Polycentric inspection: A catalyst for sparking positive interactions in educational networks

Martin Brown(iD)**, Gerry McNamara, Joe O'Hara and Paddy Shevlin**
DCU Institute of Education, Ireland

Abstract

The core assumption of polycentric inspection is that when schools reach a certain quality threshold, they can further improve best through a coordinated, collaborative effort between clusters of schools and external agencies such as, for example, social services and training providers. The suggested role of an external agency with the respect and resources of the inspectorate is to provide stimulus and support to make the network effective. Using a bounded case study method, this research seeks to assess the potential of polycentric inspection as a tool for improving school effectiveness and outcomes. Evidence from this study suggests that this mode of evaluation has had a significant impact on improving schools, supporting teachers' practice and, arguably, increasing student examination outcomes in the network examined. In consequence, it is suggested that these findings have wider implications for the changing conception of school evaluation and how improvement can be achieved in education.

Keywords

collaboration, networks, polycentric inspection, school governance

Introduction and background

School evaluation has become a key driver in the attempt to improve the quality of performance across the continuum of education (see, for example, Brown et al., 2016). In this context, Barber et al. (2010) in Mckinsey sparked a debate about a lack of improvement in many education systems. They argued that, having reached a certain quality threshold, education systems in many countries are not aiming for higher achievement and fail to innovate in their teaching and learning. One mechanism to make this final but difficult leap "from good to great" is, they suggested, through the process of creating school networks. As argued by

Corresponding author:
Martin Brown, Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection (EQI), DCU Institute of Education, DCU St. Patrick's Campus, Drumcondra, Dublin 9, Ireland.
Email: martin.brown@dcu.ie

Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan (2016), "the power of effective networks lies not only in their potential to improve teaching and learning in schools, but more importantly, in their power to become forces of positive change in entire systems" (19). Barber et al. (2010) also state that school networks should be governed or guided by some external agency. In this article, we suggest that the inspectorate or a similar agency may be best placed to take on this network governance role which we have designated "polycentric inspection".

The article summarises research conducted as part of an EU-funded Erasmus+ project titled "Polycentric inspections of networks of schools", the focus of which is to provide an assessment of the potential of polycentric inspection as a tool for improving school effectiveness and outcomes. It describes a case study analysis of polycentric inspection in West Belfast, Northern Ireland (where this approach is officially described as area-based inspection). The project draws on the knowledge and experience of members of a networked school alliance to understand the implementation and impact of polycentric school inspection.

The first stage of this article offers an analysis of the rise of networking in education. The next stage provides a theoretical perspective on network governance and describes how this development has informed the authors' conception of polycentric inspection as it applies to educational networks. Leading on from this, the school inspection system in Northern Ireland is briefly described, and a more detailed account of polycentric or area-based inspection is given. Using case study as a method the fourth stage moves from an analysis of documents to surveys, and semi-structured interviews with members of a network of schools officially called an "Area Learning Community" situated in West Belfast, Northern Ireland. Finally, the fifth stage of the article converges the other stages of the study to reach an overall judgement on school networking and polycentric inspection as it has developed in Northern Ireland concluding with an assessment of potential in other contexts.

The rise of educational networks

The concept of networking to enhance a particular aspect of organisational provision is well established in both the public and private sectors in areas such as business and psychology (Burt et al., 2013). Because networking can be used as a loosely bound umbrella term for many social interactions, Chapman and Hadfield (2010) are of the view that "the sheer plasticity of the term network means that it has been applied to a wide range of social and technological phenomena" (p. 310). Feys and Devos (2014) state that "it is a growing trend among politicians and school governors to use terms such as *network, partnership* and *collaboration*. In the public and non-profit sector, collaboration is no longer simply an option; it has become the new orthodoxy" (3). Hertting and Vedung (2012) suggest that: "evaluation and network governance are both among the top 10 trendy concepts in public policy" (p. 29).

