A CO-PROFESSIONAL APPROACH TO INSPECTION FOR ACCOUNTABILITY AND IMPROVEMENT: PROGRESS AND PROSPECTS IN THE IRISH CONTEXT[1]

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This paper examines developments in inspection and school self-evaluation in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland since 2010, and looks ahead to how aspects of these processes can be further developed. Current approaches to inspection are described in the context of a collaborative approach involving a range of partners, and the development and revision of standards dealing with teaching and learning, and leadership and management. The evolution of inspection reports is described, and evidence from a survey of principals and teachers is provided to highlight strong levels of satisfaction with new evaluation models. Challenges to be met include embedding standards in schools and other educational settings, improving engagement with parents and students in inspections, improving how data are used to support inspections and school self-evaluations, and maintaining a loop of learning between schools and the development of educational policy. The paper concludes with a consideration of how researchers and teachers in Higher Education could support changes in evaluation and inspection.

OVERVIEW

The work of the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in the period from 2010 to the present has been subjected to at least one independent academic review, published in *Towards a Better Future: A Review of the Irish School System,* following a wide-ranging examination of Irish education (Coolahan, Drudy, Hogan, Hyland & McGuinness, 2017). One chapter of the review is devoted to the work of the Inspectorate. Its findings about many aspects of our work are largely positive but the authors

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concluded that the pace at which we have sought to introduce innovations may have been too rapid. The conclusions, and interviews that Coolahan and his team conducted with me and my colleagues in the Inspectorate as part of their review, proved to be very thought-provoking, and there is much in their analysis to reflect upon. In contrast to their remit, however, this paper is based on an 'insider' perspective. Drawing on experience from within the Inspectorate, it provides insights on changes in policy and practice in the areas of evaluation and inspection that have recently been introduced to the Irish education system.

At the outset, it is worth underlining two maxims that are relevant to this discussion: first, that the Inspectorate believes that *the* most powerful factor in ensuring children's learning in schools and other settings is the quality of the individual and collective practice of teachers and practitioners; and second, that *a range of complementary features* are needed to provide an effective quality assurance process for an education system. Inspection, of itself, cannot insert quality into any system or process. A consistent theme in the research on evaluation and improvement, and a strong finding from the OECD's extensive study on evaluation and assessment in the education sphere (OECD, 2013a), is that high-quality teaching and learning in schools is enhanced through a range of measures, including:

- effective initial and continuing teacher-education programmes;
- relevant and challenging curricula;
- a broad range of well-considered student assessment arrangements;
- excellent school leadership and investment in preparation for school leadership;
- the use of national and international surveys and monitoring; and
- external inspection and effective internal self-evaluation.

While acknowledging this range of measures to be necessary for a comprehensive approach to quality assurance, I also note the view of Melanie Ehren of the Institute of Education in London that 'inspections [of schools] are here to stay and have become important elements of education and accountability systems, particularly in Europe' (2016, p. 1). So, the focus in this paper is confined to just one of the elements of quality assurance listed above: to external inspection and school self-evaluation. I examine how these processes are being used in the Irish system, largely in the school sector but also in the early years' sector. The paper does not discuss changes to purely internal and administrative issues; rather it is concerned with those aspects of

our work that directly affect the schools and settings in which we provide inspection and advisory services.

The first part of the discussion looks at how the Inspectorate has sought to develop both inspection and school self-evaluation over the past six to eight years. I believe we have made considerable headway but some aspects have progressed less quickly than might have been expected, while others remain to be tackled. The second part considers how the Inspectorate has sought to identify some current challenges and tasks in the years immediately ahead and how these might be tackled. Finally, some questions are posed about how researchers and teachers at Third Level might assist us in addressing the evaluation and inspection challenges that lie ahead.

WHAT HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED TO DATE?

A Commitment to a Distinctive Purpose and Approach to Inspection

Since 2010, a number of themes or guiding principles have informed and shaped the development of the work of the Inspectorate in schools. We agreed to work towards a commitment that inspection had to serve both accountability and improvement functions; that a greater emphasis needed to be placed on encouraging school improvement; and that an inspection system focussed singularly on high stakes accountability would fail to exploit the particular benefits that external inspection could bring to the quality assurance of schools. Some of these aspirations are reflected in the work of Ehren (2016, pp.1-2) who described the particular contributions that inspection can make to improving educational practice:

> [school inspections] have an important role in providing information about the quality of schools, particularly on wider, less easily measured goals such as school culture and climate, safety and well-being and effective pedagogy…..As the key for improving performance lies in the quality of classroom teaching, school inspections are by nature well positioned to look at what works best in thinking about effective pedagogy and are also well placed to disseminate such effective practice. During their visits of schools, as well as in follow-up activities in failing schools, school inspectors can use a much more refined approach to address school failure than the approaches we would find in monitoring and accountability systems that only make use of test data and other quantitative performance indicators.

