



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Research and Information Service Briefing Paper

Paper 98/15

10th August 2015

NIAR 377-15

Caroline Perry

Young people's views on school inspection

Summary

This briefing paper explores the views of students on school inspection obtained through a series of 12 focus groups held with schools. A number of the schools had recently experienced an inspection.

A large proportion of participants in the focus groups stated that the inspectors did not observe a “typical” day at their school. Instead, many noted that their lessons were different, that their teachers’ attitudes changed and they had been told how to behave in advance. As a result, students agreed that inspectors should not give any notice for future visits.

The majority of focus group participants noted that they would like to be involved in inspection, suggesting that they could make a valuable contribution. Many called for greater opportunities for pupils to engage with inspectors. There was consensus that parents should be involved in the process, and many students also wanted wider school staff, such as classroom assistants and caretakers, to participate.

Participants highlighted a number of areas they thought should be included in school inspection, particularly:

- Teachers’ skills and their interactions with pupils;

- Pupils' happiness and well-being;
- School policies, such as bullying; and
- Exam results.

This paper highlights a number of areas that could be given further consideration, including:

- The potential advantages and disadvantages of shorter notice periods for inspections or unannounced inspections focusing on other areas in addition to pastoral care and safeguarding;
- The potential for greater involvement of students in school inspection, including advantages and disadvantages;
- The potential for greater involvement of wider school staff, such as classroom assistants and catering staff, including advantages and disadvantages; and
- The extent to which inspections assess children's well-being.

1 Introduction

The Committee for Education carried out an inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and the school improvement process in 2013/14. Subsequently, the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe) held a series of focus groups with students to explore their views on school inspection. This briefing paper considers the findings from the focus groups.

2 Methodology

RaISe held a total of 12 focus groups covering all post-primary school management types, including a special school, an Irish-medium school and an Education Other than at School (EOTAS) provider.

Education Officers held a series of focus groups with schools visiting Parliament Buildings and made a number of outreach visits to schools to ensure a mixture of school management types. All students from the school groups took part in the discussions. The remainder of this paper considers the findings of the focus groups.

3 Experiences of inspection

A number of schools participating in the focus groups had been inspected recently. When asked about their experience of inspections, many students described inspectors observing their class, checking the work of a small number of students and, in some cases, asking pupils questions.

A large proportion of students believed that the lessons and aspects of the school inspected were not reflective of a “*typical*” day at their school. Instead, many reported that they had been told how to behave when the inspectors were present, that teachers were acting differently and that lessons varied from their usual structure and content.

Some pupils attending EOTAS said that their mainstream school¹ told them not to attend during the inspection, while others stated that they were made to move class so that the inspectors would not see what they described as “*bad behaviour*.”

“We have more fun and do better activities whenever the inspectors are in, and the teachers are nicer.”

“We were made to act a certain way so that we look better than we usually act.”

“Before they came the last couple of days involved cramming work to get stuff completed that hadn’t been done in the year: a lot of homework.”

As a result, there was agreement among students who reported that their school was different on the day of inspection that future inspections should not be announced in advance. Currently schools receive two weeks’ notice of an inspection² and unannounced inspections focus only on pastoral care and safeguarding.³

“It’s not an accurate evaluation of the school as everyone is acting more proper. Less notice should be given of when the inspection will take place to combat this – surprise inspections.”

Other changes suggested by students whose school had been inspected included having a longer duration of inspection and a greater number of inspectors. Some participants attending EOTAS suggested that inspectors did not have a good understanding of alternative provision.

4 Involvement of students in school inspection

A majority of participants stated that they would like to be involved in school inspection, suggesting that they were well-placed to provide inspectors with information on the school’s performance. Many suggested that inspectors should speak to all pupils rather than a small minority of them.

¹ Schools retain responsibility for pupils attending EOTAS who are registered with them and are expected to contribute to learning opportunities within the EOTAS placement

² Education and Training Inspectorate (2013) *Inspection notification periods*[online] Available at: <http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/what-we-do/support-material/support-material-general-documents-non-phase-related/support-material-general-documents-about-inspection/inspection-notification-periods-september-2013.pdf>

³ ETI *Education and Training Inspectorate: Types of inspection* [online] Available at: <http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/what-we-do/types-of-inspection-amended-2.pdf>

Most of those who wanted to participate in the process called for greater opportunities to give inspectors their views about their school, on a one-to-one basis, through focus groups or by filling in a questionnaire. A smaller proportion of pupils wanted to showcase work to inspectors.

“We are the students that go to the school: we know what happens when the inspectors aren’t there.”

“The education system is there for our benefit and if they don’t check what we think should be done to improve it, why bother doing the inspection at all?”

