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Creeping Performativity: The Irish Experience

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In 2004, a new form of inspection was introduced to post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. It represented a complete change from the previous light touch pattern and reflected the New Public Management approach to policymaking and implementation then becoming fashionable in the jurisdiction. Around the same time, a new policy for tackling educational disadvantage was adopted. Recent case-study research into the effectiveness of this policy elicited views from six school communities on a wide range of issues. One was the experiences of teachers and school leaders in dealing with the impact of the new inspection regime over the last fifteen years. The picture that emerged is a cause of serious concern.

Introduction

The 1990s is widely considered by scholars to represent a time of significant interrogation and reform of Irish education. While the reform agenda was prompted by a domestic policy agenda and specifically by a lack of legislative basis underpinning education, the thinking behind it was informed by wider international thinking, specifically by OECD and European trends (Harford, 2010). Acknowledging the link between education and social, economic and cultural prosperity, the Irish government identified education as a central plank of national policy in 1991. The following year a Green Paper (discussion document), Education for a Changing World (1992) was published and represented the first in a series of measures aimed at directly involving all stakeholders in the consultation and ultimately the policy process. This paper was followed by a National Education Convention in 1994 in order to

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widen the consultation process (Coolahan, 2004). Harford (2010, p. 352) observes that 'while heretofore a high level of consultation with the teacher unions and the main denominational churches had characterised policy development and filtered the nature and rate of change in the education system, the National Education Convention successfully broadened the breadth of representation and sought to widen the consultation process. The White Paper (1995) Charting our Education Future built on the consensus which emerged from this process, its core objective to 'address itself to the policy framework that can best embrace the diverse and multiple requirements for education action in the future' (Government of Ireland 1995, 3). In addition, this period witnessed the publication of an OECD report on the Irish education system (OECD, 1991) and an important research publication, Educational Disadvantage in Ireland (Kellaghan, Weir, Ó hUallacháin & Morgan, 1995), the first in a series of reports aimed at addressing the issue of educational disadvantage. The requirement to increase the resources made available to tackle this problem, and to use them in a more targeted manner, was a common theme.

Background

Despite significant growth in the Irish economy in recent years, there remain areas of considerable inequality in Irish society as evidenced at second level education where in 2019 32% of those with the highest grades in Higher Education Institutions nationally were from the wealthiest families, compared with 3% from the most disadvantaged (HEA, 2019). The experience in Ireland, as elsewhere, is that the link between poverty and poor educational outcomes is both strong and complex and that the education system continues to perpetuate and legitimate inequality, reproducing intergenerational advantages for dominant social groups (Harford, 2018; Lynch and Crean, 2018). Over the course of the twentieth century just one serious effort to address this deficiency was made in the 1960s (for a full account, see Harford, 2018), and whilst significant progress followed, the reforms at that time were insufficient to bring about equality of opportunity. This is the case despite the fact that the Education Act of 1998 sets out the objective

'To promote equality of access to and participation in education and to promote the means whereby students may benefit from education.' The current strategy to achieve that vision DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools): Action Plan for Educational Inclusion (DES, 2005) was launched in 2005.

DEIS

The DEIS programme recognised formally that educational disadvantage arising from poverty and social inclusion is exacerbated when a large proportion of students attending a particular school are from such backgrounds. This phenomenon, referred to in early research in the UK as the 'balance of intake' effect (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore & Ouston, 1979) is usually described in the Irish context as the 'multiplier' effect (Smyth, 1999). DEIS introduced an independent standardised system for determining which schools were entitled to participate based on a deprivation index that includes variables such as employment status, education levels, single parenthood, overcrowding and dependency rates. Various existing initiatives were integrated into a new schools' support programme. In all, there are two hundred or so post-primary schools who have DEIS designation, of a total of approximately seven hundred and thirty such schools.

