

**From Looking at Our Schools (LAOS) to Whole School Evaluation -
Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL): The Evolution of
Inspection in Irish Schools over the Past Decade.**

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Abstract

This paper attempts to provide an overview of the key assumptions underpinning the *Whole School Evaluation* (WSE) inspection policy developed in Ireland since 2003. Beginning with a documentary analysis the paper argues that the capacity to generate useful self evaluative data in schools was seen as being at the heart of the model of school evaluation proposed by the Department of Education and Science. It further suggests that while the rhetoric of self evaluative capacity building has been key to the emerging system the lack of a meaningful structural response within schools means that this has remained aspirational. The latter part of the paper seeks to test this contention, examining the research base in the area of school evaluation and inspection in Ireland and conducting a number of targeted focus groups with school leaders. For the most part the initial contention is confirmed although there is a sense that there may be significant new pressures emerging in the near future that could cause the whole system to be revisited and perhaps be radically overhauled. An initial indicator of these potential changes can be seen in the emergence of a refined WSE Management, Leadership and Learning inspection policy which has yet to be widely implemented.

Key Words

School Evaluation, Self Evaluation, School Inspection, Educational Reform, Accountability

Introduction

Schools and teachers in Ireland have a long history of being evaluated by a centralised inspectorate, a division of the Department of Education and Skills (DES). However, by the early 1990s, this system had broken down significantly. The inspection of primary schools had become sporadic and rather idiosyncratic; in secondary schools, inspection had nearly ceased entirely. The largest teacher union supported its members in refusing to teach in front of an inspector (Chevalier, Dolton, & Levacic, 2004; Egan, 2007; Sugrue, 1999).

Based on a 3 year pilot project, and after extensive negotiations with the teacher unions, the DES in Ireland issued a framework for school inspection and self-evaluation in 2003. This framework, entitled *Looking at our Schools (LAOS)*, contains five *areas* of evaluation: (a) quality of learning and teaching in subjects, (b) quality of support for students, (c) quality of school management, (d) quality of school planning, and (e) quality of curriculum provision (DES ,2003). These five areas are subdivided into some 143 ‘ themes for self evaluation’. Schools are required in theory to gather evidence and then make judgments about their own performance on a four-part rating scale in respect to each theme. This process of self-evaluation then informs the work of a visiting team of inspectors that carries out ‘whole school evaluations’ (WSE) at unspecified intervals, usually not more than once every 5 years. The *LAOS* system was first implemented in 2004 and as of early 2011 the vast majority of post primary

schools have been evaluated under this framework.

Method

The methodology employed in this paper is an evidence-based evaluation of the policy and subsequent implementation of school evaluation of post primary schools in Ireland since 2003. This follows two distinct steps. In the first step, following the ‘policy-scientific’ approach as described by Leeuw (2003; see also Ehren et al, 2005), the key source documents underpinning evaluation in Irish schools are deconstructed in order to clarify the ‘programme theory’ in effect the intended objectives of the policy. This is achieved by bringing latent policy assumptions to the surface to identify contradictory or unrealistic reasoning behind stated policy choices and objectives. This process identifies potential discrepancies between policy as outlined in official documentation and the implementation of that policy in practice. In order to investigate the extent to which this documentary analysis does actually identify issues which are likely to inhibit the implementation of the stated policy, step two is conducted. This involves an analysis of existing research around the implementation of policy and new research with key informants involved in the implementation of school evaluation. The first part of the paper, therefore, consists in a documentary analysis and deconstruction of assumptions of the two key policy documents relating to school evaluation. In the second part of the paper, the unwarranted assumptions identified in this process are then tested against the existing research evidence and evidence from new research conducted for this purpose. This new research took the form of three focus groups with school leaders undertaken in January 2011.

Inspection in Ireland –the programme theory

The inspectorate in Ireland has a statutory quality assurance obligation in relation to education provision, as set out in section 13 of the Education Act (1998). Its functions are described broadly as the evaluation of the education system and the provision of advice to the education system and to policy makers. Three main objectives are identified: contributing to evaluation, to development and to the support of the education system.

The *Professional Code of Practice on Evaluating and Reporting for the Inspectorate* (Department of Education and Science 2002a) outlines the guiding principles that inform the work of inspectors. Among its general principles are commitment to: fostering mutual respect and trust as a foundation for the development of a positive professional relationship between inspectors and the school community; partnership and collaboration through the participation of the school community in the evaluation process; and engaging in dialogue with school staffs and the education partners. During evaluation, reporting inspectors are committed to: making every effort to foster positive relationships with all members of the school community; ensuring that teachers receive a fair and accurate evaluation of their work and are made aware of the basis on which judgements are made; and that the positive relationships between teachers and pupils are preserved.