Muijs et al. (2010) however, emphasise the relative infancy of educational networks in comparison to other areas:

> […] of course while networking has only recently come to the fore in education, the concept is long established in other fields, with strong roots in social science, psychology, and business studies […] (6)

Díaz-Gibson et al. (2014: 180) in reference to Daly and Finnigan (2010) also note that "the idea of networks in support of educational improvement, while still in its infancy, is gaining momentum in education". This is no surprise given the growing body of evidence pointing to

the benefits of being part of an educational network. These include improved learning, the efficient use of resources, heightened innovation capacity and system-wide improvement (Chapman, 2008; Chapman and Hadfield, 2010; Hands, 2010; Muijs et al., 2011). As a result, educational networks and, in particular, formalised educational networks are beginning to emerge in countries throughout Europe. These networks have similar functions, for example, peer support and collaborative planning to improve an aspect of teaching and learning among schools in a geographical location (Ehren et al., 2017). However, being part of an educational network does not always guarantee improvement.

Scholars of network theory suggest that due consideration must also be given to the guiding principles that undergird efficient and sustainable networks, such as: "network goal consensus" (Provan and Kenis, 2008); "purpose and identity" (Chapman and Hadfield, 2010; Provan and Kenis, 2008); "reciprocity" (see Moolenaar, 2010) and "trust" (Chapman and Hadfield, 2009; Daly and Finnigan, 2012). Daly and Finnigan (2010) describe conditions for successful educational networks identified in the National College for School Leadership's Network Learning project (Earl and Katz, 2007):

> The key conditions of these successful networks included frequent and pervasive communication, shared understanding and purpose, joint challenging work, and relationships built on trust that enabled the transfer of tacit and explicit knowledge. (Daly and Finnigan, 2010: 114)

Polycentric inspection and the governance of educational networks: A theoretical perspective

The benefits and guiding principles for effective networks are well documented. However, McCormick et al. (2010) also state that previous iterations of educational networks were either overly ambitious or not ambitious enough:

> Too ambitious in that networks were seen as the way to go and were bestowed with a myriad of concepts that turned out to be metaphors supported by little evidence to show they were productive. Not ambitious enough in that they did not help us understand the uniqueness of what network thinking could bring to bear. (231)

Therefore, evidence to-date suggests that for educational networks to be effective, a greater emphasis should be placed on clear goal direction, specific aims and formal management. This implies that networks would no longer be "serendipitous" but rather, designed and maintained for clear purposes. As Lima (2010) observes,

> Traditionally the density of interactions in educational networks involve, to a significant degree, *serendipitous* interactions among group members (that is, networks evolve haphazardly from the interactions of individual actors, without guidance from any central network) but if the professed benefits of networking are to be brought to fruition, there is a need to shift more towards a predominant mode of networking in the form of *goal-directed* networks […] (10)

It appears to follow that, for goal-directed networks to operate in practice, they need to be effectively led and be open to guidance from other stakeholders who are not directly involved in the daily operations of the network. One solution to achieving goal-directed network activities may be through the process of polycentric network inspection; that is, inspections that are

implemented by an agency outside of the day-to-day operations of the network but ideally having the status, power and respect, certainly to advise, lead and guide and perhaps enforce where such powers are granted.

The underlying assumption of polycentric inspection that forms the basis for the theoretical framework used in this study is that when schools reach a certain quality threshold, they can achieve further improvement not simply by single unit internal/external evaluations but by joint learning between networks of schools, other organisations and the inspectorate through a process of collaborative, quality-assured network evaluation. Consequently, we propose that for school networks to work satisfactorily, there needs to be a redefinition of accountability and development from a polycentric inspection perspective. What this might look like is described as "development evaluation" by Hertting and Vedung (2012) who explain that "at the level of the network as a whole, development evaluation implies joint learning among all participating agencies and organizations of the network, not primarily the learning of each individual agency or organization" (37). In other words, according to Brown et al. (2015) "such evaluations are horizontally driven, not through traditional hierarchical command and control processes but rather through that of reciprocal relationships and joint evaluation activities between inspectorates and the various constituent actors within the network" (5).