Research

Various reports on the DEIS programme have been published in recent years (McAvinue & Weir, 2015; Weir & Kavanagh, 2018) and a fundamental review was provided by the Economic and Social Research Institute (Smyth, McCoy & Kingston, 2015) in 2015. The absence of a control group renders judgement challenging, but it seems that progress is being made in closing attainment gaps, although at a relatively slow rate. The ESRI report pointed to the fact that little discussion had taken place since the scheme was introduced around the issue of the resources needed by DEIS schools to meet the challenges they are facing. To examine these matters further, the research being reported upon here

comprised case study research with six post-primary schools, starting in early 2019 (Fleming, 2020). Interviews were undertaken with a range of teachers in the schools (n=43). These included classroom teachers (CT), year heads (YH) guidance counsellors (GC), and principals. Focus group discussions were organised with senior students (n=29) and with parents/guardians (n=41). A wide range of issues emerged, most particularly those relating to resource provision and challenging classroom environments. Concerns over student well-being also emerged as a dominant theme. Finally, the existing inspection regime and whether or not it is fit for purpose in DEIS schools emerged as a key issue in this study. This latter theme, the suitability to the existing inspection regime to DEIS schools, is the focus of this article.

The Inspectorate

The Irish school inspectorate is among the longest-established inspection systems in the world, emerging in 1831 with the establishment of a national system of primary education (Coolahan and O' Donovan, 2009). Despite its historical significance, its impact was limited, inspectors historically constituting a 'quasi extinct occupational species' (McElligott, 1986, p. 30). This rather minor role meant that the actual impact of inspectors on the lived reality of schools was negligible. Indeed, many teachers in the Irish context will have undergone their entire teaching career without every having had a visit from an inspector.

The 1990s, as previously noted, was a period of immense reform in Irish education, triggered both by international influences as well as by a domestic policy agenda. During this period, policymaking and public administration generally was increasingly coming under the influence of a neo-liberal agenda (Grummell, & Lynch, 2016), usually encapsulated under the heading of New Public Management (NPM). This agenda required those at the coal-face to demonstrate that they were performing efficiently in line with performance indicators, thus giving rise to the term 'performativity' to describe such a regime (Ball, 2003). The NPM approach has thus emerged as dominant in the Irish context (Conway & Murphy, 2013;

Mooney-Simmie, 2012; Skerritt, 2019), with the PISA process becoming more influential in determining government policy here (Fleming, 2020; Ó Breacháin & O'Toole, 2013) as elsewhere (Lewis, 2017; Lewis & Lingard, 2015; Sjöberg, 2019; Yuan & Zhao, 2019).

The Education Act (1998), which represented a significant step in the framing of a wider legislative base for primary and post-primary education (Glendenning 1999), included a particular role for the Inspectorate in advancing an NPM agenda, including a role in evaluating the organization and operation of schools, the quality and effectiveness of education in schools and the quality of teaching and effectiveness of individual teachers (Section 13). This was achieved through the design of a new inspection model, introduced on a pilot basis in 1996 and subsequently extended on a national basis following consultation with teacher unions and other key stakeholders in 2004. Conceived of as having a more direct impact on the work of schools and the role of teachers, a condition of the new model was that no teacher should be named. The focus was expected to be on the work of the school as a whole, and this focus was to be framed within the context in which a school was operating.

Context Matters

Taking context into account in compiling inspection reports is not a straightforward process. A feature of the early studies on school effectiveness was that they focussed on those known to be 'successful'. The emphasis was on identifying the characteristics displayed by such schools with a view to applying them elsewhere (Hopkins, 2001). In due course, this approach began to be questioned, as attention turned to schools deemed to be 'failing', usually those located in disadvantaged settings. Grey noted in 2001 (p. 33) 'we don't really know how much more difficult it is for schools serving disadvantaged communities to improve because much of the improvement research has ignored this dimension – that it is much more difficult, however, seems unquestionable'. The need to pay significantly more attention to the challenges arising in

such contexts was identified (Reynolds, Harris, Potter & Chapman, 2001) and 'a diverse range of school-level factors was recognised as the norm' (Harris & Chapman, 2004, p. 428). Empirical research in New Zealand (Thrupp, 1998), and in the UK (Lupton, 2005), illustrated just how complex school context is. In Thrupp's research, a strong link emerged between the socio-economic nature of the catchment area and school policies, processes and practices. Lupton's research was based on four schools serving disadvantaged areas. Describing the environment as volatile, she observed 'the idea of unpredictability possible captures the distinctiveness of the schools better than any other' (Lupton, 2005, p. 595). Pupil-teacher contact time was often diverted into counselling students and dealing with behavioural issues. Aside from the time factor, this caused emotional stress for staff. For school management, dealing with day-to-day incidents resulted in a workload that was high as well as being unpredictable. Time for reflection and school improvement planning was, at best, very rare. Lupton concluded:

