompted us to consider whether there was another way of determining the representativeness of our returns: for example, by looking at a clearly identifiable subsample with the same characteristics, i.e. principals. Each school has only one principal, and, as we had 450 returns from principals, that represented approximately 38% of the principal cohort. We looked at the breakdown within that: we had a 37% return from nursery principals, 38% from primary principals, 36% from post-primary and 48% from special schools. So it came out almost as a natural random sample. Principals indicated whether they had been inspected in the past five years. We have 50% representation from principals who said that they were inspected in the past year; 40% representation from those inspected in the previous two years; and 55% representation from those inspected in the two years before that. So, overall, we were able to suggest a 48% return of those inspected in the past five years.

I accept that these are approximate figures, and I accept the challenge that these principals are self-selecting and, therefore, may represent the principals who had the greatest concerns. However, even if you were to assume that all the other 52% were positive about the inspection process, you would recognise that there is a considerable challenge being offered by a fairly robust sample of customers, and we suggest that that merits consideration.

I turn now to the questionnaire design. NISRA also raised concerns about the objectivity of the questions and the extent to which they may have influenced the principals' quantitative and qualitative responses. On slide 5, the questions are listed in two columns to show that for each fairly open and positive question asked there was a balanced alternative. That is a typical approach taken in questionnaires. I will give you three examples. We asked whether the inspection process took appropriate account of school context and intake; and whether the process was perceived to have a

certain social bias. We asked whether the inspection process took appropriate account of value added; and was it overly data driven. We asked whether it took appropriate account of a school's own evaluation; and should the school evaluation process be replaced? That was the kind of balance in the questionnaire.

The fairly open questions are in the left-hand column. Of those in the right-hand column, question 15, was taken from your inquiry:

"The inspection process encourages compliance rather than innovation."

Ofsted has just recognised that in its report today.

The findings are based on the principals' returns only. Overall, the quantitative data appears generally positive, albeit slightly less positive than in the NISRA survey — NISRA carries out an independent post-inspection survey. In answer to whether the inspection process takes account of self-evaluation, 44% "totally agree" and 33% "partially agree", giving a total of 77%, which is a fairly strong endorsement of the inspection process. In answer to whether the process takes account of a range of practice, 38% say that they "totally agree" and a further 29% "partially agree", which is similar to the NISRA finding. Its survey asked schools whether they were content with the quality of service: 42% "strongly agree" and 37% "agree" — is that a partial or strong agreement? What I am suggesting is that the outcomes are fairly similar.

We need to bear in mind the research into response tendencies, which suggests that, in general, a majority of people give socially desirable responses. They respond in a fairly positive way and have what is called a "yaysaying" tendency, whereas a minority tend to have a "naysaying" tendency. The likelihood is that the truth lies somewhere in the middle. The true perceptions are probably among those who "partially agree" or "partially disagree". Within the profession, there seems to be reasonable endorsement that inspection is acceptable, after a fashion.

However, we then looked at the more challenging perceptions that were reported — these questions may be considered leading, but we view them as fairly open. One question was whether schools considered that the inspection process was overly data driven: 45% totally agreed and 39% partially agreed, so a massive 84% felt that data was very much dominant in the process. Second on the list of challenging perceptions came in answer to a question on whether schools feel that they are held account for factors beyond their control. Question 20 asks whether inspection takes appropriate account of intake and value added. In answer to an earlier question, schools felt that inspection did take account of context. However, when asked specifically whether it takes account of value added, 17% "totally disagree" and 35% "disagree". That is the only time that the questionnaire almost tips over into the negative. That is a fairly robust outcome.

On the previous slide, "Positive Perceptions", the only question that tipped over into the negative was whether the inspection process allows any challenge on the basis of evidence. There is a strong feeling among schools that it does not allow sufficient challenge.

Finally, I turn to the qualitative perceptions. Given that this is a self-selecting sample, we have to admit that the qualitative responses are likely to be more negative, assuming that the 52% who did not respond might have had a more positive view. Therefore, to ensure that we are being entirely sensitive and responsible in reporting this, I want to focus for a moment only on the issues raised by principals who said that they had an "outstanding", a "very good" or a "good" inspection. These are issues raised by people who had a good inspection outcome.

I will read out a few responses, which are in my "positive with some reservations" category. One principal highlighted the:

"inability of the inspection team to clearly identify teachers that underperformed".

A big issue for principals is getting feedback on individual teachers. Many ask what is the point of inspection if you do not get detailed feedback on what to do in relation to specific members of staff.

Another principal said that, although the good inspection outcome in many ways concurred with their own self-evaluation,

"the inspection process could be improved through developing the role of the district inspector."

That was followed by the comment:

"all teachers should receive both oral and written feedback."

In another example, a primary school was awarded a "very good" outcome, but its nursery unit was awarded only a "satisfactory" outcome. The principal remarked that the inspectors were "very defensive" and would not take into account the evidence that was highlighted.