An equally important commitment made by the Inspectorate concerned the manner in which we would carry out our role. Determined that our work would encourage improvement, we built upon an approach to inspection that had been adopted following the passing of the Education Act of 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998) and committed ourselves to a collaborative and co-professional partnership with teachers, school leaders and others in school communities.

So how have we lived up to these twin commitments regarding *purpose* and *professional engagement*? Both have been incorporated into three of the four guiding principles in our new *Code of Practice* (DES, 2015). The principle of 'Development and Improvement' underpins our emphasis on promoting improvement in schools and settings; the principle of 'Respectful Engagement' commits us to working cooperatively with school communities in a spirit of mutual respect and reciprocity; and the principle of 'Responsibility and Accountability' commits us to providing 'the public with an assurance of the quality of teaching and learning in publicly-funded schools and other educational settings', and to reporting 'objectively and fairly… having taken the context of the school or setting into account' (DES, 2015, p. 5). In evaluating and reporting on schools, we have continued to avoid the narrow measures of test scores and examination grades as the sole determinant of the value of schools' work, and we have also placed a strong emphasis on evaluating the work of each school within its particular context. Our inspections seek to affirm positive practice and to identify poor practice where it exists.

It is for others to judge how successful we have been in fostering a collaborative and co-professional approach, but we have deliberated at length about how we work in schools and the other settings that we inspect, and we place a very strong emphasis, through induction and continuing professional development, on instilling this approach in newly-recruited and serving inspectors. We have changed the ways in which we develop inspection models so that, rather than relying solely on formal consultative processes, we have begun to engage in trials and experimentation (with the agreement of schools and settings) as part of a developmental process for proposed changes. This approach has led us to change aspects of our original plans. More importantly, though, it has served to alleviate fears and anxieties among practitioners, teachers, school leaders and their representative bodies about proposed changes. This has engendered greater trust in advance of

changes being formally introduced to the system, and perhaps greater confidence in the validity of inspections.

A Collaborative Effort to Set Standards for Educational Provision

An important outcome of our commitment to collaborative partnership has been the whole process of setting standards for educational provision. We have been aware for some time of how modern evaluation systems need a clear statement of the standards that we expect of schools and other settings and this has been reflected in the Inspectorate's development of standards for primary and post-primary schools (Hislop, 2012). These were originally envisaged as a fully comprehensive set of standards for the Irish school system that would consist of standards for *teaching and learning*, standards for *leadership and management*, and standards for *student supports*.

The standards for *teaching and learning*, issued in guidelines for school self-evaluation in autumn 2012, provided the first published set of standards for this dimension of work (DES, 2012). The publication drew on school effectiveness research and followed an extensive, and at times challenging, consultation process. It was clear that inspectors' judgements were informed by the standards and that a majority of schools engaged in the self-evaluation process in the period between 2012 and 2016. Subsequent feedback also showed, however, that the standards had proved unwieldy for schools, and the Inspectorate accepted that significant revision was required. Detailed work was carried out with key partners, including the professional bodies for principals, school management authorities, parents, students and teacher unions as well as groups within the DES working to establish the Centre for School Leadership. All of this work was informed by further research from national and international sources.

A radically different set of standards was published in September 2016 – *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools* (DES, 2016a) and *Looking at Our School 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools* (DES, 2016b). These are the first fully comprehensive set of published standards for Irish schools. Instead of the originally-conceived three dimensions, two survived in the revised documents: *teaching and learning* and *leadership and management*, with elements of the third dimension, *supports for students*, integrated into both of these. Content was pared back and the standards were written as statements of practice (or descriptors) that provide an accessible picture of what each one means. Each standard is now presented at two levels of practice: what constitutes

'effective practice' and what might be expected at the level of 'highly effective practice'. This style of presentation is intended to encourage schools to think about and improve aspects of their practice in terms that range from 'good' to 'excellent'.

The quality framework is intended to provide a shared understanding of effective teaching, learning, leadership and management practices in the Irish school system. It adopts a broad, balanced and challenging view of learning – one that is responsive to learners' needs, concerned with learners' well-being and determined to foster the balanced learning of knowledge, skills and dispositions. The framework sees high-quality teaching as a powerful influence on achievement, and reflecting the work that Fullan, Hargreaves, Hattie and others have produced (e.g., Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hattie, 2012), it points to the importance of teachers' *collaborative* practice as well as teachers' *individual* practice.

Looking at Our School 2016 is not a prescriptive formula for standardisation. We recognise the limitations of such frameworks. Very tightly defined standards may have advantages in terms of reliability, for example, but some of the most valuable aspects of inspection and evaluation deal with features of school life that are not amenable to check-list criteria.