> What emerges from this study is not the impossibility of delivering a high-quality education in these settings, but the difficulty of doing so, and the fragility of the situation. Managers and staff described themselves as running to stand still…Quality could be achieved, but not consistently assured (Ibid., p. 602).

Subsequently, Braun, Ball, Maguire, and Hoskins (2011) examined the issue of school context and its significance. They concluded that context is always specific and changing, both inside and outside of school and they found it impossible to provide a 'full list of contextual factors [as] such a list can never be exhaustive (Braun, et al., 2011, p. 597). Observing that, at national level, policymakers tend to assume a best-possible scenario for implementation, including ideal buildings, pupils, teachers and resources, Braun et al. found the reality in schools to be different 'with their situated and material contexts, their specific professional resources and challenges, and their different external pressures and supports (ibid.).

This tendency to assume the existence of an idealised school was not limited to the bureaucracy. In studies of leadership generally, the tendency among scholars had been to ignore context (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006) but there has been evidence of a change of approach since the early years of this century (Osborn, Hunt and Jauch, 2002). This is clear across a number of studies (see Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins 2008; 2020). Clarke and O'Donoghue (2017, p. 179) suggest the idea of 'contextual intelligence', as defined by (Kutz, 2008), may prove a useful mechanism for considering the theory and practice of leadership. As Kutz describes it, contextual intelligence comprises three fundamental abilities, an intuitive grasp of relevant past events, an acute awareness of present contextual variables and an awareness of a preferred future. Hallinger (2018) recalls delivering a lecture some years ago on the topic of school leadership. In the subsequent discussion one of those present asked how he, as a principal, would apply these findings in his own school. In his response, Hallinger acknowledged that the questioner had identified the 'boundary' of the existing knowledge base, in that general research findings can offer only limited advice as to apply them in particular contexts:

> I cannot give you evidence-based advice on exactly how to adapt these findings to the specific challenges facing you at your secondary school in Hong Kong. I simply do not know enough about you or your school (Hallinger, 2018, p. 6)

The recognition of the importance of context to school leadership is growing in the education world but much more remains to be done by way of empirical research (Clarke & O'Donoghue, 2017).

WSE

The Irish inspection regime incorporates a range of models. For the purposes of this article Whole School Evaluation-Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE) and the subsequent process known as a 'follow through' inspection, are the focus. In the case of WSE, a school will receive notice in advance and the principal will be asked to fill a quite detailed information form. Space is allowed for

the principal to supply 'a short written account of the school's location history and context.' These are complex matters: 'contexts are volatile, latent, ambiguous and therefore elusive' (Clarke and O'Donoghue, p. 176) and the notion they can be captured and reflected in a half-dozen lines is absurd. A DEIS school will often have a comprehensive collection of reports on the neighbourhood, often qualitative, including ones produced by state agencies and others by academics across arrange of disciplines. These offer a detailed and nuanced picture of the catchment area. There is no facility for including these with the information form or any indication that such a step would be welcome. Yet, the inspectorate claims that 'our evaluative judgements are based on high quality data taking the context of the school into consideration (DES Inspectorate, 2016, p. 7).

