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## For improvement, accountability, or the economy? Reflecting on the purpose(s) of school self-evaluation in Ireland

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on compulsory school self-evaluation in Ireland. It sets important historical and contemporary context by documenting the development of a culture of evaluation in Ireland throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium before charting the rise of school self-evaluation during the austere economic conditions of post-2008 Ireland. Three key reasons are proposed for the rise of school self-evaluation: the influence of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the perceived need for more accountability, and the drive towards self-managing schools. In debating the purpose of school self-evaluation in Ireland it is put forward that it is not underpinned by any single logic, but an assemblage of overlapping logics interwoven by complements and contradictions. It is concluded that while improvement is predominantly promoted in official discourse, it is accountability and economic logics that dominate.

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## Introduction

The purpose of evaluation is often unclear (Ottesen 2019). This paper reflects on the purpose(s) of school self-evaluation (SSE) in Ireland, where this internal mode of school review has been compulsory since 2012. It documents the development and rise of SSE in the Irish context and considers its purpose(s) in light of these. In doing this, this paper is mindful of Janssens and van Amelsvoort's (2008) contention that the role SSE plays within a country and the manner in which it is formed depends very much on, *inter alia*, the political and historical context in which schools operate. Similarly, it is cognisant that, as Chapman and Sammons (2013) point out, imperatives such as those relating to economics can lead to uncertainty about the purpose of SSE. In reflecting on SSE in Ireland, we focus on a country in which SSE is relatively new and where all types of evaluation and inspection must be treated with delicacy,<sup>1</sup> and where education is now closely aligned with the economy and viewed competitively. For example, the central vision of the Department of Education and Skills' (DES)<sup>2</sup>

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Action Plan for Education 2016–2019 ‘Is that the Irish Education and Training System should become the best in Europe over the next decade’ (DES 2016, 1) and there are goals of improving the ‘success of learners’ (DES 2016, 16) which include targets of improving and consolidating students’ performances in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an international comparative assessment of human capital administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD is now ‘a central node in the structuring of the global education policy field’ (Grek 2014, 278), instigating more testing, measuring, rankings, and comparisons, and reforms and policies aimed at producing scores that signify strong education and subsequently economic systems, often through concoctions of autonomy and accountability.

In this paper, we are concerned with SSE and schools at post-primary level, which students in Ireland typically enter at the age of 12 and leave aged 17 or 18, or in rare cases aged 19. There are over 700 post-primary schools in Ireland and while governance models can vary, they operate in an education system that is largely centralised and standardised. A variety of modes of external inspection are carried out by the DES’ Inspectorate and since 2012 SSE, a collaborative and evidence-based form of internal review based on collecting data and making judgements to improve standards in schools, has been mandatory. While SSE is now the predominant form of evaluation in Ireland and is used to inform the work of visiting inspectors, schools have to date engaged with and in SSE in an inconsistent fashion and with recent research pointing to how changes in policy do not necessarily produce changes in practice (Brown et al. 2020) and how it is simply not possible for SSE to be implemented in schools as policymakers envisage (Skerritt et al. 2021), it is time for a much-needed debate about the direction of SSE in Ireland: where are we? How did we get here? Where are we going?

While this reflection focusing on a single European country will be of much relevance to readers in Ireland, the topical nature of its remit adds wider applicability. Evaluations often appear to serve multiple purposes (Ottesen 2019) and with SSE now ‘a global phenomenon’ in inspection policy (Brady 2016, 523) this paper makes an important contribution to scholarship by focusing on the key purpose(s) of SSE through the case of Ireland. To understand the connection between regulation and self-evaluation in different contexts it is necessary to pay attention to a country’s history and culture while at the same time understanding that today’s education systems are transnationally connected (Grek et al. 2013) and this paper highlights the need for those researching SSE to take account of local details while also considering the international and transnational influences of powerful supranational bodies. As SSE has become increasingly topical, while at the same time many individual states are faced with increasing influences and pressures emanating from external sources in what can now often seem to be a borderless European or Western education space, this paper will appeal to readership far beyond Ireland.