A team of inspectors conducts the evaluation and the process involves meetings with management, parents, the principal and teams of teachers. In post-primary schools, interviews are also held with students. Inspectors visit classrooms and observe teaching and learning, interacting with students where appropriate and examining student work, including written assignments and portfolios. Evidence schedules are completed and judgements are made that form the basis of the evaluation report. Although the evidence base includes measures of attainment such as those provided through the use of standardised test results in literacy and numeracy at primary level and state examinations at post-primary level, such evidence, which could be used to create league tables, is not included in the final reports. The procedures followed are outlined clearly in two publications *A Guide to Whole School Evaluation in Post-Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Science 2006b) and *A Guide to Whole School Evaluation in Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Science 2006c).

Approaches to evaluation

The range of approaches to quality assurance employed in the Irish education system include: promotion of school self-evaluation; extensive support for school development planning; teacher in-career development and support in the context of curriculum change; school-designed assessment and reporting to parents; use of standardised assessment and state certificate examinations; external evaluation of schools by the inspectorate; programme evaluations focusing on aspects of curriculum provision and system evaluation through international surveys of attainment (DES, 2004). The inspectorate conducts a range of external evaluations. Among these are: whole school evaluation, subject inspections at post-primary level, individual inspection of probationary teachers at primary level, thematic evaluations and focused inspections. The *LAOS* model of external evaluation is viewed as an inspection

mechanism that complements internal continuous improvement activity in schools. It is designed: to facilitate full participation of the whole-school community in the process; to contribute to school development; to ensure school and system accountability; to enable teachers and schools to use the evaluation criteria for school self-review and improvement; and to contribute to system improvement. The model expects inspectors to take account of schools' own review and development work and to affirm good practice and achievement. Inspectors are committed to basing judgements on first-hand evidence and to applying evaluation criteria objectively and reliably. A review procedure under section 13(9) of the Education Act (1998) *Procedure for Review of Inspections on Schools and Teachers* (Revised) (Department of Education and Science 2006d) provides details of how teachers or boards of management can request a review of any school evaluation carried out by an inspector.

Whole-school evaluation (WSE) was introduced into the Irish education system in 2004 following a pilot project in 1998. The model, originally called whole-school inspection (WSI), evolved through consultation with all the education partners and was renamed WSE. In spite of the renaming, the model is a centrally controlled system of inspection and the term WSE has become synonymous with external evaluation only.

Evaluation framework

Looking at our School provides the framework for WSE at primary and post-primary level. Inspectors evaluate the quality of a number of components in the key areas of management, planning, curriculum provision, teaching and learning and support for pupils. The WSE process involves three clear evaluation stages: pre-evaluation, in-

school evaluation and post-evaluation phases. Potential for school improvement exists through the evaluation framework (*Looking at our School*) and at each of the stages.

Data gathering and benchmarking

The importance of data gathering is acknowledged in the literature and inspectors engaging in external evaluation of schools request a range of information from schools. As part of the WSE process, inspectors require schools to complete a school information form; in the course of meetings, inspectors complete pro forma interview schedules; and during in-class observation, schedules of evidence are completed. Information is also gleaned from state agencies such as the National Education Welfare Board and the State Examinations Commission. A wide variety of information is thus gathered, which includes both qualitative and quantitative data. Statistical data in the form of staff numbers, pupil enrolment trends and attendance, assessment results and state examination results are gathered. However, the value of gathering information about the working of schools that is not easily measured is highlighted in school improvement literature and much of the focus of external evaluation is on these aspects of education provision. Quality indicators contained in the *Looking at our School* documents and augmented by recently devised statements of level within the indicators are used by inspectors as the basis for making judgements in areas such as the quality of school planning, overall curriculum provision, teaching and learning and supports for pupils. Although final reports do not comment on the specific measurable results, the schools' ability and practice in relation to analysing results internally is noted. At post-primary level, the state examination results are a clear benchmark for schools in assessing the level of progress.

Evaluation reports and findings

Since 2006 WSE reports have been published on the Department of Education and Science website. Details of publication are available in *Publication of School Inspection Reports, Guidelines* (Department of Education and Science 2006e). As part of the publication process, school staff, management and parents' associations are informed in advance that the report will be published; that management has the right to respond in writing to the report in advance of publication and that normally the response is published with the report. On completion of the final report, a copy is sent to the principal and management who are invited to respond through one of three means: accept the report without comment; respond formally to the report; or request a formal review of the inspection. The purpose of the school response is to allow schools to make observations on the content of the report and to set out how the report will be used in the context of the school's ongoing programme of self-evaluation, planning and improvement. This development provides a first step in encouraging schools to use the findings of the evaluation for school improvement. Evidence from WSE reports published at post-primary level in June 2008 suggests that the majority of schools now provide a school response indicating how the recommendations will be implemented. Further follow-up, in the form of meetings or communication between Department officials and school trustees or board of management, has been undertaken where serious concerns were noted in reports

Irish School Evaluation – source document analysis

In the *LAOS* document, an elaborate system of evaluation is outlined as the basis on which school management and staff can make “professional judgments regarding the operation of the school” (DES, 2003, p. ix). The system works as follows. Each of the

five evaluation areas is divided into *aspects*, and the aspects are divided into *components*. Each component is then teased out into several *themes* that guide the self-evaluation process (see Figures 1 and 2 for an example of an evaluation area and its multiple levels). It is noteworthy that terms such as area, aspect, and component replace terms such as “evaluation criteria” that were used in the Whole School Evaluation (WSE) pilot project (DES, 1999 , McNamara and O’Hara, 2005) . This highlights the immense sensitivity to anything smacking of evaluation in any form in the Irish education system.