Evaluating Teachers

The members of the inspection team will visit a number of classrooms, usually for an hour or less. The teaching profession in Ireland, as elsewhere, has undergone significant reform, which many consider to be reform overload as well as a veritable 'policy epidemic' (Levin, 1998). This agenda has been pursued while resources are being reduced, schools in Ireland, as elsewhere, being asked to do more with less (Ravitch, 2016; Whitty, 2016). In recent years, as authorities changed focus from requiring schools to be answerable for implementing policies to being accountable for learning outcomes, the question of teacher effectiveness has come to the fore. The search for robust systems has been underway for quite some time but the quest is proving elusive for one fundamental reason:

> Teaching is unforgivingly complex. It is not simply good or bad, right or wrong, working or failing. Although absolutes such as these are popular in the headlines… they ignore almost completely the nuances of "good" or "bad" teaching, of real students collected in actual classrooms in the context of particular times and places. They mistake reductionism for clarity, myopia for insight (Cochran-Smith, 2003, p. 4).

The notion that a short episodic visit to a classroom would have any evaluative merit in classroom performance is farfetched. Research over a long period has identified many problems with such an approach (Bridges, 1990; Cohen & Goldhaber, 2016; Cuban, 1988; Hargreaves, 1998; Medley & Coker, 1987). The significance of context has been identified (Bell, Gitomer, McCaffrey, Hamre, Pianta and Qi, 2012; Lei, Li, and Leroux, 2018; Steinberg & Garrett, 2015) as critical. Grave doubts have been expressed as to whether or not such an exercise has any validity and reliability (Praetorius, Pauli, Reusser, Rakoczy and Klieme, 2014; Taut & Rakoczy, 2016). After one large scale US study, a simple conclusion was reached: 'A single observation by a single observer is a fairly unreliable estimate of a teacher's practice' (Ho & Kane, 2013, p. 13).

In light of the substantial investment in teacher evaluation schemes, Hallinger, Heck and Murphy (2014) undertook a comprehensive review of the research carried out over a decade. As regards the impact of teacher evaluation strategies they 'had yet to see compelling evidence that implementation of these systems is yielding higher teaching quality and improved learning outcomes for students' (Hallinger, Heck, & Murphy, 2014, p. 17–18) They found no evidence that supported the use of teacher evaluation as a school improvement strategy: 'the policy logic driving teacher evaluation remains considerably stronger than the empirical evidence of positive results (Ibid., p. 21).

Undaunted by this evidence, the short episodic single observer visits to classrooms is the approach taken in evaluating teaching and learning in Irish inspection. Learning is, by and large, invisible, cumulative, and individual and occurs both inside and outside school. Teachers 'do not have control over the variables that are responsible for most of the variations in educational outcomes' (Detterman, 2016, p. 9). Yet, having visited a number of classes, usually a fairly small proportion of the total, a verdict will be proclaimed. In the case of one recent inspection, for example, the report noted that the overall quality of teaching and learning was

'good' and went on to suggest that more development of in-class assessment would be beneficial. So, a number of inspectors visited different classrooms individually and observed various staff members, after which they came together and by some opaque mechanism reached an overall verdict of 'good'.

Evaluating Schools

Reading the inspection report referenced above, a notable feature is the section on context. It amounts to about five lines in a long document. No reference is made to a whole range of contextual matters. Even though such a list can never be exhaustive (Braun et al., 2011), in the current climate issues such as funding and staffing levels, additional resources provided locally, availability or otherwise of appropriately qualified staff, balance of intake, are all examples of very relevant contextual factors that are not even mentioned. It is undeniably the case that the educational service to students, in any school, is a function not just of the personnel within that school community but also of decisions made in the state Department of Education and Skills (DES) on various issues and its actions or lack of them. A policy of avoiding these matters in inspection reports is to completely disregard context and adopt an idealised notion of conditions on the ground (Braun et al., 2011). This approach calls into question the integrity of the whole evaluation process. Accountability includes assessing the part played by the state in ensuring that schools have adequate resources (Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit & Pittenger, 2014). There are also a range of local factors that should also form part of the process, such as neighbourhood features, enrolment practices, homelessness, community health, unemployment among parents, and students' home circumstances. Also omitted are details of the inspection itself such as the proportion of classrooms visited, the experience and qualification levels among the inspection team including details of experience and expertise in school leadership. Yet, the published report (which is publicly available online) omits all these factors and records the inspection team's verdict on teaching and learning and the quality of management and leadership, after merely a few days in the school.