### **Considering the purpose(s) of school self-evaluation**

Arguably a lighter and softer approach to school evaluation than traditional forms of inspection, SSE is predominantly presented as being used for the purpose of improvement. An appropriate question, however, as posed by Chapman and Sammons (2013), is: are the purposes of SSE to generate personal and professional development and

school improvement, or to regulate and monitor practice and standards? While Chapman and Sammons (2013) focus on SSE for school improvement, it is acknowledged that in some systems there can be confusion:

Policy imperatives for accountability ... and economics- in a system where educational outcomes are used as a proxy for economic well-being, via PISA and information from the OECD- can lead to discomfort and lack of clarity relating to the purposes of self-evaluation. (Chapman and Sammons 2013, 11)

While officially it is very much focused on improvement, Ireland is a country where the purpose of SSE is somewhat blurred. There are international influences, and desires for international success, and perpetual goals and objectives to do better, facilitated through increased accountability. On the ground, research indicates that different people in schools are doing SSE differently (Skerritt et al. 2021). School management agree generally with its usefulness as an improvement process but both teachers and management are frustrated by a range of implementation issues at the school level (O'Brien et al. 2019). Small-scale research by Murphy (2019) suggests that teachers perceive the focus to be skewed towards accountability and that their capacities to lead improvement in their local contexts are constrained by the 'prescriptivist and sometimes repressive interpretations' of management teams, and while tailored supports and interventions provided to schools by Dublin City University's Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection generally result in increased confidence and skills among teachers, and improved capacity to engage in SSE on an ongoing basis (O'Brien et al. 2017, 2020, 2021), the complexity and intricacy of SSE is compounded by the blurring of externality and internality in that the SSE standards and criteria are externally produced and imposed (Brady 2016). Thus, this 'centralised prescription' (Sugrue 2017) is not quite a case of SSE being 'something that schools do to themselves, by themselves and for themselves' (Swaffield and MacBeath 2005, 239) or schools speaking 'for themselves' (MacBeath 2005a). Instead, it can send mixed messages (Sugrue 2015). It could well be that quelling teachers' anxieties around external inspections is a subtle purpose of SSE (Brady 2019) while at the same time controlling them from afar and striving for far-reaching success.

While it may be more economically viable for countries to shift the focus from expensive external inspections to internal SSE (McNamara and O'Hara 2008a), it could be argued that the rise of SSE is not so much due to it being a cost-saver as it is SSE being a potential money-maker. Through PISA, the OECD has become a major governing body in education, but as the name suggests it is an organisation more concerned with economics than education. The OECD measures the academic performances of students in different countries and publicly ranks countries based on these calculations. These measures are now accepted as criteria of good educational performance (Sahlberg 2011) and countries compete with one another in these assessments as a means of demonstrating global competitiveness – a high-performing education system is considered to be indicative of a vibrant economy and favourable for attracting foreign direct investment. Dovetailing with the rise of SSE, the OECD has increased its agency as a policy actor in global education since the mid-1990s and developed the capacity to shape the views of key actors in education (Sellar and Lingard 2013). The OECD also strongly endorses school autonomy, and the connection between both autonomous schools and SSE can be seen in many countries (see for example MacBeath 2005a;

Janssens and van Amelsvoort 2008; Vanhoof and Van Petegem 2010; Schildkamp, Visscher, and Luyten 2009). Through school autonomy, in particular, schools have more freedom and independence to focus on their own local contexts but paradoxically they also face greater accountability. As Brady (2016) reminds us, the idea that self-evaluation increases teacher and school autonomy, wherein both schools and teachers have more ownership and responsibility over their work, actually enables greater accountability, which is then said to provide high-quality education and, therefore, greater competitive advantage amongst knowledge-based economies.

The purposes of evaluation are often described by the binary terms ‘accountability’ and ‘improvement’ but the functions of evaluations are not necessarily mutually exclusive and purposes commonly overlap (Ottesen 2019). Given its salient role in contemporary education, we should not overlook the role of economics in SSE, and perhaps instead of a binary, the purposes of evaluation should be thought of as more of a trinary. Indeed, it has been put forward by MacBeath (2005b, 2005c, 2006) that SSE is driven by economic, accountability, and improvement logics:

- In terms of economics, SSE is the most cost-efficient form of quality assurance;
- Especially from the perspective of value for money, the accountability logic sees it as imperative that schools are accountable to stakeholders;
- The improvement logic sees it as inevitable that performances will improve provided schools are evaluating current performances and planning for the future.

These three logics inform and guide the analytical reasoning employed in this paper and will be returned to later and fleshed out in relation to SSE specifically in the Irish context.