You can see that, even among those who considered that they had been treated very well, issues are raised about feedback; better emphasis on the role of the district inspector; and the ability to offer challenge. Some principals asked for advice on next steps, more detailed reports, how the competences could form more objective criteria and how more account could be taken of context and value added. The point I want to stress in response to the challenge to our survey is that even principals with "good" outcomes are raising issues, which I have summarised for you. There is a feeling that there is insufficient support in the system, the process is very stressful, the process is data-driven, there is a lack of consistency across the process, there is insufficient feedback and insufficient opportunity to offer challenge and there is insufficient account taken of context and value added. A number of principals offer alternative approaches, mostly to do with areas such as the role of the district inspector, the critical friend mentoring process, the constructive feedback process and all of that.

Before I move on from the qualitative perceptions, I want to draw to your attention one little bit of evidence that I have put at the very top of the slide. It is the time of day or night that the responses were written. It is notable and may be an indicator of the stress that the profession feels that it is under, that 27% of the responses were written between 5.00 am and 8.00 am, 23% were written during the working day and over 50% were written after midnight. I know my working process and that of my colleagues, and I do not think that that is unusual. The previous time that I reported to the Committee, I said that I thought that there might have been a blip in the computer programme, but we went through this very thoroughly and that is what we came up with. It shows that over 50% of principal colleagues were working after midnight.

Some of what we put forward were considered by some to be leading questions, but those were in fact recommendations emerging from the Scottish and European research. You will see that nothing terribly radical is being said. It is line with many other submissions that you have received, and, as we said, the direction of travel in Scotland. Also, it seems, from recent press coverage, that it is similar to the direction of travel for Ofsted. 'The Guardian' reports Mike Cladingbowl saying that high-stakes full inspection limits honest dialogue and innovation and that schools are too cautious in innovating because they fear the inspector imminently walking through the door. He says that Ofsted wants proportionate and regular contact between schools and inspectors, such as that which happens under the district inspector model, and that it wants to foster constructive and expert professional dialogue between an inspectorate and schools in order to give impetus to improvement. He says that Ofsted wants more frequent shorter monitoring visits in order to see schools as they are as opposed to putting on a performance. He suggests that visits be reported only briefly to parents by letter and that, like the inspectorate here, current school leaders and excellent serving practitioners be used more at full inspection.

You can see that our recommendations are not at all out of line with others being made that the inspection should allow teachers, principals and leaders from schools to challenge with evidence, take important account of learning goals and perhaps give a longer unpublished report to schools that gives the detail that principals are requesting. If there is still to be a published report, it should be very short and concise, as is the case in Scotland. I think that, probably most of all, we are asking for more supportive language. This comes from the EU research in particular, which says that, if the feedback is too critical, the person receiving it cannot hear it. In this case, I wonder whether, if our draft report is seen as being very critical of the inspectorate, there might be difficulty hearing the message there, too. That is why we want to put across a constructive message here today that the feedback that we are giving is coming from people who had a good inspection.

Also, there is a real plea to the Assembly, the Minister and the Department that we need better support. I noted that, two weeks ago, in your very detailed discussions with the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) what was said about self-evaluation. You asked some very probing questions, and it was admitted that the self-evaluation culture was really only a current one that was introduced in 2010. It is hardly three years old and has barely gone through a full cycle. As you know, the OECD report was very cleverly written, and the danger is that we believe our own rhetoric that we are a great system with everything in place. However, the OECD said about inspection that it wanted

us to develop new indicators in key areas of pupil performance. I am delighted that, just before I came in, I heard the Minister announce that, in assessment, there will be wider indicators of pupil performance. The OECD recommends that we build school self-evaluation capacity. You probed the ETI on the extent to which schools have had any real support in doing that. The OECD also recommends that we:

"only move to a more proportionate ..."

and risk-based

"... approach to inspection once the self-evaluation culture is consolidated".

Is it consolidated? I think that you were suggesting that it is not. The OECD is saying that we should move to that approach only when there is capacity in schools for that and when the data gathering and analysis framework are established, so we have to build that capacity in schools. One of the OECD's messages is, perhaps, slightly hidden, but listen to the wording:

"a consistent approach to reporting on equity".

It is really suggesting that there we need a better value-added measure to ensure that we are reporting equitably. Most of all, its message is to involve the profession more fully in the design of key elements of education policy in a way that maximises their buy-in. What we were doing through the survey was involving the profession and allowing it to speak. If we cannot hear what it is saying, that is a very sad reflection. The kind of challenge that we faced to this survey focused very much on whether the quantitative evidence was robust, representative and reliable. That is a valid challenge, but the issue is this: are we hiding behind that and not looking at the qualitative issues, those pages and pages and pages of comments from principals and teachers who are crying out for attention?

In summary, Chairman, you know from John Gardner's presentation last week that there is no evidence that school inspection in itself leads to improvement. It is only one element of a complex array of matters that have to be interdependent. Among those are proper student assessment, proper valued-added teacher appraisal, leadership appraisal and, at the centre of it, school self-evaluation. So our overall message is that inspection is only one part of that process, that we should not overrate its input or its output and that we are in danger of believing our own rhetoric sometimes. We really need to be constantly evolving, as we recognise that the ETI is, towards a more supportive approach. Yes, inspection should offer a challenge, and we are all up for that. We hope that, on this occasion, ETI is also up for listening to the challenge. Crucially, the EU is saying that, if we are to bring about any improvement, we must design into the process self-esteem and motivation. If the feedback destroys, you cannot hear it. If it is to take account of the professionalism, self-esteem and future motivation of teachers, it needs to be much more respectful.