Aftermath

When the draft report comes to a school, there is a factual verification process after which a finalised version is made available to the school's board of management. The Board of Management can submit its response to be included in the final version, although the DES can choose not to print it. A board of management or a teacher may decide to ask for a review of an inspection report. In such a case, there is a system for informal review by a senior member of the inspectorate. If that does not assuage concerns, a request for a formal review may be initiated. The decision to grant or otherwise a formal review is a matter solely for the Chief Inspector and the choice of the two reviewers is reserved solely to him/her, hardly a transparent and independent process.

At some point after a WSE report has been published, the school will experience a 'follow through' inspection. The code of practice for the inspectorate describes 'respectful engagement' as one of the four principles underpinning the work and includes under that heading, commitments to 'work co-operatively and fairly with learners, teachers, school leaders' and others, to 'promote professional dialogue' and to 'promote trust in our working relationships with others'(DES Inspectorate, 2015, p. 4). In the same vein, the Chief Inspector has spoken about working in a collaborative and co-professional way with teachers, school leaders and others in the school (Hislop, 2017, p. 8). In that context, one might presume the 'follow through' inspection would involve a professional discussion involving the principal and senior colleagues with the inspection team, but this is in fact not the procedure. A 'follow through' report follows a strict format. The recommendations in the WSE report are set down and opposite each one a scoring and comment are provided. Scoring rates from no progress to very good progress. In the Guide to Inspection document the intention is clear:

> At the conclusion of a follow through inspection, inspectors will discuss their overall findings with the principal and/or the deputy principal…They acknowledge the progress made and provide advice on further actions to ensure the full implementation of each recommendation (DES Inspectorate, 2016, p. 35).

The Six Case Study Schools

The schools who participated in the research project being reported here had a number of features in common. A significant proportion of students in each one was suffering from the effects of poverty; on average about 20% had been diagnosed as having additional educational needs and principals estimated a similar proportion needed a diagnosis; high numbers were displaying signs of anxiety, anger or trauma; the working environment tended to be volatile; and teachers expended considerable time and energy, both physical and emotional, in responding to the students' care needs.

Teachers in the six schools were asked to recount their experiences of inspections. At a personal level most found the experience acceptable. However, all believed that an inspector could not reach a well-founded conclusion on the teaching and learning process during the course of very short visits to classrooms:

> …if they spend an hour in my class (say a difficult group) they don't know what I have gone through to develop a relationship with the group, they don't know what's going on for those students. They are there for an hour to watch the learning intentions being delivered, that I have differentiated, that I have done this, that and the other, they don't see the care that goes on…they don't see the bigger picture…(CT,7)

Some ascribed this to the parameters within which the inspector was performing her/his duties:

> They come in and they have a checklist and the checklist is what they work off, they don't take account of the location of the school, they student in front of you, whether that student had breakfast or lunch…they talk to students and (may say) show me your homework

> (but) they don't know what family life is like, for some they don't have a quiet place to do homework, (some) are out on the streets till 10 or 11 o'clock, some are in emergency accommodation…they don't take any of that into account. (CT, 9).

Others referred to a lack of experience and understanding:

> I don't think they took anything into account, anything outside the 40 minutes that you teach. I feel they didn't understand the level our students are at; they didn't understand that we are trying to cater for a really broad spectrum in one room [and] the issues they are dealing with…I think they come in and they have boxes to tick and they have to do their job and it's unfair that they don't take into account the pressures we're under…They were only here for three days; you cannot possibly get a feel for a school in three days. (CT, 7).