Over the course of our own research on school inspection (Altrichter et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2017, 2018; Gustafsson et al., 2015; McNamara and O'Hara, 2012) and in the inspection literature as a whole (Ehren et al., 2013; Ehren and Visscher, 2008), there is a constant debate between supporting development as opposed to accountability as the key task of inspection (Hopkins et al., 2016; Nevo, 2010). In polycentric inspection, it seems reasonable to suggest that it depends on the type and status of the network to determine whether inspectorates have accountability powers or take an entirely supportive and developmental role. For example, the issue of accountability powers for polycentric inspections becomes discernibly different for funded and non-funded networks (Ehren et al., 2017). Also, because of the altruistic and collaborative nature of most networks, there may be a reluctance to consider them from a network governance and accountability perspective. As stated by Provan and Kenis (2008), "there seems to be some reluctance among many who study networks to discuss formal mechanisms of control. A common assumption is that, since networks are often collaborative arrangements, governance, which implies hierarchy and control, is inappropriate" (230). Lima (2010) also suggests that there is a lacuna of studies relating to the failure rates of networks in education and yet there is a constant drive to establish school-to-school networking as an integral part of educational practice. This point is important in the context of this research. As Lima (2010) observes,

> There is nothing inherently positive or negative about a network: it can be flexible and organic, or rigid and bureaucratic; it can be liberating and empowering, or stifling and inhibiting; it can be democratic, but it may also be dominated by particular interests. What actually occurs in concrete educational networks is something for researchers to determine. (2)

Research on the impact of school inspection has primarily focused on individual schools (Brown, 2013; Brown et al., 2017; Dedering and Muller, 2011; Ehren et al., 2013; Gustafsson et al., 2015; Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood et al., 1999; McNamara and O'Hara, 2012; Witziers et al., 2003). Interestingly in the context of this article, much of this research suggests that schools improve more through the indirect effects of inspection (accepting feedback,

setting expectations and improving school self-evaluation capacity) as opposed to the direct effects of command and control accountability mechanisms such as naming and shaming or financial penalties. There is little in the literature concerning the inspection of school networks probably because it is only recently, as the limitations of narrow, individual school-based approaches to improvement have become clear, that there has been a significant shift towards the notion of driving change through networks (Muijs et al., 2010). As Jackson and Temperley (2007) put it,

> […] the school as a unit has become too small-scale and too isolated to provide rich professional learning for its adult members in a knowledge rich and networked world. A new unit of meaning, belonging, and engagement – the network – is required. (45)

However, it may also be, as Siciliano (2012) suggests, "more difficult to isolate the causal effect of network structure in comparison to single school outcomes" (2). This is certainly an issue with the current project.

Polycentric inspection activities included the following activities:

- Facilitating a collective agreement for a shared agenda for change within the network;
- Scheduling visits to all schools and other organisations in the educational network;
- Examining the quality of collaborative initiatives between network members;
- Taking into consideration the varying perspectives on school quality of the schools and the various stakeholders;
- Quality assuring the network's implementation of recommendations from previous polycentric inspections;
- Providing feedback to stakeholders on elements of best practice in other schools and networks (Ehren et al., 2017; ETI, 2010b).

This research aimed to assess the impact of this programme of inspection on supporting and perhaps steering the network but, more importantly, on the extent to which networking brought about identifiable improvement. For this project, the definition of polycentric inspection is as follows:

> school inspections from a polycentric perspective are external evaluations of networked schools together with their interdependent web of stakeholders in order to provide feedback, disseminate good practice and, ultimately, to agree upon a shared agenda for change within the network. (Brown et al., 2015)

The next section of this article provides an overview of school networks and the school inspection system in Northern Ireland with a focus on polycentric inspection or area-based inspection as it is also referred to.

School networks in Northern Ireland

Of particular relevance to this research is the establishment some years ago of "Area Learning Communities" (ALCs) that consist of clusters of post-primary schools (including special schools). At present, there are 30 ALCs in Northern Ireland, defined by the Department of Education (DENI, 2010) as follows, "ALCs are voluntary coalitions of schools which can be

a useful forum for planning and collaboration to meet the needs of pupils in an area and for focusing on quality and sharing good practice" (p. 4). Concerning the role of the inspectorate and the issue of accountability, it is essential to stress the voluntary nature of these networks. ALCs "work together voluntarily to provide a broad and balanced curriculum and to deliver on the requirements of the "Entitlement Framework"". The Entitlement Framework requires schools to provide pupils with access to a minimum number of courses at Key Stage 4 (24 courses) and a minimum number of courses at post-16 (27 courses). To reach these targets, Article 21 of the Education Order 2006 enables schools to secure course provision for students at other institutions within the ALC. Thus, a key purpose of these networks is to allow the level of flexibility required to enable students to take courses at more than one institution. It also follows that these networks are fundamentally geographical in nature being linked to districts, in this case, West Belfast.