The Deputy Chairperson: That was a very thorough and credible presentation, and I think that you have summed up, with proof, so much that we have heard from all who have given us evidence, and you have done so in a really good and clear way. I thought that you were being particularly nice and positive when talking about all who partially agree. Had that "partially agree" category been more negative, the picture would be even bleaker. You put the message across very nicely and reflected the same concerns, so thank you very much indeed.

Dr Gallagher: I just want to reinforce the point that sometimes the message is uncomfortable, but it is a don't-shoot-the-messenger issue; it is about trying to represent the genuine voice of the profession and to have it listened to. I do not think that anything terribly radical is being said; if anything, it is all reasonably measured and supportive in bringing out issues that need to be addressed — issues of consistency, criteria, language and support.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you. I think that you have made that very clear. The information at the back of the pack, which contains all the answers, the extra bits of information and the questions coming back from the principals who replied, is well worth everyone having a good look through.

Mr Rogers: Thank you very much for your presentation. I would like one thing clarified. Is there a wee mistake in the data for question 15 under "Challenging Perceptions"? Should it not be 52% in total?

(The Chairperson [Mr Storey] in the Chair)

Dr Gallagher: Apologies; yes, it should be.

Mr Rogers: My main question relates to recommendation 7:

"Should be undertaken primarily by practising principals and teachers."

Is that due to the underlying question of questioning the expertise or how long it is since inspectors were in the classroom? There is also the idea of an inspector inspecting senior leadership in a school when he or she was never in that role in a school, and inspecting Irish-medium schools without a working knowledge of the language.

Dr Gallagher: It is really noticeable that Ofsted is picking up on those issues also. We know that ETI has moved to involve associate inspectors more and more, and that has to be welcomed. I will turn that question over to my colleagues, who are principals.

Mr Colm Davis (General Teaching Council NI): Thank you very much.

Dr Gallagher: You have the real knowledge.

Mr Davis: Yes, that is one of the things that is very difficult. When you are leading a school, sometimes the waters are very muddied, but your focus is very much on raising standards and achievement in the school. You are looking for someone to come in and use the right constructive language to support you, and you are hoping that it is coming from someone who has been there before, maybe led an outstanding school and can make positive suggestions and steer you in the right direction. We acknowledge that members of the GTCNI have done that in some cases, and we welcome their involvement, but there are others who have not. It is a combination of the teams. When an inspection team is put together, it would be very interesting to look at the balance within that team of those who have been serving heads or in a top position leading change in a school and having a high degree of success and also at whether they were actually within that sector. There could be an argument there about whether they need to be more sector-specific. Are there variations within the sector? How objective or subjective can they be when they are bringing baggage from another sector that may not particularly apply to that sector? It muddies the waters for the school improvement that is going on in that sector if they do not have an understanding of it. There are quite a number of issues there.

Carmel raised the fact that, in the model that has been suggested — it has even been suggested in England — there should be a lot more peer-to-peer mentoring from our colleagues as part of the process. That could be from a significant other or a school improvement partner — I do not like to use that term; I know that they used it in England where it did not go down so well. If you have a school improvement partner — someone who has been there and has a lot to offer the system, who can come in and mentor, tutor and support you through to raise the improvement, who can understand how the school works and have a feel for that — the credibility of that person, backed up by the other people out there with significant expertise from ETI, the regional training unit and the boards — if the boards still exist — means that those people would be a combination. I think that we all need to get ownership of this and bring it forward together.

Mr Rogers: I have a question about data driven versus data informed. Back in my early days as a principal, you had a big red book to fill in [*Inaudible*] the inspection. Whether somebody questions the reliability of your data or not, the message that we have got from others is that it is very much data driven as opposed to data informed.

Dr Gallagher: Yes. One of the issues that comes out subtly from the OECD report is that the quality of data analysis needs to improve. One of the issues that we brought up in 'Striking the Right Balance', for example, is that you can have one or two underperforming children who absolutely appear to destroy the whole performance of a school. That is inappropriate data analysis. There can be blips in performance that are not trends and indicators that, as I said, are completely out of proportion. There has to be a much more sophisticated approach to data analysis. The suggestion is that, if DE has NISRA and all that capacity at its disposal, NISRA analysis should assist the ETI data-analysis process and bring into consideration the finer statistical nuances. As we know, there are lies, damn lies and statistics. You have to be terribly careful about statistical analysis, particularly in respect of the value added.

One of the issues that may come to you from another piece of research that is being done by a primary principal from the Shankill is that there is an inordinate comparison between the overall outcome of an inspection as far as pupil performance is concerned and the leadership. They are almost seen as the same thing; if the performance is bad, the leadership is bad. However, there can be instances, which I know about particularly because I worked on the early years project in the Shankill for many years, in which huge contextual issues are not recognised. One of the contextual issues that we found in the Shankill was that, even when we poured all those resources into the early years to improve children's engagement with school, by the time they came to the age of 8, the community effect was kicking in again. It is highly distressing to see principals in a community such as that — principals who you have worked with for years — who feel that they are being viewed as inadequate, whereas, in fact, they have been putting in a huge effort.