<i>Area</i>	<i>Aspects</i>	<i>Components</i>
Quality of learning and teaching in subjects	(a) Planning and preparation	(i) Planning of work (ii) Planning of resources
	(b) Teaching and learning	(iii) Methodology (iv) Classroom management (v) Classroom atmosphere (vi) Learning
	(c) Assessment on achievement	(i) Assessment models and outcomes (ii) Record keeping and reporting

(Des, 2003, p. xiv)

Figure 1.

Each of the *components* has in turn attached to it a set of *themes for self-evaluation* which the document suggests. For example the themes for self-evaluation for the first set of components above are as follows:

<i>Component</i>	<i>Themes for Self-Evaluation</i>
Planning of work	Long term planning for the teaching of the subject and its consistency with the school plan The extent to which planning documents describe the work to be completed within the subject The degree to which planning is in line with syllabus

	requirements and guidelines
	The degree which planning provides for differential approaches to curriculum coverage in accordance with the spectrum of student ability, needs and interests
	The extent to which provision for corrective action for learning problems or difficulties is an integral part of the planning of work in the subject
	Evidence of cross-curriculum planning and integration
	The provision for monitoring, review and evaluation of the planning of work in the subject
Planning for resources	The inclusion in planning of an outline of the material and other resources required to support the teaching aims and objectives
	The level and quality of provision made for health and safety requirements in the use of materials or specialist equipment is to provide a safe learning and teaching environment

(DES 2003, p. 24)

Figure 2.

The *LAOS* document suggests that themes (the smallest units of evaluation) “can be used by the school as a guide in judging or measuring its own performance” (DES, 2003, p. x). The methodology suggested for using the themes is described as follows:

A school may decide to focus on an area, an aspect or a component. The school will gather information in relation to the theme or themes under evaluation. Having engaged in a process of collecting and analyzing this information and evidence, the school will be in a position to make a statement or statements indicating its own performance in the relevant component, aspect or area. (DES ,2003, p. x)

Schools are invited to make statements regarding each area, aspect, or component evaluated based on “a continuum consisting of a number of reference points

representing stages of development in the improvement process” (DES, 2003, p. x). The continuum encompasses four descriptors: (a) significant strengths (uniformly strong), (b) strengths outweigh weaknesses (more strengths than weaknesses), (c) weaknesses outweigh strengths (more weaknesses than strengths), and (d) significant major weaknesses (uniformly weak). The **assumption** here is that schools have the skills and resources to gather evidence and make these judgements. However and crucially none of these four descriptors or indeed any of the themes for self evaluation are connected to benchmarks or performance criteria so it is impossible to say what level of performance is regarded by the Inspectorate as appropriate in each case. This in turn makes it impossible for schools to place themselves on this continuum even if they have carried out self evaluation and therefore the assumption is unrealistic.

LAOS places great emphasis on school self-evaluation and downplays evaluation by external inspectors. In the fraught field of student attainment, great caution prevails. In primary education, there is no national standardised testing and, therefore, no accepted benchmarks against which to compare student achievement and teacher performance. At the secondary level, inspectors review data on the outcomes of national examinations before evaluating a school. However, teachers are not individually held accountable for results, and the use of examination results to compare schools or teachers is prohibited by law. It is clear that the acceptability of the evaluation process to schools and teachers was a central concern of the DES in the early implementation of the new inspection regime. The *LAOS* framework was designed with an emphasis on cooperation and partnership rather than monitoring and accountability. It was agreed that it was the work of schools as a whole that would be examined and that individual teachers would not be identified or punished for poor

performance. The scheme of evaluation was agreed on only after long and difficult negotiations with stakeholders, negotiations that saw the views of the teacher unions being accorded significant weight (O'Dalaigh 2000). What emerged is defined as follows:

Ireland, along with other European countries, is adopting a model of quality assurance that emphasises school development planning through internal school review and self-evaluation with the support of external evaluation carried out by the Inspectorate. (DES , 2003, p. viii)

In effect, the policy is that school self-evaluation will act as a preparation for inspection but, more importantly, it is also to be the driving force for collaborative internal school improvement efforts. The **assumption** of this approach is that schools have the capacity to follow up inspection recommendations without further external assistance. However the international literature (Coe, 2009) and research in Ireland quoted in part two of this paper indicates that this assumption, other than in the area of simple compliance with rules, is largely unwarranted.