### **Historical background: developing a system of evaluation in Irish schools**

Towards the end of the twentieth century, Ireland’s Inspectorate was faced with notable obstacles, namely the powerful teacher unions and resource issues as it was responsible for overseeing the annual state examinations (Brown et al. 2018; McNamara et al. 2020). By the 1990s, the school inspection system had broken down and inspections at post-primary level nearly ceased (McNamara and O’Hara 2012) and at worst became non-existent (McNamara and O’Hara 2008b). As the DES’ current Chief Inspector, Dr Harold Hislop, has pointed out, there was a lack of a legislative basis in Ireland for much of the education system at this time (Hislop 2013). However, by the late 1990s, legislation was finally in place via the 1998 Education Act and the Inspectorate’s role from here was to evaluate, report, and advise on the country’s schools (Coolahan et al. 2017).

The 1998 Education Act gave the Inspectorate, for the first time, a legislative remit to evaluate the work of schools (McNamara et al. 2020). The decision to make school development planning compulsory was based on both international literature which was suggesting that school climates in which reviewing and revising were encouraged were associated with school effectiveness, and domestic literature which was linking school climates to student outcomes (McNamara, O’Hara, and Aingléis 2002). In addition to school development planning, the raft of legislation that followed the 1998 Education Act promoted a partnership approach to education with an emphasis

on evaluation (Harvey 2015). ‘Partnership’ had been a central plank of the approach taken by successive governments in Ireland since the late 1980s to achieve agreement on programmes for national development, including the introduction of school evaluation (Dillon 2011). Here, public sector reform was a matter of negotiation and agreement between government and the public sector unions (McNamara et al. 2020). While Ireland’s economic success in the late 1990s and early 2000s was based on cooperation and negotiation between social partners, ‘a model which is perceived to preclude invasive inspection or appraisal of professionals in their workplace’, it was also the case that other stakeholders, namely parents and business interests, were increasingly vocal in demanding that hard data ‘about the performance of teachers and schools be made available in a transparent fashion’ (McNamara and O’Hara 2006, 565). Thus, by the early 2000s, there was a growing appetite, mainly outside of schools, for more accountability in schools.

Some scholars, such as Fleming (2016), have contended that evaluation has never been a strong feature of the Irish education system. For example, external inspections were uncommon by the 1990s meaning many teachers never, or rarely, experienced one. Apart from European Union (EU) expenditure, Ireland did not previously have a strong tradition of evaluating policies and programmes (McNamara et al. 2009) and rather than coming from any domestic demand, the emergence of such a culture in the Irish public sector, and particularly in education, is attributed to the influence of external bodies, without which it could be argued that no evaluation culture would have emerged in Ireland (McNamara et al. 2009). It is widely agreed that the influence on Irish education in the 1990s was largely international (McNamara et al. 2020) and while previously it was said that it was more so the influence of the EU, and to a lesser but significant degree the OECD (McNamara et al. 2009), the OECD’s influence on Irish education policy should not be underestimated. Mac Ruairc (2010, 244) contends that ‘there has been a long history of successive governments using OECD policy recommendations, arguably in a selective manner, to support or drive government policy in education’ since the 1960s. It is arguable that the first formal impact of international agencies on the Irish education system was an OECD Report in 1965, where the connection between education and economic development was made quite explicit (Sugrue 2006). In terms of catalysing contemporary change, and specifically in relation to school evaluation, an OECD report from 1991 can be seen to be particularly pivotal. According to the report, teaching approaches in Ireland were from a previous century (Mooney Simmie 2012) and the teaching culture was very removed from any professional accountability (O’Grady, Guilfoyle, and McGarr 2018). It was said that school inspectors’ ‘full potential is far from being tapped’ and, in order to achieve this, consideration should be given to ‘shedding certain existing duties’ while the ‘lack of development of teacher and school self-evaluation’ was also referred to (Sugrue 2006, 186). In a lot of ways, this OECD report ‘ushered in a new period in Irish education ... leading to major policy churn’ (Sugrue 2009, 372). Following on from the 1998 Education Act, the early years of the new century saw major changes to the structure and functions of the DES<sup>3</sup> in that it was relieved from the wide range of activities that had previously been over-absorbing it and enabled it to focus its professional work on evaluation and advice (Coolahan et al. 2017). From 2003 onwards, school evaluation then became a reality in Ireland. However, while this evaluation was based on a dual model

of both internal evaluation and external inspection, the emphasis was largely on the former – which remained optional for schools until 2012.