The standards are written in a way that respects the professional autonomy of the teacher and school leader, rather than providing a checklist of mandatory requirements. Time will tell whether the revised version proves more user-friendly than its 2012 predecessor. The fact that this body of work has evolved from collaboration with a wide range of partners and for a broader range of purposes than simply inspection and school self-evaluation is positive. A further advantage is that the standards that inspectors use in coming to judgements about the work of schools have now been made explicit, and already school leaders have reported using them as the starting point for reflective practices with their staffs. We also know that the standards are being used (as was intended) to inform the development of recruitment policies for school leaders and middle management and to inform the content of continuing professional development. Over time, we have further work to do to ensure the ongoing validity of the framework and indeed of the inspection models linked to it.

A Range of Inspection Models to Make Inspections More Responsive to Need
A third task that we have commenced is the development of a range of inspection models for use in schools. In September 2016, we introduced a

number of new inspection models and revised older ones. As shown in Table 1, these include short unannounced visits to schools in addition to more intensive whole-school evaluations and follow-up inspections.

As envisaged, the shorter inspections, particularly the unannounced visits, enable us to monitor practice in a larger number of schools. In addition to the evaluation aspect of our work, information from these inspections is an important factor in planning for the deployment of more intensive inspections. This information, combined with a range of other data, enables us to target our resources when a more thorough engagement with the staff, board of management and wider school community might be beneficial, and to minimise the disruption of inspection where it is less urgent.

Establishing this range of inspection models has not been without its challenges, especially as their introduction was accompanied by a shortening of many of the notice periods for notified inspections. Our education partners, for example, told us that while the range of models was intended to lessen the inspection burden on most schools, the introduction of so many inspection approaches was potentially confusing and overwhelming for teachers and schools. So, we worked with them to address their concerns and produced a set of guides to inspection at primary and post-primary level that were subsequently well-received (DES, 2016a, b, c). This is a further example of how our co-professional approach has paid dividends. We have succeeded in introducing the models with the collaboration of school communities who facilitated and aided the development of our plans.

Having this range of inspection models available to us has helped to ensure that we engage with greater numbers of schools on a reasonably regular basis and for a diversity of purposes. Some models, such as incidental inspections and follow-through inspections, are proving to be particularly beneficial at both primary and post-primary levels in fostering detailed co-professional discussions between inspectors and school leaders regarding school improvement. We also believe that shorter or no-notice period inspections help to reduce the risk of 'teaching to the inspection'. A remaining concern is our level of engagement with primary schools. Despite the use of this range of inspection models, staffing resources for inspections in the very large number of primary schools in the system need to be increased to provide the sort of advisory and inspection service that we believe to be desirable.[2]

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[2] In the school year 2015-2016, recognised state-aided schools totalled 3,124 mainstream primary schools, 138 special schools, and 735 post-primary schools.

Table 1

Inspection Models Approved for Use in Schools – September 2016

Length/intensity	Inspections in primary schools	Inspections in post-primary schools
Short, unannounced inspections *(1 in-school day)*	Incidental inspection	Incidental inspection
Medium-scale inspections, covering an aspect of the work of the school *(typically 1-2 school days)*	Curriculum evaluation Evaluation of provision for pupils with special education needs	Subject inspection Subject inspection of special education needs Programme evaluation (Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Applied, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme)
Whole-School type inspections *(typically, 3 in-school days)*	Whole-School Evaluation, Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL)	Whole-School Evaluation, Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL)
	Whole-School Evaluation (WSE)	Whole-school Evaluation (WSE)
	Evaluation of action planning for improvements in *DEIS* schools	Evaluation of action planning for improvements in *DEIS* schools
(typically 2 in-school days)		Evaluations of Centres for Education, Inspections of Schools in High Support Units, Special Care Units and Children Detention Centres
Follow-up inspections *(typically 1-2 -school days)*	Follow-through inspections	Follow-through inspections

We know that inspectorates in other countries are seeking to develop approaches to inspection that address the complexities of systems with greater school autonomy and where groups of schools operate in formalised networks (e.g., Brown, McNamara & O'Hara, 2015; Ehren et al., 2017). These conditions do not exist in the same way in Ireland, but we have evaluated a group of mainly *DEIS* schools (schools participating in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools project) at primary and post-primary level in a single urban area with a view to examining linkages between schools and how these are impacting on student learning. As the project yielded considerable insights both for individual schools and for schools collectively, we intend to extend it to other areas.

Evolution of Our Inspection Reports

School inspection reports have to fulfil both improvement and accountability functions – providing guidance for and affirmation of good practice, and reporting accurately to a professional audience as well as to parents and others. This is not an easy balance to achieve in a single document.