The emphasis on school development through internal school review and self-evaluation grows stronger throughout the document - for example:

The centrality of the school's role with regard to evaluation and development is clear

Schools themselves have the key role in the task of identifying existing good practice as well as areas for further development

This document presents a set of themes through which a school may undertake a review and self-evaluation of its own performance

These evaluation themes will be continually updated so as to be of assistance and relevance to schools in their review and self-evaluation activities as part of the school development and school improvement process. (ibid., pp. iii-x)

Analysing this document it seems reasonable to argue that *Looking at Our School* produces a template for schools undertaking self-evaluation and the role of external inspection in this process is significantly downplayed. The model which emerges is remarkably similar to the idea of MacBeath that the role of external evaluation and inspection is merely to ensure that internal systems of evaluation and self review are implemented effectively - "a model in which external evaluation focuses primarily on the school's own approach to self-evaluation" (MacBeath, 1999, p. 152).

The underlying **assumption** of this approach by the Inspectorate is that schools are in a position to undertake extensive self evaluation and thereby generate evidence on which evaluative judgements can be based. However it was clear back in 2003 and remains clear now that no such condition prevails. According to *LAOS* schools will "engage in a process of collecting and analysing information" and on this "evidence" "statements" will be made (DES, 2003, p. x). This sounds impressive until one realises firstly that these bland assertions ignore the fact that very little data (of either a quantitative or qualitative nature) are available about any facet of the operation of schools in Ireland, and secondly, no attempt is made to suggest who should "collect and analyse" this information or how they should go about it.

This criticism of the original pilot project was flagged clearly in the evaluation report of that project (DES, 1999). Inspectors involved noted the lack of "hard data" on which to base reasonable judgements – "schools need to present us with evidence oral and written in respect of their operations" and again "access is needed to better organised in-school data on pupil performance" (ibid., p. 28). The final section of this report suggested that these points had been taken seriously by the Department. Under

the heading "Moving Forward" we read about the need for better quantitative information

both individual schools and the inspectors carrying out whole-school evaluation would derive considerable benefit from having access to a range of quantitative information, including statistical and other information, on patterns of early school leaving and pupil participation and on the catchment area from which the school draws its pupils. Information of this kind would greatly enrich the WSE process for the school and should form part of the preparation for the future whole school evaluation. (ibid., pp. 47-8)

This section goes on to promise that *LAOS*, when fully implemented, would yield ‘a stream of high quality data which will allow valid, full and reflective judgements in relation to quality assurance’.(ibid, p.49)

Nonetheless despite these clear recommendations the *LAOS* document is notable for the lack of any suggestions as to how schools should collect the data on which the effectiveness and credibility of the whole system must rest. Why is this? It certainly cannot be that the DES is ignorant of the fact that the education system as a whole and individual schools in particular produce extraordinarily little data. This is acknowledged in the quotation from the pilot project report given above in which the necessity for such data is emphasised.

Equally it cannot be that the *areas, aspects and components* in the new evaluation documents do not require significant data to enable judgements to be made in relation to them. For example, Component 4, *overall student achievement in subject*, in Aspect C *assessment and achievement* has the following *themes for self-evaluation*.

<i>Component</i>	<i>Themes for Self-Evaluation</i>
Overall student achievement in	The extent to which students' results in regular

subject	assessments and/or examinations in the subject reflect levels of achievement commensurate with ability and general expectation
	The extent to which student achievement in the subject is regularly evaluated in comparison with National norms

(DES, 2003, p.28)

Figure 3.

Clearly any kind of sensible and useful judgements in these areas require data that in the present system simply do not exist. There is no data regarding the "ability and general expectations of pupils", still less any "national norms" of achievement with which comparisons can be made. In the latter case it might be argued that results of State Examinations provide "national norms". However, a comparison with these results is useless to individual schools since it provides no evidence of the particular performance of a school in "adding value" to pupil achievement. This is because there are no baseline data and the intake of schools differs enormously. This point is made by Smyth:

a particular school's average performance in "raw" data terms tells us little about the difference the school actually makes to its pupils. An above average ranking in these terms may merely reflect a selective pupil intake. In contrast another school may have lower exam results but its pupils may have made considerable academic progress relative to their initial ability levels. (1999, p. 208)

There is a widely recognised void in Irish post-primary schools with regard to measuring standards of achievement and progress (Mathews, 2010). Benchmarks other than state examinations are not strong in the Irish education system and available measures, such as PISA, are not frequently used. There is a lack of availability of standardised tests for post-primary schools and therefore inadequate comparative data and benchmarks that are sufficiently contextualised to draw conclusions about student outcomes. (McNamara and O' Hara, 2006).