One teacher recalled her class had gone very smoothly during the inspection. The students, obviously conscious that she was being assessed, listened when they were told to listen, interacted when they were told to interact' and 'worked hard to stay quiet', generally doing everything they were told. The teacher recognised that 'this was hard work for some of those kids, for the whole class, a huge effort.' Obviously impressed, the inspector indicated he had no suggestions to make for improvement but expressed the view the class was too quiet. It was the view of the classroom teacher that this assessment lacked understanding and rigour. This theme was taken up by a number of respondents who indicated they received little if any advice or guidance they would actually act on:

> Well nobody likes it [inspections] you are being judged and do we get something out of it, something that would help afterwards? I haven't really felt that that I got anything that would help me…it's a snapshot; they are only coming for a few hours a day for so many days. (CT, 1)

Similarly, respondents were of the view that inspectors lacked an understanding of the particular context of DEIS schools, and were superimposing norms from other settings in their assessment of DEIS schools:

> Inspectors do not get a completely accurate picture…A DEIS inspection with two people who were not easy to deal with…they came in nearly aggressively: I would have thought they should have a better understanding of what a DEIS school is. If they took some of the classes for a few days… (CT, 4)

This observation was common. The real issue for teachers was their belief that inspectors did not have an understanding of the context in which they were working. Whilst it is almost certainly an overstatement to describe all members of the inspectorate in those terms, the unanimity with which this view was expressed by classroom teachers is striking. To put it at its very minimum, members of the inspectorate have a very serious credibility problem.

Broadly speaking the classroom teachers who participated in this research fell into two categories in their reactions to the experience. One group looked on the episode as a minor irritant and forgot it fairly quickly. Others reacted by being upset, angry, resentful and outraged like colleagues in other countries (Penninckx, 2017). The process and the outcomes did not fulfil the need for it to be seen by them as 'meaningful and valid indicators of teachers' efforts and professional achievement' (Lauermann & Karabenick, 2011, p. 136). Feedback, whether positive or negative, was ignored because the source was deemed to have no understanding of the classroom reality. Penninckx and his colleagues, in a study involving over 2,000 teachers, specify what is required:

> If school development is one of the aims of inspection, it is vitally important that sufficient care is taken of the teachers' perception of its quality or, more precisely of the psychometric quality (reliability and validity), of the transparency of the inspection process, of the criteria used for determining the inspection judgement, and of a friendly, trustworthy, supportive and respectful approach towards staff members in the inspected school (Penninckx, Vanhoof, Maeyer & Van Petegem, 2016, p. 343).

As compared to their classroom colleagues, principals have far more experience of the inspection regime. Most classroom teachers

will participate directly in only a relatively small number of inspections over the course of their career. Principals, on the other hand, are involved in every inspection which takes place in a school. In relation to understanding the context, a number of the principals suggested that some inspectors do, but the majority felt otherwise:

> It really depends on the person. I felt the inspectors [on a WSE] understood where we were at and very cognisant. They were very empathetic, and I found them affirming. Not everybody on the staff had the same experience. I suppose then the kind of drive by or incidentals, not so much so…maybe the person is kind of out of touch and doesn't really now that much about this type of school. (Principal, 3)

Some believed that genuine understanding of the context of DEIS schools could only emerge if one had taught in a DEIS school:

> I think the average inspector doesn't… have a clue unless they have taught in a DEIS school…They don't have a real understanding at all, and I suppose, to be honest, the level of disadvantage, I didn't have a huge understanding of it until I came here. (Principal, 6)

Differences across DEIS schools also emerged as an issue, a point one principal referred to as understanding 'the subtlety of a school':

> I suppose they come across with some suggestions that are just not practical in terms of the timetable and in terms of what should happen…I don't think inspectors fully get what a DEIS school is about…The can get urban/rural. They can get size…not unimportant things, but they don't get the subtlety of a school. (Principal, 2)

Of the six principals the one who saw the process in most positive terms (already quoted above) still questioned how realistic it was:

> But some of it was very idealistic and I did say to her "I would love to be able to do all of these things but realistically there is only a finite number of hours. I put in so many hours already in a day." I would love to be able to do all the things she said. I would love it but from a realistic side of it some of it wouldn't happen. (Principal 3).