Until recently, we have probably been less successful in maximising the accessibility of the reports that we publish as a result of our inspections; the language and style used might not always have been sufficiently clear, especially to a non-technical audience. A published inspection report is a formal document, however, and a certain formality of language will probably always be necessary to fully reflect the complex dynamics of school environments. We believe that schools, their culture and the work that goes on in them, are not readily reduced to a single score or even a single statement of judgement (such as "outstanding school" or "satisfactory school" or "failing school" as used in some jurisdictions) and we have opposed such a simplified approach. Nevertheless, we have taken steps to make our reports more accessible.

Since September 2016, each report opens with a standard description of what that inspection type is designed to examine. Each section of the report contains a clear evaluative statement about the quality of provision under that heading, and a grid is appended to each report showing the continuum of language that we use in reporting our judgements. The language continuum (see Appendix) contains a wide range of terms to allow inspectors to record nuanced judgements about a school's practice across the three, four, or more major dimensions of the school's work that are being evaluated in an

inspection. It is quite likely that the quality of any school's work will vary across these dimensions: teaching may be highly effective; learning may have considerable strengths; leadership and management may have scope for development, etc. This allows for a richer evaluation of strengths and areas of development, and we hope that this additional clarity will be helpful to the audiences that use our reports.

Advancement of Collaborative Self-Evaluation in Schools

Much of the research on school improvement demonstrates that when teachers examine both their individual and collective practice in a constructive and structured way, they can bring about significant improvement in the learning of students. Initiatives such as school self-evaluation, the advent of the Teaching Council's *Droichead* policy (the teacher-led induction of newly qualified teachers), and the inclusion of Subject Learning and Assessment Review meetings (SLARS) within the post-primary *Framework for Junior Cycle* are all intended to facilitate the sort of deep professional engagement among teachers that can be challenging, but very beneficial and professionally fulfilling.[3]

The adoption of these practices in schools is not without its challenges. The climate in which this agenda was being advanced in 2012 and subsequent years coincided with a most severe retrenchment in the funding of Irish public services, including schools. While further discussion on *Droichead* and SLARS is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that school self-evaluation was re-introduced to the system and made a mandatory requirement in 2012; extensive guidelines were published for schools; online supports were provided; seminars were held for principals; advisory visits were conducted by inspectors in over 4,000 schools within an initial two-year period; and regional seminars were organised at which schools shared their experiences and good practice. McNamara and O'Hara's (2012) research had revealed that a lack of similar supports had undermined an attempt to introduce school self-evaluation in 2003.

Weaknesses and shortcomings in the roll-out of school self-evaluation in the 2012-2016 period include the previously mentioned complexity of the standards. Some schools welcomed the initial requirement that literacy and numeracy should be reviewed during the initial four-year period, but others

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[3] The requirements for the second phase of school self-evaluation were set out in Departmental Circulars 39/2016 (DES, 2016d) and 40/2016 (DES, 2016e), which cover the period from 2016-2017 to 2019-2020.

felt that schools ought to have been freer to select their own areas for review. There was a risk, too, that school self-evaluation could become exclusively associated with the *Literacy and Numeracy Strategy* rather than with a wider agenda of school development and improvement. Schools also struggled with handling data and reporting self-evaluation outcomes to parents. Also, although the evidence showed that school self-evaluation was more advanced in primary schools, its implementation in that sector was impeded in the 2016-2017 school year by industrial action – an action taken in pursuit of restoration of middle-management posts, rather than because of any rooted objection to school self-evaluation.

Some of these concerns have been addressed in a review of school self-evaluation conducted with the education partners in 2015-2016. In the meantime, schools have been given greater freedom to identify their own issues for self-evaluation, provided that these relate to teaching and learning; the standards have been changed significantly in *Looking at Our School 2016*; and the reporting requirements have been simplified. More importantly, a conscious effort has been made to integrate school self-evaluation more effectively with other initiatives, including the roll-out of Junior Cycle changes, the introduction of the *Primary Languages Curricula* (CNCM, 2015; NCCA, 2015), *DEIS* action planning (DES, 2017a) and the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme (DES, 2017b, 2017c).

In summary, school self-evaluation has commenced in many schools but there is more work to be done over the next several years. Internal data from a national survey covering 95% of primary schools and 88% of post-primary schools in 2015 showed that all of the schools surveyed indicated engagement in the self-evaluation process, though smaller percentages reported completion of a school self-evaluation report. Even so, we are still not ready to rely on the conclusions of school self-evaluation as part of the evidence base for external inspection as inspectorates do in some countries. Also, it is likely that school self-evaluation will advance more in some schools than in others, given the skilled leadership that it requires. In that regard, I welcome the emphasis being placed on school self-evaluation by the Centre for School Leadership, by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), by the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), and by the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD). The IPPN and NAPD have regularly facilitated over-subscribed workshops on school self-evaluation given by inspectors and school leaders.