LAOS is equally loath to specify other kinds of data and evidence which might be gathered as part of genuine school self evaluation to inform external inspection. For example the inspection process is notable for the absence of meaningful consultation with parents and no structures are included to ensure that students are consulted. Equally no suggestion is made that management or peer evaluation of teacher performance common in other systems be undertaken. In short although school self evaluation underpins the theoretical framework of *LAOS* there is no attempt made in the framework to define and encourage the conditions which would make it possible in practice. That it is possible to operationalise self evaluation is shown in other systems. In England for example self-evaluation forms are accompanied by detailed back-up data, gathered over a period of time, to support self-generated claims and satisfaction ratings. Evidence of consultation with partners is also expected (McNamara and O' Hara, 2006). In *LAOS* despite the emphasis on self evaluation schools are required to produce for inspection only a series of process documents such as plans and policies but nothing close to a self evaluation. In fact the four level self rating scheme outlined in *LAOS* is never used by schools and never demanded by the Inspectorate. Why the gulf between rhetoric and reality in the Irish system?

One explanation lies in the necessity to get agreement from powerful interests and particularly the teacher trade unions to get any system of inspection in place. This necessity placed major constraints on what could be included. Most crucially in reaching consensus with the partners in relation to the introduction of *LAOS* it was agreed that the process would focus on the work of schools as a unit and of subject departments and not on the work of individual teachers. Remarkably therefore the

evaluation system lacks what surely is a fundamental element namely an analysis of individual teacher performance. Issues of competence and of effort on the part of individual teachers are avoided since evidence and adverse judgements in this regard would create problems for schools and indeed for the broader system as mechanisms for dealing with them are largely non-existent. From this constraint has flowed the reluctance noted above to engage with evidence such as student performance data, pupil and parent opinion and so on.

A second explanation for this theory practice gap is the possibility that it was always meant to be rhetorical, in other words that the real goal was a system of external inspection with a pretence of an element of self-evaluation. It is noticeable in this regard that despite the theoretical emphasis in *LAOS* on self-evaluation schools are not in fact required to produce and/or maintain a self-evaluation profile as for example in England. There is a good deal of circumstantial evidence to support this view. A key underlying **assumption** of *LAOS* was that power and autonomy to self-evaluate would be decentralised to schools but this has never happened. For example although school boards of management are tasked with implementing inspection reports these boards have neither the training or the control of resources to make this feasible. Equally, as the research reported below shows, criteria for judging the performance of schools have been developed within the Inspectorate but not shared with schools or indeed the general public. In short *LAOS* may well be yet another example of the absolute resistance of centralised bureaucracies in Ireland to relinquish any power.

Interestingly however there is, in a new inspection document just released, some evidence of evolution in inspection and in particular with regard to the production of self evaluative evidence.

Whole School Evaluation – Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL)

The first significant policy revision in relation to school evaluation since *LAOS* came in a new inspection policy document in September, 2010 (DES, 2010). This document reaffirms *LAOS* as the key framework document of school evaluation, but apparently in response to criticisms of the implementation of policy such as those outlined above, makes some fairly significant changes. In particular, there is a sharper focus on some aspects of evidence to be used for school self evaluation and external inspection. Schools now will be required to survey parent and student opinion in order “to gain an insight into the views of parents and students on the performance and operation of the school” (ibid., 2010,p. 2). These surveys will be anonymous and will be “referred to in the inspection report”.

A second evolution of policy referred to in the new document seeks to place greater responsibility on the school to report on it’s own self evaluation processes. Schools will be expected to provide a presentation to the external inspectors on self evaluation, including “the impact of school self evaluation on school improvement and the implementation of recommendations of previous evaluations” (ibid, p. 2).

A final development implied in the new document is that inspections, rather than being simply cyclical, may henceforth be triggered by school performance thresholds. What these thresholds might be, other than general criticism in previous inspection reports, are not spelled out, nor is there any suggestion of sanctions or indeed rewards in relation to underperformance. It appears, however, that in cases where school performance is deemed inadequate by whatever measurement, “working groups” including inspectors will be established to address serious weaknesses. These working groups have already been deployed in some eighteen schools.

Conclusion of Part One

The conclusion of the documentary analysis undertaken in the first part of this paper is that key assumptions underpinning the inspection policy outlined in 2003 were over ambitious and difficult to implement in practice. These were that schools could drive major improvement without follow up assistance and that schools and in particular boards of management had the status, skills or resources to tackle serious shortcomings. In particular, a fundamental element informing *LAOS*, that schools could generate self evaluative data which would enable judgements to be made on vital aspects of school performance, including student outcomes and individual teacher quality, was never realistic given that no clarity existed around requirements for the conduct and reporting of self evaluation and no training or resources to undertake self evaluation was provided. Part two of this paper will review existing research and report on new research, with a view to testing the extent to which this

interpretation of the gap between rhetoric and reality in Irish school evaluation has been borne out in practice. It should be noted that the significant policy revision issued by the DES in 2010 has not as yet come into force in practice and therefore any changes resulting are obviously not captured in the research reported below.