### **The rise of school self-evaluation in Ireland**

While a culture of evaluation has been developing in education in Ireland over the past two decades, SSE has accelerated in recent years. In doing so, SSE has moved from being ‘a largely rhetorical concept to a very real imposition on schools and teachers’ (Brown et al. 2017, 74). The reason ‘for this rapid change of policy can only really be guessed at’: that SSE was always likely to be stepped up, the increased role of SSE in other countries, and the limited resources and reduced number of school inspectors are all possible reasons why (Brown et al. 2017, 74). While this speculation is plausible, in what follows, this paper expands and elaborates on this and encourages and enjoins new lines of thought. We suggest that there have been three key reasons for the rise of SSE in Ireland: the influence of the OECD, the perceived need for more accountability, and the drive towards self-managing schools.

### ***The influence of the OECD***

As is the case internationally, the Irish Government has faced immense pressure in recent years to grow the economy, and according to Sloane, Oloff-Lewis, and Kim (2013), a highly educated and competitive workforce is a way of doing so, but a consequence will be increased accountability in schools. Most OECD countries have legal requirements in places for schools to conduct SSE (O’Brien, McNamara, and O’Hara 2014) and a 2011 OECD report exhorted the Irish Government to move forward with accountability efforts, noting that Irish authorities should set up mechanisms to systematically evaluate teachers’ and schools’ performances as up until this point Ireland had limited accountability systems in place (Sloane, Oloff-Lewis, and Kim 2013). A significant drop in the 2009 PISA standings while the country was suffering from a severe economic disaster formed the basis of a perceived catastrophe in education (Skerritt and Salokangas 2020) and a series of reforms were subsequently introduced from 2011 onwards including a national strategy for improving literacy and numeracy, the extension and reconceptualisation of Initial Teacher Education programmes which would include a greater emphasis on literacy and numeracy, and compulsory SSE with a focus on literacy and numeracy. The Education Minister appointed in 2011 was committed to reform and the economic and education conditions at the time presented the perfect vehicle for committing to this, regardless of mood of the teaching profession.<sup>4</sup>

The influence of the OECD on Irish education policy has been referred to above, but it is evident that OECD influence intensified the drive towards SSE in Ireland in recent years due to ‘PISA shock’ (Brown et al. 2018; McNamara et al. 2020). It is perhaps unsurprising that SSE rose when PISA scores declined, and especially during an economic recession. Ireland’s Chief Inspector, for example, has publicly discussed several reasons for the increasing concern with quality assurance in Irish schools and among these reasons are ‘the desire for value for money, a move to school autonomy, and the impact of international comparisons’ (Hislop 2012, 9). In terms of ‘Globalisation and international comparisons’ as a factor, Hislop (2012, 6–7) has acknowledged the rise

and influence of the OECD's PISA and the 'powerful back-wash effect' it has had on many education systems, including Ireland's. The influence of the OECD on SSE in Ireland can again be seen in more recent comments made by Hislop (2015, 5):

In Ireland, we have been convinced by research, including the OECD's Synergies for Better Learning Project, that shows significant benefits for learners when effective self-evaluation in schools is complemented by external inspection.

### ***The perceived need for more accountability***

With a declining economy coinciding with a perceived decline in standards in schools, it is very plausible that the rise of SSE in Ireland was also, in part, due to (mis)perceptions of the teaching profession and public demand for more transparency and accountability. Soon after SSE became mandatory, the Chief Inspector admitted that relative to external evaluation, SSE had 'been considerably less well developed' (Hislop 2013, 15) and that 'the term teacher appraisal is quite foreign in the Irish context' (2013, 18). Less than a year previous he had also remarked that 'Ireland is unusual in not having some form of regular teacher appraisal' and that 'a school culture in which principals monitor the work of other teachers would be beneficial' as 'even informal monitoring of teachers' work does not occur' (Hislop 2012, 26). This sentiment is also shared by many parents. According to McCormack, Lynch, and Hennessy (2015), there have been calls for greater accountability within schools. The need to increase school and teacher accountability was frequently cited in their study 'as a justification for publishing comparative data on schools' (McCormack, Lynch, and Hennessy 2015, 520). Teacher incompetence was a concern among parents, with calls being made for the teaching profession to be subjected to greater scrutiny, inspection, and transparency. One parent they surveyed, for example, remarked that

Some teachers once qualified and in a secure job for life lose interest. There is no accountability. (McCormack, Lynch, and Hennessy 2015, 521)