So, it is data but with a huge pinch of salt. It needs to be properly analysed, and we need to look for substantive trends in data and not inordinate little blips that are caused by one or two children.

Mr Rogers: When you talk about taking the data with a pinch of salt, are you really talking about the reliability of the data, particularly the end of key stage data?

Dr Gallagher: I have particular views about end of key stage data. First, it is such a narrow set of numbers that it tells nobody anything, and that is what our assessment survey verified. Secondly, while teacher assessment is hugely important for teaching and learning and for feedback to parents, once you make it the object of accountability, you are in danger of it becoming distorted and schools pushing the levels up. When you rely only on narrow data, you are likely only to get improvement in those areas, or the semblance of improvement in those areas, while the rest of the system could be going to the dogs.

We have to be very careful about data. That is why we, along with the unions, have issued a discussion paper entitled 'Rising to the Challenge'. It is about rising to the challenge of the OECD report. In that paper, we say that— I think that it is a message for the Committee and the Minister — if you want broader system improvement, you need broader data requirements and Government targets that take into consideration all important learning goals, not just literacy and numeracy. Important though those are, in the 21st century, we need information management, problem-solving, decision-making, creativity and all the thinking skills that we have put into the centre of the curriculum, which are in danger of being sidelined because everyone is paranoid about the narrow data.

Mr Hazzard: Thanks, Carmel and guys, for that update. It is very useful, particularly coming on the back of some of the correspondence from the inspectorate. I think that its nose must be put out of joint that more than one man and a dog replied to a consultation. I think that that is good.

You spoke, Carmel, if I took it up right, about the bones of a good improvement service being student assessment, teacher appraisal, school leadership, self-evaluation and an appropriate inspection process. You are not calling for fundamental change; it is about developing what you call motivation and self-esteem. How best can that be done?

Dr Gallagher: I put in your pack the conceptual framework from the OECD's 28-country analysis. We are talking about building our system on international best practice, and they are saying just what I said, namely let us be clear about the goals for the system. They are not count, read, succeed. They are about improving the performance of all young people in the 21st century.

We have, of course, to take account of our traditional culture and values, but we need educational policies that really believe in those system goals. Then, as you are suggesting Chris, we need all these things that are complementary. So, what we would be wanting — I am sorry that I do not have the diagram here today — builds on our competence framework, which we are going to revise to be really sharp. The OECD suggested that we revise it into a very sharp working document.

That will then inform school development planning, school self-evaluation, teacher appraisal and PRSD, a performance review that John Anderson and John Gardner were talking about. It informs school leadership appraisal. The data from good value-added assessment are informing all of that. Only when you have all that good data analysis in place can you put in a risk-based assessment process that really looks to the centre and schools' own self-evaluation — a strong, central piece of the conceptual diagram. So, all the bits need to be put in place.

I suppose, with regard to beating up the inspectorate, it is not their fault that they have, to some extent, been hauled in to be held to account for things that they have been doing in response to narrow policies. So, it is about opening our eyes to the fact that the policies have to change in order for the inspectorate to change.

Mr Bryan Jess (General Teaching Council NI): I think, Chair, in answer to a couple of questions, it all comes into your probing question at the end. The concern about the inspectors not having taught or managed recently is all to do with street credibility. If someone is giving you a hard message, do they have the street credibility to give you that message?

The second phase is whether they can advise you how to improve things. That is the important thing. Any one of you could walk into a classroom and get a picture of whether it is a good classroom or not. To define why it is a good classroom or not requires a bit of knowledge. The increasingly complex social situation in a classroom requires someone to have current knowledge of the issues that children are facing. With regard to the question about inspectors being up to date, many of them can make that judgement not having been in a classroom for a while because they are astute, but some are not. That comes across clearly in the responses.

The concerns that schools have about data is that there is an agenda to get literacy and numeracy outcomes in levels and it takes no account of where children start from. If we have a more sophisticated measurement of how children come into schools and how they improve, teachers will feel that is a fair system. "We started here and, boy, we got to there. We will never get to there with other schools, but we have worked very hard to get to there." Having that acknowledged is the concern about good data driving things along, because some schools will never manage to compete with others.

Again, inspectors take that into account when they talk to teachers. Yet, for some reason, it appears to never come across in many of the inspection reports. What is published in inspection reports but key stage outcomes and the overall phrases "outstanding", "very good", "good" or "unsatisfactory"? That relates very much to the numerical outcomes of a school.

So, those all come together, and, if you can get those things right, teachers will value the critical comments that they have had and the suggestions for where to go forward. Teachers want acknowledgement that data to analyse what the school is like and where the children are going is complex and should be used comprehensively to assess a school on a wide range of things. They want the context of children and schools to be recognised. If we can come up with a model for that, treating education as not simply numbers but a broad thing, it would be beneficial for the country. Teachers want recognition of their hard work. It is about pulling all those questions into some sort of model.

Mr Hazzard: I have one final point. I agree entirely with what you said. We got a word of warning, I suppose, last week from Professor John Gardner who said that in places such as America, in the value-added context, schools were penalised if they did not grow in certain areas. He said that, unlike certain data, the value-added section could be manipulated by schools. He said that once it becomes a system of reward — a carrot-and-stick approach based on value-added — it distorts the whole importance of value-added.