Another recalled his experiences since the new regime was introduced which echoes the above point:

> They actually don't know the management of a school. They come in and they bring in your teachers and they bring in your students and they bring in your parents to see are you managing the school well but they would have to be here six months to know how you manage it because you could be managing it in a crisis…If you pick another three days at another time of the year you will find a totally different attitude…a school is a living thing… (Principal, 5)

In his long experience, inspections had never referred to deficiencies in provision that reflected badly on the Department of Education and Skills. He instanced, as an example, the problem of the insufficient supply of qualified teachers that has being an ongoing problem in Irish education for about a decade but is never referred to in inspection reports.

Mirroring the experience of classroom teachers, the principals interviewed in this research reported satisfactory experiences of inspections on a personal level. One of the six principals recalled that in their history as a school principal, only one inspection had left particular scars:

> I think we had one inspection here that was conducted in an extremely unprofessional manner…the written report was fine, but I think the manner in which it was conducted was extremely negative, on a verbal level it didn't take account I suppose of the marginalised students that were here and it didn't take acknowledge any form of the work that staff are doing. It left me with a crippled staff for six months. (Principal, 1)

The Irish Approach

Various multi-jurisdictional studies have sought to establish where the Irish inspection model lies on a continuum between high stakes incorporating sanctions and low stakes emphasising support. One described the Irish regime as medium pressure (Jones et al., 2017) another used the term low-stakes (Simeonova et al., 2020) and

Ottesen bracketed Ireland with England at the high stakes end (Ottesen, 2018). The presence of sanctions is the measuring stick usually used in exercises of this nature. In the Irish model there are no specific sanctions for teachers but in the case of principals the position is less clear. The entire WSE exercise is essentially a verdict, however flawed, on her/his performance and, to a lesser extent, that of other senior staff. This, together with the fact that the report will be published online means that, whilst there are no official sanctions, reputational damage can occur. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that this has had a serious impact on some individuals and schools. Thus, to an extent at least, the Irish model is unusual, if not unique. Furthermore, the model is changing from that which was introduced originally. Publication of reports on the DES website, and the introduction of 'follow through' and incidental (unannounced) inspections are the most significant alterations.

Questionable Foundations

To describe the current inspection model as collaborative and co-professional is risible. It is destructive of teacher and principal agency. It removes teachers and other key actors in a school community from the policymaking process at school level and places it in the hands of inspectors who pay an occasional visit. In essence the inspection model used in Ireland is an audit (Sugrue, 2018) and that is reflected in the comments of the interviewees. It is based on the adoption by schools of so-called SMART targets. Quite apart from the insistence that they be 'measurable' which is anathema to the idea of a holistic education, the requirement that they be 'realistic' and 'time-bound' without any reference to the resources provided by the state to achieve them is a nonsense.

The process is presented as providing accountability and improvement. It is assumed that one leads to the other in a linear manner but, as we have seen, research casts grave doubts on such thinking. In particular, feedback whether at classroom or school level flounders when those giving it are deemed 'not knowledgeable enough or trusted'(Fullan, 2019, p. 82). No

possibility of any side-effects is acknowledged yet, in any intervention in an educational process, they are inevitable (Zhao, 2017) and may be negative at school (Jones, et al., 2017; Jones, et al., 1999) and classroom level (Braun & Maguire, 2020; Lauermann & Karabenick, 2011; Penninckx et al., 2016).

Side-effects

In the case of the six schools examined in this research, there was no discernible educational impact at classroom level or in relation to school policies and practices, thus confirming experiences elsewhere (Hallinger et al., 2014; Penninckx, 2017). Of course, it is possible that there were benefits which have escaped un-noticed or un-acknowledged. At the same time, consideration must be given to the possibility that any such beneficial effects may be outweighed by negative side effects. Given the nature of the follow through process, a principal will have to endeavour to respond to WSE recommendations even if she/he doubts their value. Many principals and teachers will resist this pressure to place performance over professionalism (Courtney, 2016; Fuller, 2019; Garver, 2020; Perryman, Maguire, Braun & Ball, 2018; Sugrue, 2009). Yet, the incessant demands of an audit system of inspection will generate both interference with the routine business of the school (Datnow, Lockton, & Weddle, 2020) and lead to goal displacement (Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2020).