A smaller number of students stated that they did not want to participate in inspections, giving reasons including:

- A lack of confidence in expressing views;
- Disagreement or discomfort with the general approach to inspection (for example the length of visits or a perception of pressure within the school during the process);
- A perception that teachers are acting differently during the inspection; and
- A perception that inspection is not relevant to students.

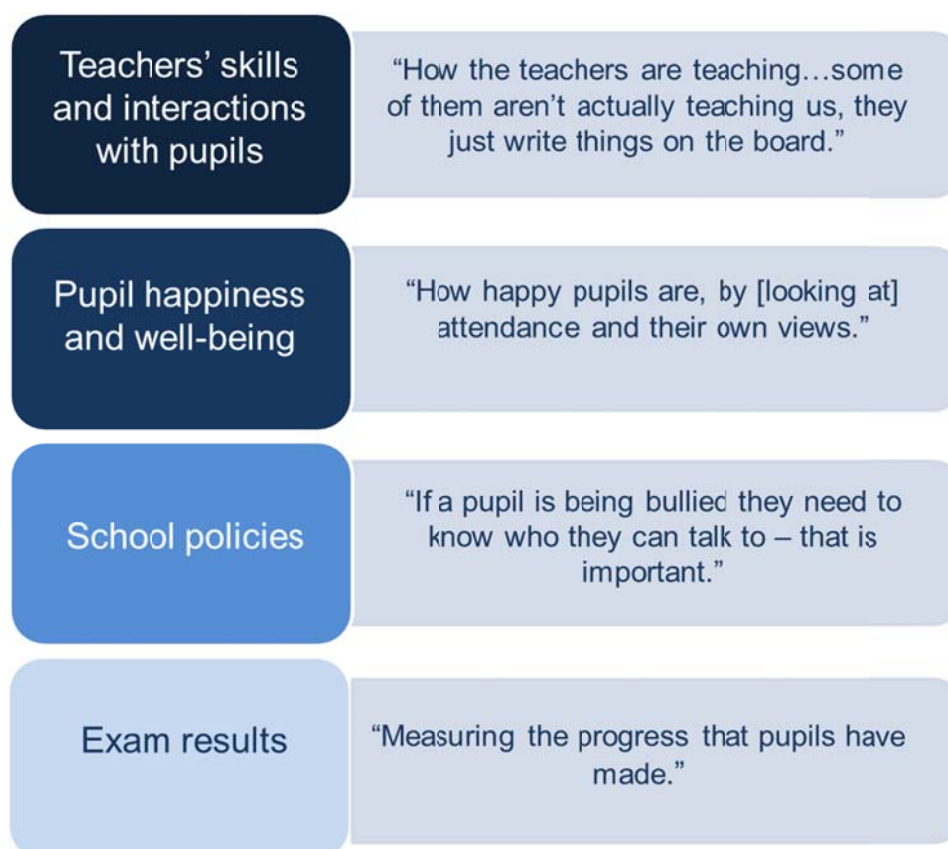
There was consensus among participants that parents should be involved in school inspections. Most students thought that inspectors should also obtain the views of school staff other than teachers and principals. In particular, many suggested that staff such as caretakers, catering staff and classroom assistants could provide useful information.

“I’d like my parents to take part because they are part of my education.”

“Everyone involved in the school, everyone that works in it really, because it’s a reflection of the school. Really, it should be about all aspects of it.”

5 Assessing school performance

Students frequently mentioned a number of key areas they thought should be included within a school inspection; these are highlighted in the following figure.

Figure 1: Key areas for inspection highlighted by focus group participants

Focus group participants highlighted a number of other areas they believed inspectors should consider: particularly behaviour, attendance and pastoral care. Participants from two schools suggested that exam results should not be included. Some suggested that a value-added approach of measuring progress over time would give a more accurate reflection of the school's performance.

"Progress should be measured more than the actual test results because children take tests differently, like some panic, others take them okay and one might be good in a certain subject and others won't. It's how the child learns not how well they did in an exam."

6 Conclusion

This briefing note has explored the views of young people participating in focus groups on school inspection. It has highlighted a perception among many students that inspectors do not experience a typical school day due to preparations taken by the school in advance.

A majority of pupils believed that inspections should include student views, with many also suggesting that wider school staff, such as caretakers and catering staff, could provide useful contributions. Areas that could be given further consideration include:

- The potential advantages and disadvantages of shorter notice periods for inspections or unannounced inspections focusing on other areas in addition to pastoral care and safeguarding;
- The potential for greater involvement of students in school inspection, including advantages and disadvantages;
- The potential for greater involvement of wider school staff, such as classroom assistants and catering staff, including advantages and disadvantages; and
- The extent to which inspections assess children's well-being.