Inspections conducted by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), whose mission statement emphasises "promoting improvement", utilise a number of inspection modes across the different phases/sectors of the education system of Northern Ireland. Although different inspection frameworks exist, in most cases, inspection is focused on individual schools. As stated in ETI (2014), "the work of ETI focuses mostly on the inspection of, and reporting on, the overall effectiveness of single organisations such as schools, colleges, training and other providers" (1).

In single school inspections, if a school achieves a good inspection, the consequences as set out in the DENI improvement document entitled Every School a Good School (DENI, 2009a) is that the next inspection is a less intensive inspection with a significant emphasis on the school's own self-evaluation process that is guided by the ETI developed resource referred to as Together Towards Improvement (ETI, 2010d). On the other hand, where urgent areas for improvement are identified, the school is required to enter what is referred to as an FIP (Formal Intervention Process), the consequences of which can be, for example, "restructuring of the governance, leadership and management within the school; merging the school with a neighbouring school" (DENI, 2009a: 65). However, in the case of networks of schools across a geographical area, a different inspection model (area-based inspection) has been tested by the ETI.

Area-based inspections

In Northern Ireland, area-based inspections have been in existence since 2005. Area inspections focus on a particular aspect of education across different stages in a geographical area. As stated by ETI (2005),

> the aim of all inspections is to promote improvement, the purpose of the area inspection is to assess the relevance, appropriateness, adequacy and effectiveness of the provision of education and training within a given geographical area, in preparing 14–19-year-old learners to progress to further education, training or employment. (2)

The importance placed by the ETI (2010c) on education organisations in an area working collaboratively to provide quality education is evidenced in the Chief Inspector's Report (2008–2010):

It is important that all organisations who work for the benefit of learners continue to explore ways of working together to provide effective transitions and a more coherent experience for all learners. The area-based evaluations of transitions within two distinct areas …, highlight the importance of effective and well-informed self-evaluation and of making more connections through working with a range of stakeholders to raise standards and to achieve better outcomes for learners. The importance of strategic planning cannot be underestimated. A shared approach to developing a curriculum which will serve the needs of learners and provide them with individual learning pathways which are broad, balanced and coherent is crucial. (25)

The focus of area-based inspections varies. However, in more recent area inspections (ETI, 2010a, 2010b), the focus of the inspection specifically related to strategic planning for education and training within the area, the quality of learning for young people and the effectiveness of the transition arrangements for young people within and across the various sectors. In the course of these inspections, ETI visits a representative sample of education providers within the particular area. Various documents such as student attendance, student performance in external examinations and the results of previous inspections are used in preparation for inspection. Each organisation at the request of ETI must also complete a self-evaluation report on the strengths and weaknesses of the network prior to the inspection taking place.

During the inspection, a number of inspectors with specialist knowledge in a particular aspect of education and training form part of the team. Each inspector evaluates a representative sample of education providers relating to their own specialism. For example, in the case of an area-based inspection of Ballymena (ETI, 2010a), inspectors with specialist knowledge of pre-school centres, primary schools, post-primary schools, alternative education providers, special schools and further education and youth settings formed part of the inspection team. As with individual school inspections in Northern Ireland, the evidence used to form judgements on the quality of education provided in these organisations consists of, but is not limited to, lesson observations, analysis of each organisation's self-evaluation report, interviews with parents, students, teachers and the management team and members of Boards of Governors of each organisation inspected. Evidence is also gathered from a range of other organisations in the area such as the Education and Library Board who are asked to provide their own evaluation on the theme being inspected. Interviews also take place with a range of other relevant organisations in the area such as the Curriculum Advisory Support Service, the Department for Employment and Learning and, in the case of West Belfast, the West Belfast Area Partnership Board.

When the inspection is complete, an inspection report is provided to the ALC. An overall judgement is made detailing the main strengths and areas in need of improvement (ETI, 2009, 2010a, 2010b). Inspection judgements fall within a quality continuum ranging from unsatisfactory to outstanding (unsatisfactory, inadequate, satisfactory, good, very good and outstanding). A set of quantitative terms is also used to describe the extent to which an organisation is achieving its objectives, namely, "Almost/nearly (more than 90%)", "Most (75%–90%)", "A majority (50%–74%)", "A significant minority (30%–49%)", "A minority (10%–29%)", "Very few/a small number (less than 10%)". The report also contains quantitative comparative data on areas such as key stage assessment results for the area in comparison with the Northern Ireland averages and the percentage of school leavers entering employment or higher or further education in the area (ETI, 2010a, 2010b). The report is divided into two distinct sections.

