

14/08/2013
Peter McCallion
Room 243, Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw, Stormont, BT4 3XX

Email: committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk

Inquiry into the ETI and the School improvement process

i. Early Years – the organisation for young children

Early Years¹ is the largest organisation in Northern Ireland working with, and for, all young children. It is a non-profit making organisation and has been operating since 1965 to promote and develop high quality, evidence-informed early childhood services for young children, their families and communities. Our vision is that children are strong, competent and visible in their communities; physically and emotionally healthy; eager and able to learn and respectful of difference.

We work within a strong set of values which place listening to children and those who care for them; inclusion and diversity; a strong voice for children; parents as first educators; participation of children and families; community involvement and development; partnership and excellence and evidence-based innovation at the forefront of what we do. We believe our vision and values not only create a framework for us to provide services consistent with our positive vision of and for children but point to many areas of relevance to this present, much needed, inquiry.

ii. Inquiry terms of reference

Prior to commencing with the main body of this written submission, Early Years wish to express disappointment in the actual terms of reference for the Committee's inquiry circulated to stakeholders. The terms of reference outlines the areas which the Committee will explore as including school inspection, the school improvement process and issues impacting on schools experiencing difficulties. Such consistent usage of the term 'school' in this manner is regrettable. Experience has taught us that this inevitably leads to an assumption that the fundamental stage before formal school commencement, pre-school education, is not worthy of consideration. The precise use of terminology is extremely important here. Specific reference to the important pre-school level of the education pathway should have been included. This Early Years submission, towards a more holistic approach, therefore will seek to highlight significant suggested areas for the Committee's inquiry broken into 1) key issues within the current system; and 2) recommended priorities and actions to be taken forward whilst maintaining a focus on pre-school education.

1. Key issues within the current system

The ETI used to have its own budget but this is now controlled by the Department of Education. It is contended that this creates a number of associated implications for the required role of the Inspectorate as an assessor, challenger, advisor and supporter of settings within an overall environment of continuous improvement and

¹ For more see <http://www.early-years.org/>

self-reflection/evaluation, given that this role presently does not stem from an independence from the Department. Such implications include:

- The Department of Education utilises too narrow a definition of literacy² concerning the use and understanding of appropriate and legible written information. This should be much wider given the range of children within the tiers of our education system and the widely acknowledged (such as in the recent Public Accounts Committee Report³), convincing evidence which indicates the greatest improvements in literacy and numeracy skills will come from sustained intervention and investment in children's early years.
- It would appear that the ETI is being driven by the Department's current emphasis on statistics and data. As such data is only available at primary and post-primary levels, the perception is growing among stakeholders that the work of the ETI is currently more focused on primary and post-primary levels of the education system with an ever-decreasing focus on pre-school education.
- Early Years would prefer to see a more holistic approach to children's education. We must seek to skill and support our children for the future in which they are growing and learning towards and this has to include a focus so that the essential abilities for all future learning, successful social engagement and preparation for life (perseverance, negotiation, self-regulation, motivation, ability to interact) can also be acquired. To quote Eric Hoffer, 'in times of change, learners inherit the Earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists'.
- We also note that the most recent Chief Inspector's Report did not receive the same level of dissemination within the pre-school sector as the other sectors. Separate conferences were held to disseminate the findings to principals of primary, secondary and special schools yet no such conference took place in relation to the pre-school sector. This was regrettable given the significance of many of the findings in the report pertaining to the quality of provision in pre-school settings. If the pre-school sector is to continue to improve, then similar opportunities for settings to come together and address issues within the CI report should have been provided

The current area of, and processes surrounding, inspections themselves will be a significant aspect of the Committee's Inquiry. Within the present system, despite initiatives underway to shorten in some cases and standardise inspection notification periods, it is contended that inspections are, or at least are being perceived as, becoming 'an event' to be prepared for following receipt of notification. Inspections need to be viewed as part of the 'process' of continuous improvement and self-reflection/evaluation carried out by schools and pre-school settings.

2. Priorities and actions

To support the Committee's consideration of what priorities and actions need to be taken to improve ETI's approach to the improvement process as part of this Inquiry we recommend the following:

² For example see the 'Count, Read: Succeed' Strategy

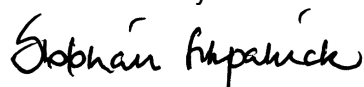
³ Report on Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in School: May 2013; NIA 116/11-15
ISBN: 978-0-339-60482-7

- In developing an environment of assured quality and stakeholder confidence in the required role for the Inspectorate as an assessor, challenger, advisor and supporter of settings within an overall environment of continuous improvement and self-reflection/evaluation, the ETI should be independent from DE.
- In order to ascertain the true state of affairs, unannounced inspections should be the norm not the exception.
- Inspections should not be perceived as just an event: instead, they should be viewed as part of promotion of continuous improvement and a culture of self-evaluation.
- There also needs to be developed more sustained relationship between district inspectors and their schools/pre-school settings.
- Consideration should be given to more joined-up inspections with ETI working more closely with other inspection bodies, in particularly, the HSCT.
- The ETI should report in greater detail on the advancement of 'Shared Education' made by individual schools as recommended by the Ministerial Advisory Group for the advancement of Shared Education in Northern Ireland.⁴
- The ETI inspections should focus more a child-centred approach rather than DE's narrow pursuit of statistics, data and measurement and the employment of limited definitions of literacy and numeracy.
- In line with other approaches towards area based planning, more opportunities should be presented for ETI to inspect how pre-school settings and other professions in an area work together to promote specific actions and improvements together towards a child centred and holistic approach and supporting the child and family through all stages of the education process.
- Given the narrowing of the ETI's work to primary and post-primary work mirrored with decreasing interest in the pre-school sector (as demonstrated by the lack of CI conference for early years), we would suggest that perhaps it is time that an alternative form of external verification (aligned with well embedded self-evaluation processes) is employed within the pre-school sector.

Oral evidence to the Committee

We would welcome the opportunity to present oral evidence to the Committee and elaborate further on the key areas within this submission in order to ensure that issues surrounding current and future inspection and improvement processes adequately reflect all education levels in the development of both this inquiry and the Committee's final report.

Yours sincerely



Siobhán Fitzpatrick CBE
Chief Executive Officer

⁴ <http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEducation/MinisterialAdvisoryGroup/>