Mr Jess: Again, what is the point of inspection? Is it to improve the child? Is it to improve the building school? Or is it to improve the Northern Ireland system? If you mix up those measures, you get distortion. If you publish what your children are doing to beat the schools' back, we will improve their scores but that does not mean that we improve their education. If you want to genuinely improve the child's opportunities and to make sure that those who do not do so well get better, can you publish those results against other schools that do not have the same context?

I have to America and seen schools where, down the hallway, they had 50 feet of SATs or standardised test outcomes that show, class by class, who is doing what. If you were to inherit a class near the bottom of the pile, what would that do when, every single day, the teachers and parents see that? What you use assessment for is fundamental. What you want the outcomes to be depends on the point of assessment.

When I read the GTC report, before one of our meetings, I was surprised at how positive it was. We need inspection; professional colleagues want it. However, the manner in which it is done and the use to which it is put are not quite right.

Mrs Dobson: I apologise for missing your briefing. You may have touched on answers to some of my questions, but bear with me anyway. It is obvious that there is a general suspicion among principals about inspectors and their reports. Your survey bears that out. You may have answered this already, but how do you feel that that suspicion has built up? Is it historical or is it due to specific actions taken by the ETI over the past years? I note that over 80% of principals support the idea of inspections being undertaken by practising and principal teachers. I also noted your comment, Bryan, about street credibility. What is your opinion on that? Would this be a little too close to self-regulation? Would you, perhaps, like to see inspectors being required to have a requisite number of years teaching practice as a basis for inspections? Will you give me a bit more detail on that?

Mr Jess: We welcome many inspectors in the system into our schools, and we have a good relationship with them. Some of the most memorable ones smile and tell you nice stories as they really tell you the truth. You realise that and respect that person, because the profession recognises that there must be an outside arbiter of the system. There is no question over that. It cannot all be just practising friends. We went down that route with PRSD years ago. It has to be an outside body, but perhaps the group that comes to your school would have a bigger representation of practising people.

Mrs Dobson: So, it is important, and, as you say, teachers value critical comment.

Mr Jess: Absolutely. Professionals are professionals, and they think that the system needs to inspect. From school to school, how can you tell how well you are really doing when you are in your own wee environment for such a long time? As the survey shows, professionals welcome the need for inspection, but there is a question mark over the ability of every inspector to assess a school's context because of their current experience.

Mrs Dobson: Your survey concluded that the majority of principals felt that inspections held schools accountable for things that they felt were outside their control. Will you expand on your concerns on that issue?

Mr Jess: Those are not my concerns. They are the concerns of the principals who responded. I am not sure. Carmel might have —

Dr Gallagher: I think that that really goes back to the question of context that we were talking about. Sometimes, the context is not fully taken account of.

To go back to your previous question, Jo-Anne, about whether this is a historical concern or a specific concern, I think that specific concerns have emerged over the past five years not just in Northern Ireland but probably worldwide. With the introduction of PIRLS, TIMSS, PISA etc, everything has become data-driven. Pasi Sahlberg, whom I am sure you will hear from at some stage and who will give the General Teaching Council lecture this October, to which you will all be invited, was the last chief inspector of Finland. External inspection was done away with there and replaced with a critical friend self-evaluation process, which, I think, is the kind of thing that we are looking for. He calls the whole move over the past decade, and certainly over the past five years, the global educational reform movement (GERM), where politicians want data that make it look as if their system is doing brilliantly, but the fact is that such data only give a small insight. The data that probably work best are the data that show that children are happy at school and love reading and that teachers enjoy their job.

I will indulge in a little bit of female anecdotal evidence, from a beautician and from my sister-in-law who sells clothes in Coleraine, to drive this home. The beautician said, "Dear God, every teacher who comes in here is stressed out of their mind". My sister-in-law in Coleraine said, "Why are teachers so stressed out?"

Mrs Dobson: It should not be that way.

Dr Gallagher: It should not be that way. I have been asked by the Castlereagh principals to provide input to them on 20 March. They suggested the title, which is, "Does it really have to be like this?"

I find our report very measured. I have heard that inspectorate colleagues consider it to be horrific. I have said that it is not horrific. It is actually so measured, because it is saying, on the one hand, "Yes, let us have inspection" and, on the other hand, "But please just take account of some of these concerns about criteria, consistency, support and professional trust".

Mr Davis: We are back to the whole issue of needing a big discussion about data and what the data will be used for.

Thanks to the British Council, a few years ago, I went to Estonia. I thought, "What are we going to learn in Estonia?", but, to be honest, we learnt quite a lot. I probably learnt more in Estonia than anywhere else. That was very much down to the pride in their schools, despite coming out of the backdrop of communism and being taken over by that many countries. They took a very local approach to self-evaluation. They had lifted elements straight from the English system and other systems as well. What they did was to connect all the school targets with the local community targets, so everybody — the youth service, the health service — was accountable. They used self-evaluation and self-measurement with school improvement partners, who are the local principals or local directors. It was very much about getting pride back into the local community by all working together rather than in separate departments. There was an element of accountability linked up there. They had hard data, but there was a lot of soft data as well. The thing that was important to them was getting pride back into the local community and encouraging young people to stay there by creating jobs for them. That was linked in with the schools so positively. The harmony was unbelievable. We need to do a bit more of that here in this small community. Trying to get that into —

Mrs Dobson: I apologise; I have to go to the Agriculture Committee at 1.30 pm.