Part 1 (Summary) of the report is divided into different sub-sections. The first section (Introduction) describes the area-based inspection model. The second section (Context) describes the area in which the inspection took place. This section provides contextual data on the area, including the number of children taking up the free school meals entitlement and the percentage of the population claiming benefits. The third section (Evaluation) describes the focus of the evaluation and the types of evidence that were gathered to inform overall inspection judgements. The fourth section (Summary of main findings) provides an overview of the strengths and areas for improvement for the area under focus. Oral feedback on the report is also given to each organisation that is inspected.

Part 2 (Conclusion and key priorities for development) of the report is also divided into different sections. The first section (Conclusion) provides an overall judgement on the quality of education provided in the area together with a statement detailing identified strengths and aspects for improvement. Furthermore, in line with other follow-up inspections, this section also states that (as is the case with the Ballymena (ETI, 2010a) and West Belfast (ETI, 2010b) area inspections) that "the Education and Training Inspectorate will monitor and report publicly on the progress made in addressing these areas for improvement" (ETI, 2010b: 9). The second section of the report (Key priorities for development) details the work needed to tackle the areas for improvement. However, to eliminate confusion relating to the responsibilities of each ALC member in attaining these goals, this section provides a detailed description of the specific roles and responsibilities of each one to reach the identified targets for improvement. For example, ETI (2010a, 2010b) explicitly lists the roles and responsibilities of the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning, educational stakeholders (Education and Library Boards) and organisations (primary schools, post-primary schools, special schools, further education colleges, training organisations, alternative education providers and the youth service) in realising the range of improvement outlined in the report. Oral feedback on the report is provided in a public forum to all organisations, stakeholders and interested individuals within the area.

The impact and future potential of this model of area-based or polycentric inspection is the principal focus of this research and will comprise the remainder of this article. First, however, a brief description of the research methodology employed is presented.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study was a concurrent mixed methods case study the purpose of which was to gain an understanding of the "complex interplay between a given phenomenon and its broader context" (Iorio, 2004: 60). Case study was chosen as the most appropriate method because of the substantial complexities surrounding the implementation of polycentric inspection and network governance. Rather than solely relying on numerical data points, following Yin (2014), there was a recognition that there are other variables and sources of data to consider to form an overall interpretation of the phenomenon. Finally, and most significantly in this work, case study inquiry "benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis" (Yin, 2014: 17). In this instance, the theoretical proposition was that polycentric network evaluation leads to improvement. To test this proposition, data collection and analysis consisted of an in-depth exploration of what Creswell (2012) refers to as a "bounded system". The bounded system where the case study took place is an urban district of Northern Ireland called West Belfast.

Table 1. Priorities of the polycentric network: evaluation and planning.

	Not a priority	Low priority	Medium priority	High priority	Essential
To jointly evaluate an aspect of educational provision (e.g. literacy) in the area	0.00% 0	7.14% 2	7.14% 2	21.43% 6	64.29% 18
To jointly develop an improvement plan for an aspect of educational provision (e.g. literacy) in the area	0.00% 0	7.14% 2	7.14% 2	42.86% 12	42.86% 12

Table 2. Priorities of the polycentric network – curriculum development and assessment.

	Not a priority	Low priority	Medium priority	High priority	Essential
To jointly develop and offer curricula	0.00% 0	7.14% 2	7.14% 2	57.14% 16	28.57% 8
To develop joint assessments	0.00% 0	7.14% 2	57.14% 14	28.57% 8	7.14% 2

West Belfast has a population of approximately 93,000 residents (West Belfast Partnership Board, 2014). A total of 17,339 children are living in West Belfast and attend one of the 10 post-primary or 30 primary schools in the area. The area has one of the highest levels of people claiming unemployment benefit in Northern Ireland. West Belfast also has the highest proportion of people (76%) living in the most deprived super output areas of Northern Ireland, and it ranks first on the Northern Ireland multiple deprivation measure (West Belfast Partnership Board, 2014: 6). As a result, a significant number of pupils in the area are entitled to free school meals. Indeed, the average number of pupils entitled to free school meals is approximately 35 per cent at post-primary level and 60 per cent at primary level (Brown et al., 2015).