Effectiveness of the Approaches

All of the major tasks that we have set out to address since 2012 have been advanced at a time when the human resources available to the Inspectorate were at their lowest level for some years, because of the public service moratorium and the employment control framework imposed during the financial crisis. Nevertheless, it is fair to ask if what we have been attempting to achieve is making a difference to the operation of schools and to students' learning. In this regard, the findings in Table 2, drawn from the surveys that are now routinely conducted with teachers and principals following whole-school evaluations, are of interest. These surveys, which are administered electronically by the Statistics Section of the DES (and from which we receive aggregated data only, to ensure the anonymity of the responses), show a high level of satisfaction among respondents with how we approach our work in schools.

More recently, the Statistics Section of the DES has begun to administer similar confidential online post-evaluation surveys to chairpersons of boards of management and chairpersons of parents' associations. The initial returns, though very small in number, are positive about the contribution that evaluations are making to school improvement, the manner in which evaluations are conducted and the feasibility of implementing the recommendations in the reports. As we obtain greater numbers of these returns, we will be monitoring the feedback very carefully.

Follow-through inspections are a further useful source of feedback regarding the impact of inspections. These are intended to monitor the implementation of recommendations in published reports and play an important role where there are concerns about the quality of provision.[4] School leaders, teachers and school boards of management often welcome the affirmation of follow-through inspections when improvements have been implemented. Data obtained in follow-through inspections showed that schools have acted upon a high proportion of recommendations. In 2015, for example, analysis of these data showed that schools had made very good progress or good progress in implementing 74% of recommendations at primary level and 79% of recommendations at post-primary level. This is

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[4] Where such concerns are identified, the school may be subject to monitoring by the Inspectorate or it may be referred to the Department's School Improvement Group which can implement a range of actions or interventions, including requesting follow-up inspections by the Inspectorate.

especially welcome given that some recommendations were made in respect of schools that had been inspected because of perceived risks or concerns.

Table 2
Satisfaction with Inspections in Post-evaluation Surveys, 2015-16

	Primary teachers and principals % agreeing or strongly agreeing	Post-Primary teachers and principals % agreeing or strongly agreeing
Feedback helped me to reflect on and develop my professional practice	88.3	84.0
The recommendations included in the report are relevant	86.1	84.4
Overall, the evaluation contributed in a practical way to our plans for school improvement	85.4	84.0

N = 534 primary out of 2,008 (26.8%); N = 172 post-primary out of 1,527 (11.3%)

In an environment where a number of initiatives are being taken to improve educational provision, it is difficult to disaggregate the effect of any one measure such as inspection on student achievement. While data from national and international surveys of achievement are not without limitations, it is encouraging that the performance of students in Ireland in such surveys has been positive during the 2012-2016 period. The 2014 National Assessments of English Reading and Mathematics showed the first significant improvements in over 30 years (Shiel, Kavanagh & Millar, 2014). In the 2012 and 2015 rounds of PISA, students in Ireland scored at very high levels in reading literacy, and at above average levels in mathematics and science (OECD, 2013b; OECD, 2016). The surveys of reading in PIRLS at primary level and of mathematics and science in TIMSS at primary and post-primary levels also showed that students in Ireland performed well overall (Clerkin, Perkins, & Cunningham, 2016; Eivers & Clerkin, 2012).

Perhaps one further indication that we are getting inspection and evaluation 'right' comes from the fact that the approaches we have been developing and implementing seem to resonate with actors outside the schools' sector. Teagasc, the Agricultural Development Authority, for example, sought detailed briefings from us on quality measures for agricultural colleges and subsequently asked us to construct and carry out whole-college evaluations (WCEs) using the co-professional and

collaborative approaches that we had developed for the schools' sector. We completed a full round of WCEs for Teagasc by the end of 2016 and the feedback from the authority has been positive about their impact.

On a much larger scale, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs asked us in 2015 to develop an education-focussed inspection of early years' provision within the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme[5] that would complement the regulatory inspections carried out by TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency. In this task, we set out to work closely with a sector that seemed wary of additional inspection. We recruited early years' specialists from the sector as inspectors. We developed a research-informed quality framework (DES, 2016f) following consultation with around 2,000 practitioners at different fora across the country. In fact, the best advocates for our new inspections at those sessions were practitioners who had experienced our trial inspections. There was much appreciation of our co-professional approach and a model of inspection that was firmly focussed on improvement has been well received by the sector.[6] The challenge is to deliver that model of inspection in over 4,000 early years' settings within a reasonable period of time with the current numbers of early years' inspectors.