Dr Gallagher: I will say just one final thing about data. Some of the data shows that fewer parents and members of the community are signing up to board of governors because of the whole issue of a pressurised culture. If we are going to get the community involved again, we need to focus on the kinds of things that the community cares about, as Colm said.

Mr Davis: I have a lot of positive things to say about the inspectorate, particularly as I work in special education. We have tried to run with a district model. There is a district inspector who comes in quite a lot on his way up the road, has a cup of coffee and is invited by me to see a good lesson. The teachers have been open to that, and it has been about celebrating the good things that are going on. From that, the inspector finds out what other good ideas will help me develop things further, and, in doing that, we have built up a relationship.

When the inspection team came into Tor Bank a year and a half ago, I think that four of the five people had a special education background and special education experience. They were all past principals, and that made a difference. It made a difference to the quality of their comments. The type of comments that they were making and the references to other colleagues were things that I could learn from. I could ask them whether they minded sharing the good practice with another school so that I could link up with it. Therefore, to me, it was fantastic.

Moreover, the data that you collate in a special school is not under the same pressure as that in the mainstream sector. Unfortunately, a lot of the children in the mainstream sector who have special needs are subjected to the same sort of pressure of having to go down the GCSE route, or whatever, and are then seen to be failures. In our way, we collate and evaluate data that shows the holistic needs for improvement and success at all levels. That works very well for our children. Why can that not be done the same, and have the same credibility, in a mainstream school?

Mrs Dobson: You are certainly talking a lot of common sense. I am sorry, but I have to go to the Agriculture Committee meeting now. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson: I apologise for having had to step out during your presentation. Unfortunately, I had to deal with a couple of other things.

Carmel, if it should not be like this, why is it so? I do not want to go over a lot of questions that have probably already been asked, but I have come to a point in this inquiry at which I am now seriously raising concerns as to the way in which senior management, whether that be in the Department, the ETI or wherever in the system, seem to be intent on creating circumstances that lead to comments being made like those found in the survey. Take the responses from NIPSA or the unions responsible for representing the inspectors. On the complaints procedure, NIPSA states that its members:

"have reservations about challenges that become time-consuming and protracted as, not only do they cause great stress to all concerned but they can be extremely time-consuming".

We then have this comment from NIPSA, which I still cannot get to the bottom of, and should it be the last thing I do before Noelle Buick leaves here tomorrow, I will get to the bottom of it. She now knows, because it will be conveyed to her. It states:

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

What is going on? When I bring professionals together, as we have done repeatedly in this Committee, they all say the same thing. They all generally want the same outcomes. However, the OECD report seems now to have become the bible of the Department. I am sure, like the Bible, there will end up being 40 different versions of it before very long, and I do not think that it is the King James version that they are going to use. However, the OECD report even said that you are on the right track with policies but that there are so many problems with practice. We have had another fiasco in the House today over computer-based assessments, and all of that. Why is it going so badly wrong? I cannot put my finger on it.

There are other comments in the NIPSA submission. People know that I am not a cheerleader for the unions, and sometimes we have differences of opinion. However, I must be honest and open about this. NIPSA also said that it was worried about the "importation" — that is the very word that it used — of Ofsted working practices. Can somebody put a finger on it and say, "This is the real reason that it is going wrong". What really annoyed and worried me is NISRA and the inspectorate commenting on your report and the way in which it was analysed by them. We have seen that from emails. I do not mind that happening if it is expressed thus: "Why did you say this?" and "Our view would be this". However, when the inspectors have commented in the past, they say, "Fear? We do not recognise that there is any fear or concern out there". Many principals have replied to the inquiry. Are they telling us something that is not the case? Should we just ignore the report? I know that that is a very long statement rather than a question. However, if it should not be like this, in your opinion, why is it so?

Dr Gallagher: In my opinion, what is wrong with our system is that we are always trying so hard to do everything. The OECD report recognised that Northern Ireland is a really good little place. I think that it was stunned when it came here, because we have all the elements of good practice present as policy. Our problem is implementation. We do things and try to run before we can walk. We say that things are in place when we have not given them any support. When you were out, Mervyn, we had a whole discussion on self-evaluation and the fact that it is really only in its infancy. However, we expect self-evaluation to be all things to all people, without actually giving principals and senior managers the backup to develop the criteria.

Radical it might be, but one of the best things that we could do is suspend inspections; put all inspectors into the schools that they are concerned about; help the schools develop their self-evaluation processes and data analysis; give the schools areas and targets for inspection; support them for a while; and then inspect them.

I listened to part of John Gardner's evidence last week, but on reading the most recent two sets of reports, you would think that we were in the most perfect system and that everyone is doing wonderfully, when, in fact, they are crying out for help. We have spent the past five or seven years, as you know, running down the Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS), making people redundant, leaving no one there to support the schools, and then going in in a manner that appears from the feedback from schools to be fairly heavy-handed and critical.