Engaging with the research in the field

The second part of this paper will seek to examine the unwarranted assumptions identified in the documentary analysis and to test them against the research evidence – both existing and that specifically generated for this project. The latter consisted of a series of three focus groups undertaken with a stratified sample of school leaders from a range of Irish school environments. These focus group sessions involving some 18 school principals and deputy principals took place in an Irish University over three nights in April 2011. (This work is reported in this paper as FG, 2011). The former involved an analysis of the existing research around the implementation and impact of school inspection within the Irish school system. As an aside it is interesting to note that despite the existence of a national school evaluation system from the early part of the last decade very little serious research has been undertaken in the field. What does exist has tended to be conducted under the auspices of the Centre for Educational Evaluation (CEE) at Dublin City University. Papers published by McNamara and O'Hara (2005, 2006, 2008, 2009a, 2009b) and McNamara *et al* (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011) have charted the development of the system from the pilot phase in the late 1990's through its mainstreaming in the early 2000's and into the new phase from 2010 to date. In parallel to this the CEE has also facilitated a range of post-graduate research projects examining the impact of evaluation across specific educational contexts within Ireland and beyond (see Brown, 2010, Cuddihy, 2010).

What little other research has been conducted in Ireland on school inspection has tended to be at post-graduate level with the most significant being a Doctoral dissertation by a School inspector (Matthews, 2010) and a Masters level dissertation by a school Principal (Mulkerrins, 2008). Finally the Inspectorate division of the Department of Education and Skills has produced a range of reports of their own describing the school evaluation system from various of perspectives (DES 2003, 2010) as well as issuing a number new policy directives which give an indication of intended future directions for the school evaluation system (DES, 2006a, 2006,b, 2006,c). This part of the paper will draw on all of the above sources with a view to illuminating the gap between the rhetoric of school evaluation as has been outlined in section one and the reality on the ground..

School Culture and the Use of Data

At the heart of this analysis of the school evaluation system in Ireland is the contention that notwithstanding official pronouncements to the contrary, the Irish education system does not have the capacity to generate the type of data necessary to create the robust model of self-evaluation clearly envisaged in the official documentation. It is stated explicitly in the *LAOS* document on which WSE is based, that a key element of the process is the concept of self evaluation and the development of the capacity of schools to collect evidence and analyze practice. However a striking theme in the various research to date is the extent to which the respondents alluded to *LAOS* as a onetime event to prepare for and then forget. The central idea of the *LAOS* framework, namely that self evaluation would be an ongoing process between inspections, has evidently failed to take hold. School leaders tended to adopt a compliance (Matthews, 2010) or indeed a survival approach to the process.

Questions about plans to continue the process of self-evaluation after *LAOS* were met with puzzlement. Common responses to such queries included statements that ‘ this is something that we have done to us rather than something that we necessarily do for ourselves’(FG, 2011). Another principal queried the premise upon which the question was based arguing that

we have a clear understanding of our role in this process. We provide documentation, we engage in a professional way with a team of external visitors who come to make judgments about us, we listen to those judgments and where possible learn from them and then we do our jobs (ibid, 2011).

Finally, Matthews (2010: 97) cites an inspector who neatly sums up this attitude among schools when stating that the common view in schools was that

‘once you’d been WSE’d that is it and it is the end of the process’.

Work undertaken by Brown (2010 : 44) largely confirms this. Surveying every second level Principal in the Republic of Ireland (n=740) on their experience of school evaluation his work indicates just under one third (33 .1%) claimed that their school engaged in any form of self-evaluation on a regular basis. In the course of a number of years of research in this area (McNamara and O’Hara 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009) it became clear that although endless meetings were held and a great deal of documentation was prepared for both subject and wholeschool evaluations, this consisted almost entirely of gathering and updating existing planning and policy documents (e.g., class plans, homework policies, school plans, discipline codes, admittance procedures). While some additional materials were produced, they were viewed as final products rather than as artifacts generated by an ongoing process.

That, for example, the discipline code of a school might be evaluated as a success or failure through some process of data collection and analysis was a completely alien concept in most cases. When challenged on this type of approach there was an appreciation that it might not necessarily be seen as being in the spirit of the *LAOS* documentation although there was little acceptance that this was the fault of the school community. On principal, addressing this issue directly, stated that

Our job is to provide what we are asked for. We are asked for policies, we are asked for plans, we are asked for minutes of meetings, we are asked for anything else that we think might be relevant. When we get all this stuff together we don't have time to worry about what is happening to it on an ongoing basis. That happens anyway in the everyday life of the school.

Policies take on a life but this life does not necessarily have to be recorded and anyway I am not sure if we could record it even if we wanted to. After all we are teachers and not researchers! (FG,2011).

Further probing in this area resulted in some interesting new thinking. School principals indicated on a number of occasions that they sensed a particular attitude toward evidence or data was implicit in the structure of the WSE process. Many thought that impressionistic conclusions were favored over analytic evaluations by the inspectorate. Despite a general view that Irish schools are not data rich, there are significant sources of information available including absentee lists, late lists, in-class assessments, etc. What is noteworthy is that, at least in the early stages of the WSE rollout, there has been little indication that the inspectors chose to examine these information sources. As a result, the idea that this was an evaluation system that was somewhat evidence-free was suggested in more than one school community. A principal summarized the views of most, saying, "When you think about it, I suppose

it is very impressionistic, not really evaluation at all.” (McNamara and O’ Hara, 2009: 106).