Our work has attracted attention outside Ireland. We have developed strong collaborative links with inspectorates in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and within the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates. We were commissioned in 2016 to provide external quality assurance for the evaluation of an intervention project undertaken by the Education and Training Inspectorate in Northern Ireland.[7] We have also been approached to advise on the establishment or development of inspectorates in a number of countries. For example, we have provided training and work-shadowing experience in Ireland for newly-recruited inspectors from places as far apart

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[5] The Early Childhood Care and Education scheme provides at least one year of state-funded early years' provision for children from 3.5 years of age in privately operated, state supported and not-for-profit community-based early years' settings.

[6] A report on the consultation process that led to the development of the education-focussed early years' inspection model will be published shortly and a review of the first year of these inspections is due to commence in 2017. The creation of the education-focussed early years' inspections was recognised when the initiative won an Excellence Award at the national Civil Service Excellence Awards in December 2016.

[7] The Promoting Improvement in English and Mathematics (PIEM) project (from September 2013 to 2015) was initiated by the Education and Training Inspectorate, Northern Ireland, to provide specific support for a small number of schools with the objective of 'closing the gap' between an individual school's achievement and the Programme for Government General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) targets in English and mathematics.

as Malta, Moldova and Tanzania, and we have been invited to make presentations on our approach to inspection in a number of other countries.

WHERE TO NOW?

Identifying Priorities

These new challenges formed part of our strategic planning in late 2016 and early 2017. It was fortunate for us that this time coincided with the development of Minister Bruton's *Action Plan for Education* (DES, 2016g). Our engagement with the Minister and his team ensured that our future work could be informed by the priorities in the plan, and aligned with the broad range of actions that the Minister is advancing.

To inform our thinking about the next steps in inspection and evaluation, we held detailed conversations internally among inspectors, with the Secretary General and officials within the DES with whom we work, and with key external figures and critical friends. The latter included two academics who shared their ideas about the nature of learning and what we should be advancing in schools, and others with first-hand knowledge of our work and its impact on schools and teachers: a teachers' union leader, a key leader in a school management authority, and the chief executive of the National Parents' Council – all of whom challenged us in different ways to improve our work. We also invited a chief inspector from another jurisdiction to hold up the mirror of international practice to our work in Ireland, and we examined the outcomes from two doctoral research projects that we had sponsored on the views of children about schools and inspection (Conneely, 2015; Fleming, 2013, 2017).

Themes in the Development of Inspection and Evaluation

Based on these deliberations, we identified some key themes that will inform our work and the development of inspection and evaluation in the next three years or so. These are now considered.

Embedding the standards for educational provision in schools and settings will be a key priority. *Looking at Our School 2016 – A Quality Framework for Schools* has the potential to create a system-wide understanding of what constitutes good practice in teaching, learning, leadership and management. The quality framework for educational provision in early years' settings, developed in 2016, will be reviewed in 2017. It will provide a statement of standards for educational provision for our youngest learners. Making these

frameworks a practical reality for schools and early years' settings is not only about communication. We must work to embed the standards in inspection practice and in our reports. We also have to use the frameworks to identify and disseminate good practice, to support school self-evaluation, to encourage collaborative professional practice and to inform the public about standards of educational provision.

A second important task will be to increase the impact of the revised and new models of inspections. We want to ensure that our inspections benefit learners, but also teachers, practitioners and leaders in schools and early years' settings and, to that end, we have begun working on deepening inspectors' capacity to give feedback following inspections. We will be working with our partners on how best we can encourage school communities to implement report recommendations, and with other support services to provide schools with the necessary assistance and resources. We believe that we can disseminate our findings and examples of good practice from inspection more effectively, including to parents and the general public. We have also begun work on extending the ways in which our own work is quality assured, and we will continue to use systematically-collected feedback from schools and early years' settings to inform improvement in our inspection practice.

Thirdly, we are planning to improve the ways in which we engage parents and students in inspections. We have already introduced extensive use of questionnaires and focus groups for parents and students, and these provide important insights that inform our inspections. We also believe, however, that the time is right for us to review and improve the ways in which we access, analyse and use the experiences and opinions of parents and learners. This will be an important element in the development of our inspection practice in the next few years.

Promoting and fostering excellence is a fourth theme of interest and one that is very much informed by the *Action Plan for Education*. We see this as an opportunity to begin working with a small number of schools in *excellence and improvement visits* to advise, challenge and support school leaders and teachers in their efforts to develop innovative approaches and to improve standards. This work will support the implementation of the Minister's *School Excellence Fund*, the revised *DEIS* policy (DES, 2017a) and the policy on Gaeltacht education (DES, 2017b; 2017c). We have no pre-conceived or fixed view regarding these visits; rather we hope that the experience will provide a genuinely mutual learning opportunity.