Despite continued high levels of public trust in the teaching profession, teachers can polarise public opinion. Particularly during times of economic upheaval, teachers have often been targeted for criticism due to the extraordinary professional autonomy<sup>5</sup> they were known to exercise, but also due to the perception that they were too resistant to change (Skerritt 2019a). The permanent and pensionable conditions that previously saw public sector workers respected, can now see them pilloried (Sugrue 2013). There is now little sympathy for the 'cosseted' public sector (Sugrue 2017) and the partnership approach that had once characterised Irish public policy subsided once the Irish economy collapsed. As McNamara and O'Hara (2012, 95) explain, the economic conditions brought about cultural change in that accountability and transparency came to be seen as being integral to the Irish education system's success and there were demands for better standards and performances. Thus, when compulsory SSE was introduced in 2012, it was made clear that, while being developmental in nature, SSE would have a strong internal accountability aspect (McNamara et al. 2020).

### ***The drive towards self-managing schools***

The combination of limited resources and the move towards self-managing schools could also be considered to be particularly influential in the rise of SSE in Ireland. The Chief



Inspector previously admitted that the models of external inspection that were in existence during the first decade of the millennium ‘proved incapable of delivering adequate inspection coverage across the school system, even with the staffing levels available to the Inspectorate prior to the contraction of public service employment’ (Hislop 2012, 14) and that the Inspectorate ‘could not deliver sufficiently frequent inspections nor could it hope to produce published reports on schools with sufficient regularity’ (Hislop 2012, 15). An embargo on recruitment during the recession, Drudy (2011, 171) suggested, could prove problematic for the Inspectorate’s work and according to Coolahan et al. (2017) the Inspectorate suffered a decline in staffing of more than 20% between 2008 and 2016, which includes some inspectors being deployed to serve on other agencies. While Coolahan et al. (2017) do state that there is no evidence that the quality of the Inspectorate’s work has been diluted, we are mindful that relative to external inspections compulsory SSE requires less of the Inspectorate’s resources and expenses. Thus, it is quite plausible that SSE was seen by the Inspectorate as a viable cost-saving alternative.

Furthermore, also on the agenda in Ireland has been the establishment of autonomous schools (see for example Skerritt 2019b, 2019c, 2020). According to Carr and Beckett (2018), the interest in school autonomy first emerged with the *Programme for Government 2011–2016*. Subsequent consultation and research papers produced by the DES (2015a, 2015b) explained that autonomy ‘involves the freeing of schools from centralised and bureaucratic control or, put simply, the decentralising of decision-making to schools’. It was acknowledged that the discussion of school autonomy stems from the proposals in the Programme for Government to make changes in relation to the autonomy of schools over aspects of staffing, budget, curriculum, governance and ethos (DES 2015a). The three main aims concerned increasing democratic participation in schools, improving the school system’s efficiency, and improving the quality of the education provided (DES 2015a, 2015b). The research paper also refers to how these are evident in the Programme’s aim of positioning Ireland in the top ten performing countries in PISA and the ambition of ‘building a knowledge society’ (DES 2015b). The Chief Inspector also acknowledged the policy objective of advancing school autonomy and points out that if greater autonomy and decision-making is devolved to schools it would have to be ‘balanced by greater public scrutiny’ of the work of schools (Hislop 2012, 6). Indeed, autonomous schools are never entirely autonomous and are more quasi-autonomous. In the Irish case, the DES (2015a, 2015b) has acknowledged that school autonomy would require more accountability and that consideration could be given to advancing the establishment of robust SSE. The school autonomy agenda continued to grow as SSE was normalised in schools and is indicative of an education system keen to adopt a more Laissez-faire approach in theory. In practice, however, the autonomy provided to schools is likely to be circumscribed by further accountability, through, for example, SSE.

### **Reflecting on the purpose(s) of SSE in Ireland**

SSE in Ireland can be seen to serve an improvement logic, an economic logic, and an accountability logic. In what follows we reflect on these three logics singly and then proceed to think of them as an assemblage of logics.