Choices

MacBeath's description is important in the Irish context. He outlines the dangers inherent in a contrived approach to school self-evaluation and the features of a genuine process:

> It appears that the more governments provide the template, the less inventive and spontaneous the process at school and classroom level become. Self-evaluation all too easily becomes a ritual event, a form of audit in which senior leaders assume the role of an internal inspectorate applying a set of common criteria arising from quite differently held assumptions about the nature of accountability and

> improvement. Self-evaluation is centred on capacity building…keeping a school mobile to its inner life…This implies a paradigm shift from a compliant and passive role to an active role in which teachers are the prime movers in self-evaluation and take charge of their individual and collective professional development (MacBeath, 2008, p. 395–6).

MacRuairc (2018) makes the same distinction using the terms horizontal and vertical: 'vertical accountability tends to ensure compliance rather than commitment and horizontal accountability creates and builds trust. When neo-liberal reforms enter these dimensions the vertical forms of accountability can become very instrumentalist – often reduced to a tick box activity' (MacRuairc, 2018, p. 14). Others use the term external to describe the auditing approach and internal 'where individuals and groups willingly take on personal, professional and collective responsibility for continuous improvement and success for all students' (Fullan et al., 2015). This thinking is based on resourcing schools to develop professional learning communities (Hord, 1997) internally and across networks. It is designed to restore agency to those working in schools and was promoted in more recent times by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009). A wide range of international scholars have recommended this approach to accountability and developed the thinking further (Azorín, 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2014; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018; Harris, 2011; Osmond-Johnson & Campbell, 2018; Weddle et al., 2019) The logic is simple: 'External accountability policies do not work because they are distant and episodic. Internal accountability is more effective because it is part of the daily culture' (Fullan, 2019, p. 87).

Just as with teachers and schools, it is necessary for organisations such as an inspectorate to engage in reflective practice. When this happens, what form it takes and how often, is difficult to discern. Consideration of a possible alternative strategy is essential to any evaluation of the current model (Hallinger et al., 2014). Clearly a change of focus to a horizontal model based on trust and working in genuine collaboration with principals and teachers along the lines

outlined by Fullan, Hargreaves and others could result in sustainable school improvement. It would be interesting to know if the inspectorate has ever considered a different role for itself as 'critical friends' to schools and, if so, why has that approach been rejected.

Conclusion

MacRuairc (2018) has argued that in the horizontal form of accountability 'the core fabric of the organisation can be damaged, leading to negative outcomes for the quality of school experience provided for children and young people' (p. 14). Ball (2003) describes the impact of the performativity agenda: 'A kind of values schizophrenia is experienced by individual teachers where commitment, judgement and authenticity are sacrificed for impression and performance (Ball, 2003, p. 221). His fundamental concern is that the existing approach will change not only what teachers do but who they are. There is ample evidence that this concern is well founded (Braun & Maguire, 2020; Lauermann & Karabenick, 2011; Lewis & Holloway, 2019; Perryman et al., 2018). Concerns in this regard have been expressed in the Irish context (MacRuairc & Harford, 2008; Sugrue, 2018), with a recent study (Mooney-Simmie et al., 2019, p. 64.) finding that 'evidence emerged of tension and struggle in relation to what was mandated, what was educational desirable and what was practically possible' in the teaching process.'

Two factors may counterbalance the impact of the performativity agenda, at least for a while. One arises from a history where for a long time the churches were the dominant force in the provision of education (O'Donoghue and Harford, 2011). As a result, the value of a holistic education is widely recognised and valued. The second one is that the teacher unions are relatively strong in the Irish context, and have been successful in ensuring that teachers in Ireland have been protected from the worst features of a performativity agenda. Principals are more exposed. Some will attempt to moderate the effect of the inspection process on their schools and others will chase the league tables approach to

performance and ensure that their schools emerge from follow through inspections well placed as they compete for students at local level. So, while it will take longer than it might otherwise to damage the Irish education system, it would be foolish to think that the performativity agenda, as it is being implemented in the Irish inspection regime, is not having an impact. This is a matter that requires empirical research as a matter of some urgency.

Authors

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