Fifthly, we want to focus more on supporting the quality of leaders in schools and early years' settings. We know the critical role that leadership can play in the quality of the learning experienced by children and young people, and we want to reflect this reality in our inspections and in our advisory and support work (Hislop, 2015). *Looking at Our School 2016* sets specific standards for school leaders, and the quality framework for early years will also set expectations for the leadership of early years' settings – both for inspections and self-evaluation. We will continue to contribute to policy making in this area, and, supported by the *Action Plan for Education*, will work closely with school leaders during our inspections to enrich our mutual understanding of good practice and evaluation.

Improving how we use data to support both inspections and school self-evaluations is another important priority for us. We are very aware that inspections examine and seek to improve many features of schools that cannot be captured in numerical data, and we know that an over-reliance on data-based and desk-bound evaluation has been problematical for inspectorates in other countries. At the same time, we believe that we are not using data to best effect in the Irish school system, and we know that schools sometimes struggle to make use of assessment and other data. We need to ensure that all such information is more readily available to inspectors and schools so that inspection and school self-evaluation can be better informed and more context-sensitive. It is timely that the DES is establishing a division to ensure better collection and use of data and research, and we will be working closely with that division. In the Inspectorate, we plan to develop tools with which assessment and other data might be made available to inspectors, schools and early years' settings in more meaningful ways in the future.

Finally, we will continue to foster the loop of learning between schools and the development of educational policy. Inspection can add significant value to the education system. It can bring information about the reality of schools and early years' settings into the DES, and it can contribute to the monitoring of the effect of Departmental and other policies on the ground. Some of our new inspection models – for example, the model to evaluate special educational needs (SEN) provision in primary schools and the evaluations of *DEIS* action planning – are specifically designed to monitor specialised provision in schools and to inform policy making. Our involvement in issues such as curricular change, STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education, inclusion, and special education

policy remain high priorities, and we have acquired new roles in relation to education in the Gaeltacht and early years. The assignment of inspectors to work with officials in various sections of the DES and in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs is designed to assist policy making and implementation in these areas.

<div align="center">ROLE OF ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS</div>

To conclude, it might be useful to raise some questions about how academic institutions could contribute to the development agenda that we see not only for the Inspectorate, but also for the schools, early years' settings and individual learners, parents, practitioners and teachers with whom we work.

From an inspector's point of view, the DCU Centre for Evaluation Quality and Inspection and the DCU Centre for Assessment, Research, Policy and Practice in Education (CARPE) could fulfil a very beneficial role if their work brings about greater understanding of the value that evaluation – both internal review and external inspection – can add to the work of schools and early years' settings. Equally important are the skills of evaluation that teachers and others will need to acquire. Greater evaluation literacy, if I can use that term, could 'normalise' self-evaluation within the practice of teaching and leading in schools. It could also reduce the genuine fear and vulnerabilities that professionals may feel, for example, in the relatively safe space of peer observation or the more challenging space of reviewing team practice and working on moderation tasks when assessing student learning. So, in my view, making sure that the staff of both Centres contribute directly to the initial and continuing teacher education programmes in the DCU Institute of Education will be really important. I believe that when these inputs are routinely provided on an on-going basis to initial and continuing education programmes for teachers and other education professionals, DCU will have started to become the sort of research-informed Institute of Education that Sahlberg challenged Ireland to create (International Review Panel on the Structure of Initial Teacher Education Provision in Ireland, 2012). There is now an opportunity for the DCU Institute of Education's teaching and research in the complementary fields of evaluation and assessment to enrich each other, so strong linkages and synergies between both Centres could be very important and beneficial.

Academic research can and should challenge as well as enrich and support the quality of inspection in schools. Research on inspection and school self-evaluation has grown considerably in recent years, but remains a relatively new field of enquiry. Much of what is published has its origins in examining the work and impact of Ofsted in England and of the Dutch Inspectorate.[8] More recently, academics at the Institute of Education in London, notably Ehren (2016; Ehren et al. 2017), have widened the evidence base that they are drawing upon, and the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates has also encouraged wider research into inspection practice. I am aware of active researchers within Belgian, German and Swedish universities in this field. A wider evidence base that includes approaches to inspection, such as the paradigms used in the English and Dutch systems, would enrich this academic field. In this regard, I welcome the work that has started at the DCU Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection: it is contributing to a broadening of the international research base for inspection and evaluation practice, and has the potential to enrich discourse, scholarship and practice, here in Ireland and elsewhere.