Some principals sought to understand why this apparently systemic lack of use of available evidence was allowed to continue. A common perception was that the culture of partnership and the impossibility of identifying underperforming teachers in the evaluation process led to a range of available data being ignored lest it result in the emergence of challenges to the mode of reporting. In this context it was argued that while the publication of WSE reports online was a welcome development – Mulkerrin’s (2008: 74) research indicated that 78% of school leaders surveyed agreed with this contention – the fact that they were widely available led to the reports being more opaque than might have first appeared necessary. It was suggested by a number of focus group participants that the verbal feedback provided by the inspectors was in many cases more pointed and more directive than that ultimately published online (FG, 2011).

Another issue that arose when examining the role of self-generated school data was the perception that most school communities were not in a position to analyze or interpret this material. In general, it was felt that while it might be useful and desirable to examine a range of data, schools were not equipped (and staff were not trained) to do it. One principal said, “We have lots of data here, but it would be a huge job to organize it and we have neither the training nor the time” (ibid,2011). Implicit in this comment is a desire for the evaluation process to take on a capacity building role. In this view, school leaders, teachers, and perhaps other stakeholders would be

provided with the training and support necessary to enable them to become genuine data-generating, self-evaluating professionals.

Responsibility for this perceived lack of a capacity building role varied depending on the groups interviewed in the various pieces of research. School principals tended to see this as resulting from a structural deficit in the approach to school evaluation promoted by the Irish inspectorate. Brown (2009:77) citing a range of sources, suggested that inspectors tended to see the emergence of a genuine self-evaluative capacity in schools as being in essence aspirational. He quoted the following principal who stated that

The attitude of the Inspectorate, to SE is comparable to a teacher telling a class that they need to study hard without giving them the resources to do so. Self evaluation in theory is the way forward but with time being a finite resource and lack of training and curriculum requirements forever increasing, is it not merely a "worthy aspiration"?

In essence it was felt that the inspectorate did not really see their role as being one of support for data generating communities rather it was argued that this was an internal school matter which should be addressed by the school principal and senior managers.

This latter point was one that exercised principals across a range of studies (McNamara & O'Hara, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009; McNamara *et al* 2011, Mulkerrins 2009, Brown,2010).) There was a genuine feeling on the part of school leaders that the inspectorate as currently constituted has a real deficit in terms of its understanding of the current management culture in schools caused by an almost total lack of former school leaders in its ranks. It has been argued that this results in a concentration on the wrong aspects of the school leaders role and the implicit expectation that they can achieve more than is possible across a range of areas. One of these regularly cited is that of capacity building in the area of data collection and analysis. To quote one principal

I was anxious to point out that we had an excellent extra-curricular culture in the school and that I would really like to have it included in the final report. I was told that this would be done but that it would help if there was some evidence. I asked what sort of evidence and was told that it was really up to me to come up with it or to have the staff come up with it. This led to a strong discussion about how I could be expected to do this but he wouldn't budge. In the end we got one line in for something that takes up hundreds of hours of work. This was very dispiriting (FG, 2011).

The general argument made by principals was that an inspectorate with management experience would know what it was possible to do in an average school environment and what needed extra help. Brown's (2010: 64) study confirmed this suggesting that only 31% of principals felt that the inspectors had the requisite managerial experience to genuinely support the development of a data rich self-evaluation culture in schools.

It must also be pointed out that studies conducted with inspectors indicated that some were also highly critical of the lack of systematic self-evaluation going on in schools (McNamara *et al* 2011). Several remarked that due to a lack of regular testing in both primary and secondary education in Ireland, the "hard data" on which to base "real" judgments are not available. Representative comments by inspectors included, "Access is required to better organized in-school data on pupil performance" and "The WSE process should involve the collection of hard data"(McNamara and O'Hara 2009, p. 22). In the view of some of the inspectorate, key data which schools should possess, such as drop-out rates and levels of absenteeism, were not available in a usable, accessible format. Likewise, individual teachers or subject departments had little in the way of collected or collated information on pupil results, aptitudes, or attitudes. From this perspective, no process that could remotely be regarded as systematic evidence-based self-evaluation was occurring in schools. Since self-

evaluation and the presentation of evidence to support judgments was in theory a cornerstone of WSE, this represents a major problem for the emerging system. The lack of usable data, whether provided by the schools and teachers or by some other mechanism, emerged as a key weakness of WSE which needs to be addressed.

As we have already seen above, this criticism of the original WSE pilot project was flagged clearly in the evaluation report of that project (DES, 1999). In a related study Smyth (1999) suggested that “schools could monitor their own attendance and dropout rates, etc.” but that “information collected at the school level is likely to be of limited utility without comparable information on the National context...providing value added analysis to schools would be worthwhile” (p. 226). Such an approach would require information on pupil ability at the point of entry and additional information (e.g., through surveys) on pupil background. This information could be used by the school itself in setting targets for improvement and in monitoring the introduction of new programs or teaching methods. However no attempt has been made to provide such data to schools from a central source or to enable or encourage schools to collect it for themselves. It is noteworthy that where it wished to do so the DES has been able to support much greater use of systematic data collection and analysis by certain schools. Those schools designated as disadvantaged and in receipt of extra funding are obliged to set clear targets and to monitor progress through systematic evaluation.