Let me go back to the psychological thing. If I tell you — Mervyn and the rest of you — that you are inadequate, that your Assembly is inadequate, that you are not doing anything for democracy and that we cannot see any measured outcomes —

Mr Kinahan: That never happens.

Mr Newton: A fairly common opinion. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: If the chief inspector called an election, the public would probably pass that judgement very shortly.

Dr Gallagher: You can laugh it off because you have one another for support, and you know that there is a process. For example, you are actually really listening and providing a vehicle for policy change.

I cannot believe the word used. In all my working life, I will never use the word "inadequate" to anyone. I think that it is awful when it is used to describe professionals. Furthermore, in what other profession do you have a process where a team arrives and, in a snapshot, decides on your whole status? I go through the audit process — I have said this to Noelle Buick herself — and in that process, it is specified what will be looked at. All the evidence is looked at. Auditors come in, and, yes, they are pretty thorough, but they then tell you what you have to improve. However, this is a case of sitting in judgement and making snap judgements on the basis of a teacher's performance in a classroom for a short period — perhaps half an hour. Please believe me that I have huge respect for many, many of our inspectors. They are very skilled people. Jo-Anne asked whether inspection has changed. There does seem to be a harder edge to it now, and people feel that they cannot cope with it any longer.

The Chairperson: On that point, Carmel, the problem is that the practice has changed. One simple example is that district inspectors are no longer permitted to become part of the inspection team. A district inspector is the person who knows the school best. Would that be interpreted, however, as creating too cosy a house? That is not about meeting the needs of the school but about meeting the needs of the system, and that is where the problem lies.

In this job, I have met many people over the years. On the occasion that we met them, we saw that the district inspectors are a very professional group of people with a genuine interest. They are not interested in cover-ups. They are not interested in trying to paint a picture that is not there. They are genuinely interested in saying, "Here is the need. Here is the way that we can address that need. We are here to help".

Colm, you mentioned the district inspector coming in for a cup of coffee. If the inspectorate finds out who he is, it will probably tell him, "Don't ever be doing that again". It is that attitude that has poisoned the process and poisoned relationships. There is now fear. We need very quickly to find a way of drawing inspections back to where they used to be. Let us be honest: nobody likes inspections. I do not like it when my office is audited. However, I will tell you this: it keeps you on your toes and makes sure that you have everything in place, have everything right, and can open any file and say to anybody, "There you are. I will not interfere in what you are doing in any way".

Mr Kinahan: I want to explore the more positive side. In the report, there are 15 responses on alternative approaches. Those are all to do with sharing and working together. Have you other ideas on how you reward good practice and make schools feel good so that they go out and share, and everyone is brought together? That is part of it, and it seems to be what is missing. The whole idea is for there to be rewards and for people to be brought together.

Dr Gallagher: Ofsted is now asking questions similar to ours. It is asking principals for suggestions on how inspections should change. That is what should happen here. You have been asking everybody to provide evidence. Why not ask the practitioners to put forward a genuine series of proposals? I reiterate the point that some hard things are being said, but they are realistic and offered in the best possible taste, so to speak. People genuinely want to contribute to improvement. It is about partnership, mentoring, coaching and all the things that Colm and Bryan talked about.

Mr Davis: It is about more exchange of good staff and good leaders between schools and secondments to other schools to support and help them. It is sometimes a very isolated role when you are up there.

Mr Kinahan: To do that, we need to build in more time. I take my hat off to you for being involved in this today.

Mr Davis: It will take a lot of time to build the model. It really will.

Dr Gallagher: We had an example recently where the ETI went in with some of their best inspectors on the literacy and numeracy agenda. Why not be radical and let us have the ETI in a support role for a few years, before returning to a different model of inspection? If we are so concerned about the system, why continue to inspect when we could be supporting?

Mr Jess: What is your picture of an inspector? Is it of one who is bussed in, drives around the countryside, stays a week and drives out again leaving mayhem, like in the famous novel, 'An Inspector Calls'? That is what we still have: a Victorian model.

We have been moving to self-evaluation. Self-evaluation will be worth the paper that it is written on only when we are allowed to be self-evaluative. Yes, have a small external evaluation of our self-evaluation to make sure that we are doing the right thing.

The Chairperson: Bryan, are you confident that, when you identify needs and issues, you will have the resource to address them? There is the nonsense around accessing psychology services, where you can get only two referrals, and all of that. Hundreds, or even thousands, of children are in need, and their needs are not being addressed in a way that we think is appropriate. That applies to not only pupils but staff, because, as with us, they would benefit from more training, advice and help, because that will ultimately have a huge impact on outcomes for young people and children in the system and in schools.

Mr Jess: If you want to have genuine improvement over the longer term, dropping in every five years with two weeks' or one month's notice is no good. It should be regular and frequent. If you work in a bank or shop, you have self-evaluation. You have appraisal going on all the time. Teachers have this notion of being in their wee room and locked away with children for years and years. That has gradually broken down. Principals and managers are in checking all the time.

Teachers are still funny people, in that they are fearful of outsiders coming in. As Colm indicated when talking about his district inspector, regular visits break down that barrier. That makes the whole inspection process more frequent, less threatening and, I suggest, less antagonistic than the current regime seems to be, whereby an inspector can visit a room twice and give no feedback whatsoever to the poor teacher. That is wrong. That is not having the interests of children at heart.