Inspection is a skilled art. Within the Inspectorate we invest heavily in the initial and continuing professional development of inspectors. That professional development has itself altered significantly: it includes theoretical and applied elements, and uses a wide range of learning approaches – seminars, workshops, peer observations, lectures, personal reading and study, as well as post-graduate academic research and placement with other inspectorates on exchanges. All of this experience is essential to maintaining the quality, consistency and reliability of our work. A recent initiative has been to identify formal taught post-graduate programmes on the theory and practice of inspection, and a small number of our inspectors have completed, or are completing, such programmes at the Institute of Education in London, where there has been a significant tradition of this sort of provision. We are open to considering the placement of inspectors on similar high-quality taught programmes in institutions on the island of Ireland if these addressed the specific professional needs of inspectors. Staff in the DCU Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection are contributing to our

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[8] For example, in a literature review concerning the impact of inspections covering 92 studies and 14 countries, 52 of the studies related to inspections by Ofsted and 10 to inspections conducted by the Dutch Inspectorate. The next highest country was Sweden with six studies, while only one of the studies referred to Ireland (see Ehren, 2016).

professional development programmes and have overseen the completion of doctoral research on inspection-related topics by at least one of our senior management team in the Inspectorate.

Academic institutions serve a wider public duty to comment upon issues of national importance. It can be difficult for academic voices to be heard in the media, but some academics have managed to carve out a space in the public discourse on educational matters. How we assess students' learning may have profound effects on how young people experience education, as well as on their well-being and subsequent life chances. I wonder if academics in the field of education have considered whether the voice of academia has been sufficiently to the fore in informing public debate on issues such as junior cycle reform and the attempts to evolve student assessment. Have we had adequate public debate on the very unusual extent of public analysis devoted to state examinations in Ireland's media?[9] Or on the indirect impact that this may have on student well-being, and the efforts of schools to provide broad and balanced curricula? Can I suggest that how we view the work of schools is an important topic too? Is there a place for the DCU Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection to inform public debate or comment on the appetite for, and the risks associated with, the ways in which schools are ranked in public media? Or to speak about better sources of information about schools and their work, including perhaps inspection?

These are merely questions from a practitioner who is outside the academic field but for whom such questions suggest that evaluation and inspection must be just as deeply research-informed as any other activity within schools, early years' settings and the system as a whole. Indeed, engagement by academic institutions with practitioners and *vice-versa* can only be to the good of both theory and practice. The DCU Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection and other institutions in Ireland have the potential to contribute significantly to the achievement of this goal.

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[9] The unusual degree of media coverage of State Examinations in Ireland was examined in an academic study commissioned by the State Examinations Commission (see Baird, Hopfenbeck, Elwood, Caro & Ahmed, 2015).

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APPENDIX

THE INSPECTORATE'S QUALITY CONTINUUM

Inspectors describe the quality of provision in schools using the Inspectorate's quality continuum shown below. The continuum provides examples of the language used by inspectors when evaluating and describing the quality of a school's provision in each area. The use of the continuum was introduced in September 2016.

Table A1
Inspectorate's Quality Continuum

Level	Description	Examples of Descriptive Terms
Very Good	***Very good*** applies where the quality of the areas evaluated is of a very high standard. The very few areas for improvement that exist do not significantly impact on the overall quality of provision. For some schools in this category the quality of what is evaluated is ***outstanding*** and provides an example for other schools of exceptionally high standards of provision.	***Very good:*** of a very high quality; very effective practice; highly commendable; very successful; few areas for improvement; notable; of a very high standard. ***Excellent***: outstanding; exceptionally high standard, with very significant strengths; exemplary.
Good	***Good*** applies where the strengths in the areas evaluated clearly outweigh the areas in need of improvement. The areas requiring improvement impact on the quality of pupils' learning. The school needs to build on its strengths and take action to address the areas identified as requiring improvement in order to achieve a *very good* standard.	***Good:*** good quality: valuable; effective practice: competent; useful; commendable; good standard; some areas for improvement.

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APPENDIX (contd.)

Table A1
Inspectorate's Quality Continuum (contd.)

Level	Description	Descriptive Terms
Satisfactory	***Satisfactory*** applies where the quality of provision is adequate. The strengths in what is being evaluated just outweigh the shortcomings. While the shortcomings do not have a significant negative impact, they constrain the quality of the learning experiences and should be addressed in order to achieve a better standard.	Satisfactory; adequate; appropriate provision although some possibilities for improvement exist; acceptable level of quality; improvement needed in some areas.
Fair	***Fair*** applies where, although there are some strengths in the areas evaluated, deficiencies or shortcomings that outweigh those strengths also exist. The school will have to address certain deficiencies without delay in order to ensure that provision is satisfactory or better.	Fair; evident weaknesses are impacting on pupils' learning; less than satisfactory; experiencing difficulty; must improve in specified areas; action required to improve.
Weak	***Weak*** applies where there are serious deficiencies in the areas evaluated. Immediate and co-ordinated whole-school action is required to address the areas of concern. In some cases, the intervention of other agencies may be required to support improvements.	Weak; unsatisfactory; insufficient; ineffective; poor; requiring significant change, development or improvement; experiencing significant difficulties.