There is also evidence from other sources which supports the notion that a lack of school-based research is a major issue at the heart of school planning and evaluation. The DES (2006a) published *An Evaluation of Planning in Thirty Primary Schools* and

noted that only 20% of these schools could be considered “good” in the area of using evidence to track improved school attainment. The few schools that showed good practice in this area are described as having “a comprehensive policy on assessment, measuring attainment systematically, devising formats for plotting progress and monitoring improvements in pupils’ behavior and attendance” (DES 2006, p. 73). A second report of the same year makes similar criticisms: “Schools did not engage in formal evaluation of impact ...there needs to be a greater focus on setting targets and evaluating how well they have been achieved. There was little evidence of this mindset” (DES 2006b, p. 7).

What is important here is twofold. Firstly, research consistently shows that when schools and teachers had gathered evidence, little interest was shown by the inspectors (McNamara & O’Hara, 2008, 2009). Moreover, schools and teachers were not aware that such evidence gathering was required, expected, or even welcomed. Second, it also appears that the DES wants schools to gather systematic data and evidence, but it has done nothing to support, encourage, or train schools and teachers to do so. Although 20% of schools were identified by the Department of Education and Science commissioned research as doing a good job of self-evaluation, our research indicates that this is a rare phenomenon (DES 2006a) . It seems clear that the empowerment of schools and teachers to self-evaluate will have to come from sources other than the DES (McNamara & O’Hara 2006, 2008). All this tends to support the suggestion in part one of this paper that the Inspectorate intends to retain the dominance of external inspection to the exclusion of decentralised self evaluation to the greatest possible extent. This view is confirmed in a disturbing interview reported in Mathews (2010, p. 156) when an inspector respondent remarks that it is a pity that

key information including the criteria for inspection judgements of school performance, which have been greatly developed by the inspectorate, are kept secret from the schools -

“developments in relation to determining ratings for aspects of practice were not yet explicitly shared with schools”.

Looking to the future

Arguably the system of school inspection currently operating in the Republic of Ireland is on the cusp of major change. The emergence of the more streamlined MLL model – with its inclusion of parental and student questionnaires - and the contention by the Chief Inspector that this will be the first of a suite of approaches to school evaluation is a clear indication of this (DES, 2010). Coupled with these structural changes is the radical transformation of the external environment. The economic collapse of the latter years of the last decade has led to a profound cultural change within Ireland with one of the major manifestations being the rejection of the partnership culture that characterized much of policy approach to the public service. Now the emphasis is on accountability and transparency and these two themes are seen as being critical to the success of the Irish education system. In this context there are increasing calls for the development of a more robust approach to teacher underperformance, a demand for more externally accessible criteria of quality- including the publication of league tables, a demand that teachers demonstrate their competence within clearly defined structures and a lack of tolerance for ambiguity when it comes to reasons for a perceived erosion in educational standards.

All of these movements, if carried through to their logical conclusion, should see a profound change in how we assess quality in schools. However whilst acknowledging the rhetorical demands for a more robust approach to evaluation many principals are openly skeptical about the ability of the system as currently designed to deliver it. Specifically principals point out that the ‘decimation’ of the middle management layer in schools as a result of cutbacks in funding will lead to a situation where schools will prioritise the essential tasks rather than those considered to be optional. In this context any movement towards the development of a robust culture of self-evaluation is likely to be faced by a range of significant structural obstacles. To quote one principal

now that I am down a number of deputy principals I am going look after the things that I legally need to – in my case the health and safety stuff and the exams. The work put in by middle managers to strengthen subject teams, to start gathering information, to plan and such like is going to fall by the wayside. I can’t support things that take teachers out of classes and a lot of this stuff does that. In the end we have to make choices and I will choose our core business every time (FG, 2011.).

This latter comment sums up the challenge faced by any attempt to enhance the evaluative capacity of the Irish system although arguably such caveats will be brushed aside by a broader cultural demand for greater accountability and greater value for money.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to provide an overview of the key assumptions underpinning the inspection policy developed in Ireland since 2003. Beginning with a documentary analysis the paper argues that the capacity to generate useful self evaluative data in schools was seen as being at the heart of the model of school evaluation proposed. It was further suggested that while the rhetoric of self-evaluative capacity building was key to the emerging system the lack of a meaningful structural response within schools meant that this remained aspirational. The latter part of the paper attempted to test this contention, examining the research base in the area of school evaluation and inspection in Ireland and conducting a range of targeted focus groups with a range of school leaders. For the most part the initial contention was confirmed although there was a sense that there may be significant new pressures emerging in the near future that could cause the whole system to be revisited and perhaps be radically overhauled.

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