Mr Hazzard: I want to remark on that. I think that we are trying to paint a picture here that it would be great if we could have a model in schools based on self-evaluation. I hate the term "light touch", but perhaps there should be a lesser touch from outside. However, is the system ready for that now? I do not think that it is. Perhaps you think that it is. If it is not, what do we need to do to get to the point at which it is ready?

Mr Jess: I cannot speak for the whole system. I know our own locality. I would say that the vast majority of schools in our locality would be ready. It does not take long for a single inspector to go into a school and get a picture of what is going well or not. That is not difficult. You can see where a school is doing well. What you do afterwards is the important thing. I think that the light touch will achieve a better outcome in the long term. For goodness' sake, how many years of inspection have we had? Forty years. It has not worked so far. We are actually getting more draconian as time goes on, and it will get worse. Stress levels will go up, and that will not achieve the outcomes that we want. I have no doubt that some schools still need to make a fairly significant turnaround. The self-evaluation process is not yet embedded in those schools yet, so self-evaluation is not in place overall, no.

Mr Davis: As you know, self-evaluation is non-statutory at present. As such, people are just embarking on the journey. Each one of us is probably going along at a different rate. Special schools have perhaps always been ahead. Owing to the nature of their children, they have always had a culture of self-evaluation. Being a teacher in a special school is like being a detective: you go into the pupils' world and beat yourself up if they are not learning, so you are always evaluating everything over and over again.

For self-evaluation really to get a grip, it has been given a level of weighting and credibility that will inspire the school leader to take it on board. Being able to hand the document over to another principal, carry out the self-evaluation process and procedures, and moderate what your standards are is something that we need to build up in small clusters. There perhaps needs to be a light touch from the inspectorate outside a cluster, or from another cluster. Compare clusters, yes, to get a realistic benchmark, but you also have to get the staff to believe in the whole culture of self-evaluation and impress on them that it will be used as a fair means to show progress in the school, celebrate achievement, promote a positive culture, and all those things. Yes, you can do a bit of professional development on that side of it. However, that has to come from within. Schools have to believe that, if it is to be part of an inspection process, it will be a very valuable part of it.

I was able to hand over my document as the inspectors walked in through the door. To be honest, I think that they used quite a bit of it for checking out or looking for evidence as they went around the school. The evidence was there, and they thought that the process was a bit hard on some areas. All the staff — 100 people — continually scored those areas and provided evidence from within the school. As such, it was an ongoing process. Not everybody would like that. Not everybody would do it. However, because we drove the culture forward in a very simplistic way, self-evaluation has been very effective. I really believe that the inspectors used what we had done.

Many years ago, I was an associate assessor. I did it for around seven years, although not for the past few years. I was very surprised when I went into a school to find that the information was not organised in such a way that inspectors could find it easily. There was some good practice in that school. However, if it is not to be found — I perhaps found it, but I was only an associate assessor — and, as Carmel said, they are going into the right classrooms but the right documentation cannot be found, that is a bit of a problem. I used to sit there thinking that I had to justify that when I had seen good practice.

My advice to school leaders when I talk to them is to make sure that they have everything nicely colour-coded against the sections in the self-evaluation process. It has to be very clear — the evidence is there — and they should produce more than one folder. People would argue differently on that one. However, because there is more than one inspector, if one inspector walks off with it, nobody else can read it, and if you are there for only two and a half or three and a half days, that will be the snapshot that you get. So, clear advice on what to have ready for them could also be very useful.

We talked earlier about procedural elements. That is also a bit of a downfall for schools. They are understated and do not sell themselves as a result. Some school leaders do not have the confidence to sit and challenge inspectors during the inspection process and may wait until afterwards. They really should have an open and frank discussion at the time. Otherwise, as a school leader, you are left having to address with teachers the issues that the inspectors may have found. You end up having to have a word with them. In other words, the inspectors have not had a word with them; you are left to do that. That is when union action sometimes results. The teacher is not mentioned in the report. This is what other schools are telling us. Having to address those issues starts to create a lot of stress for the school leader. It should have been addressed because the school leader was not in the classroom doing the PRSD observation. The teacher was *[Inaudible.]* Therefore, there are lots of issues, as you know.

The Chairperson: Carmel, Bryan and Colm, thank you very much. I think that we could talk for a lot longer. I have no doubt that we will come back to this. Obviously, we meet the inspectorate tomorrow. We will then draw up and finalise the report, after which there will be a debate in the Assembly. The inspectorate has picked up on some of the issues even before we have the report out and is carrying out some work as a result of some comments that have been made. That is valuable and helpful. The inspectorate will dispute that it intended to do that work anyway.

Thank you for the evidence that you have presented to us, which can only be described as credible and compelling. We continue to wish you and your colleagues well. We look forward to working with you in the weeks and months ahead.

Dr Gallagher: Thank you, Chairman. On behalf of the profession, I thank the Assembly's Education Committee for shining a light on the issue. It is an uncomfortable one. We are respectful and supportive of many of things that the inspectorate does. I hope that it hears that message but also that, if it offers a challenge, it can take the challenge back and improve in the way in which it wants schools to improve.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much.