### ***The improvement logic***

While there is an accountability function to SSE in Ireland, and the discourse has appeared to become imbued with tones of managerialism in recent years, the emphasis in official discourse is still largely on improvement as opposed to accountability (Skerritt et al. 2021) and this is regularly reflected in comments made by the Chief Inspector (see Hislop 2013, 2015, 2017). There is no indication that senior policymakers either envisioned or even desired an arduous accountability regime in the 1990s, and the Chief Inspector's remarks do not present indications of plans for intrusive or professionally demeaning interventions (McNamara et al. 2020). The Irish education system currently remains a relatively low-stakes system with little or no consequences for poor school performance (O'Brien et al. 2019). There are no rewards or sanctions for schools (Gustafsson et al. 2015) or teachers (Jones et al. 2017). As Coolahan et al. (2017) point out, one of the Inspectorate's key objectives in introducing and maintaining evaluations such as SSE has been to encourage greater collaborative and collegial work within school communities and break away from the more traditional model in Ireland of teachers working in isolation with 'king/queen of the classroom syndrome'. SSE has subsequently grown and developed over the years, but it has remained, in official discourse at least, focused on improvement. It appears that improvement will remain a key part of official discourse; when there is always the need to improve metrics there will always be the need to improve performances.

### ***The economic logic***

Not only is SSE a more affordable option than external inspection, but it is also endorsed by influential supranational organisations such as the OECD. The OECD has been particularly influential in Ireland and leaves a strong imprint on Irish education policy<sup>6</sup> – a case in point being the introduction of mandatory SSE after a declining performance in the OECD's PISA. Indeed, the PISA results can also be seen as a catalyst for SSE in terms of compounding the perceived need for more accountability. Through PISA, the OECD has been 'reaching into' local spaces but also simultaneously national school systems have been 'reaching out' to the OECD and others in order to justify or legitimate particular local actions (Lewis and Lingard 2015), and this appears to be very much the case in Ireland. For example, an Education International report dating back to before the release of the PISA 2009 results states that

In Ireland, PISA has been and still is a catalyst for change in favour of more testing and evaluation. All PISA cycles have been used in order to justify specific actions or initiatives undertaken by the government, either before or after the publication of the results. (Figazolozolo 2009, 15)

PISA-oriented policy persists. As Sugrue (2015) previously pointed out, the rising accountability in Irish education continued even after Ireland's improved scores in 2012. As mentioned earlier, there is the aim of establishing Irish education and training as Europe's best, which is unlikely to cease in the near future. The most recent PISA results show that Ireland's '15 year-olds are among the best in reading literacy and are performing significantly higher than the OECD average in maths and science' (DES 2019a, 9) but the official discourse espoused and endorsed by the DES is one of

continuous improvement – we must not rest on our laurels but instead be unsatisfied with imperfect results and always strive for better. For example, the DES (2019a, 9) has stated that ‘Whilst the maths and science results are relatively stable and at an above average level, we can improve further’. Looking ahead, the DES (2019b, 17) Statement of Strategy 2019–2021 outlines that the indicators used to measure progress against the goals of the strategy include the performances of Ireland’s students in ‘PISA and other national and international measures’. The signs to date are that until the unattainable is attained, PISA will persist as a key influence on Irish education.

### ***The accountability logic***

As school evaluation has evolved and become an accepted facet of school life in Ireland it has acquired elements that left-wing scholars can perceive to be part of the neoliberal agenda (McNamara et al. 2020). Inter alia, SSE has given rise to the collecting and monitoring of performance data, benchmarking against predefined standards, and increased workloads. Of note is the emerging international research conducted by scholars outside of Ireland. Verger, Parcerisa, and Fontdevila (2019) looked at data from several editions of PISA (i.e. 2003, 2006, 2012 and 2015) to examine the accountability purposes and practices associated with national large-scale assessments and found Ireland to be one of the countries with a higher percentage of schools using data from these assessments to compare performances with other schools. This is significant because, as Verger, Parcerisa, and Fontdevila (2019) conclude, national large-scale assessments generate the necessary data to hold actors accountable for students’ achievement and their adherence to national curricular standards. Based on data gathered from principals as part of PISA 2015, Högberg and Lindgren (2020) grouped Ireland into a cluster of countries characterised by the greater use of accountability tools. Within this cluster, Ireland is also categorised into a sub-cluster of countries where there are more mandatory external evaluations, standardised tests, tests to judge teacher effectiveness, inter-school performance comparisons, and the provision of performance data to parents (Högberg and Lindgren 2020). Thus, accountability is becoming more apparent in Irish education and Irish schools and represents the greater need for accountability called for by those outside of Ireland’s schools. However, externally driven accountability as the solution to enhancing professional work in the interest of the public is ‘questionable’ (Solbrekke and Englund 2011, 857) and the pressure to perform in international comparative tests could challenge values of equality and inclusion (Solbrekke and Englund 2011, 853).

### ***An assemblage of logics***

Ireland’s DES might officially contend and purport that SSE is predominantly for improvement but if we look deeper, it is part of ‘a complex assemblage’ (Savage 2016) of overlapping purposes that are both complementary and contradictory and devoid of a ‘singular guiding rationale’ (Savage 2020). Officially, SSE is for improvement – and improvement is certainly part of it – but it would appear that relative to improvement, in reality, it is the economic and accountability logics that dominate. This arrangement, which appears to be primarily concerned with financial and regulatory proceedings, has

the potential to undermine the improvement logic. If schools are steered by economic motives that are more concerned with value for money, outputs, and international rankings; and if teachers are subjected to accountability regimes that bring about, inter alia, more monitoring of performances and benchmarking against externally prescribed and imposed standards; more reporting, meetings, paperwork and generally increased workloads; attention could paradoxically be taken away from teaching, relationships, caring, and all of the other unmeasurable aspects of school life that help improve not only performances in the narrowest sense, but experiences in the broadest sense. Teachers' professional responsibility could be jeopardised (Solbrekke and Englund 2011), hollowed out (Sugrue 2013), and rendered redundant.

## Concluding comments

While SSE is no doubt aimed at improving schools, it is also evident that it acts as an accountability mechanism and that there is also an economic logic. While the economic logic may be based on SSE being a more economically viable option than external inspection, there is also the influence of supranational organisations such as the OECD and the economic incentives on offer. In Ireland, the country of focus here, SSE is not underpinned by any single logic but an assemblage of overlapping logics interwoven by complements and contradictions. While improvement is predominantly promoted in official discourse, it would appear that it is the accountability and economic logics that dominate. A key concern here is that this assemblage could potentially undermine the improvement logic and teachers' sense of professional responsibility.

This paper has focused on SSE in Ireland, which we contend comprises an assemblage of logics heavily influenced by but not solely by the OECD (Savage and Lewis 2018) and where SSE is predominantly guided by accountability and economics under the guise of improvement. How we see these purposes and the role of the OECD are likely to resonate with many around the world, while at the same time what we have presented is a context-specific case. National policies can be constituted by diverse assemblages of policy ideas and practices which often reflect transnational trends (Savage and Lewis 2018), but global agendas, processes, and drivers do not affect national education systems in fixed and linear ways (Grek et al. 2009; Rizvi and Lingard 2009; Savage and O'Connor 2015). The OECD's influence, for example, might be felt by another education system in a similar way but might enter, shape, and retain this space in ways that can vary, and this paper can help others to make sense of their own contexts and instigate new lines of thought.

With compulsory SSE in operation for almost a decade, and with a new cycle of SSE due to be rolled out in the 2021/2022 academic year, we conclude this paper by calling for more critical discussion and open debate vis-à-vis policy formulation that pays due attention to the views of those doing SSE on the ground. This could potentially, in time, lead to conversations about revising or reforming Ireland's Inspectorate – which might be necessary in the quest for *improvement*.

## Notes

1. Like Mac Ruairc (2019), we are conscious of how the terms 'inspection' and 'evaluation' are often conflated and used interchangeably. In this paper, inspection refers to external reviews

conducted by Ireland's Inspectorate while the term evaluation relates to the internal reviews carried out by schools when framed as SSE, or it can mean the overarching system of school evaluation comprising both external and internal reviews when it is used more broadly.

2. After being known as the Department of Education and Skills since 2010, in October 2020, the Department was officially renamed the Department of Education. This paper continues referring to it as the Department of Education and Skills due to the overlap between the name change and the drafting of this article, and the policy documents drawn on throughout which are labelled 'Department of Education and Skills'.
3. At this time, the Department was officially known as the Department of Education and Science.
4. Sugrue (2017, 171), for example, recounts witnessing the Minister for Education and Skills 'hectoring and lecturing' teachers who questioned his pronouncements.
5. After the previously mentioned 1991 OECD report, the term 'legendary autonomy' became almost ubiquitous in discussions in the literature about teachers' professional conditions in Ireland (Skerritt 2020).
6. In March 2021, Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills and Special Advisor on Education Policy at the OECD, was referred to in Ireland's national media as 'The most influential person in Irish education' (see <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/zero-correlation-between-quality-of-tuition-and-class-size-says-top-educator-1.4516209?mode=amp>).

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