Data collection and analysis

Data collection and analysis consisted of five distinct phases.

Phase 1: Literature review. This phase of the research consisted of a review of the literature on educational networks and network governance and resulted in the production of a theoretical framework that was used to develop a questionnaire and an interview schedule to ascertain member networks perceptions of polycentric inspection. This phase of the study was also used to form the basis for the classification of interview data in the later stages of the study.

Phase 2: Surveys. The first part of the survey consisted of a series of questions relating to the purpose of polycentric inspection as perceived by members of the network and questions relating to the priorities of the network. The second part of the survey sought to ascertain network participants' attitudes towards who should be involved in the development of evaluation methodologies and standards for the network. The survey was administered to 40 members of the network, with a 70 per cent response rate ($n=28$). The analysis was carried out using parametric statistical techniques of which the summary results are presented in Tables 1 to 8.

Table 3. Priorities of the polycentric network – peer learning and support.

	Not a priority	Low priority	Medium priority	High priority	Essential
To ensure that strong education organisations support weak education organisations in improving	0.00% 0	14.29% 4	50.00% 14	28.57% 8	7.14% 2
To ensure education organisations learn from each other	0.00% 0	7.14% 2	7.14% 2	21.43% 6	64.29% 18
To jointly develop and provide continuous professional development for staff (e.g. teachers)	0.00% 0	7.14% 2	7.14% 2	35.71% 10	50.00% 14

Table 4. Priorities of the polycentric network: infrastructural resources.

	Not a priority	Low priority	Medium priority	High priority	Essential
To share resources: IT	0.00% 0	35.71% 10	42.86% 12	21.43% 6	0.00% 0
To share school buildings and school grounds	0.00% 0	42.86% 12	42.86% 12	14.29% 4	0.00% 0

Table 5. Priorities of the polycentric network: human resources.

	Not a priority	Low priority	Medium priority	High priority	Essential
To share community workers and support services (e.g. school psychologist)	7.14% 2	14.29% 4	21.43% 6	50.00% 14	7.14% 2
To share staff (e.g. teachers)	7.14% 2	28.57% 8	42.86% 12	14.29% 4	7.14% 2
To jointly develop and provide initial teacher training	0.00% 0	42.86% 12	50.00% 14	0.00% 0	7.14% 2
To share resources: HR services	0.00% 0	50.00% 14	42.86% 12	7.14% 2	0.00% 0
To share financial services (e.g. one financial department and contracting for all schools)	0.00% 0	42.86% 12	42.86% 12	14.29% 4	0.00% 0

Table 6. Priorities of the polycentric network: equity of access.

	Not a priority	Low priority	Medium priority	High priority	Essential
To provide inclusive education	0.00% 0	7.14% 2	14.29% 4	28.57% 8	50.00% 14

Table 7. To what extent should the following stakeholders have a say in the development of evaluation methodologies.

	To no extent	To a very little extent	To some extent	To a great extent	To a very great extent
The inspectorate	7.14% 2	7.14% 2	35.71% 10	35.71% 10	14.29% 4
Head teachers of single schools (or other education organisations)	0.00% 0	7.14% 2	14.29% 4	42.86% 12	37.71% 10
Representative of teachers	0.00% 0	14.29% 4	42.86% 12	42.86% 12	0.00% 0
Governing bodies of individual schools	0.00% 0	14.29% 4	42.86% 12	42.86% 12	0.00% 0
Representative of parents	0.00% 0	21.43% 6	35.71% 10	42.86% 12	0.00% 0
Representative of students	0.00% 0	28.57% 8	42.86% 10	35.71% 10	0.00% 0
Governing bodies of networks	0.00% 0	42.86% 12	50.00% 14	7.14% 2	0.00% 0

Table 8. To what extent should the following stakeholders have a say in the development of evaluation standards.

	To no extent	To a very little extent	To some extent	To a great extent	To a very great extent
Inspectorate	7.14% 2	7.14% 2	25.00% 7	46.43% 13	14.29% 4
Head teachers	0.00% 0	7.14% 2	42.86% 12	28.57% 8	21.43% 6
Teachers	0.00% 0	21.43% 6	42.86% 12	28.57% 8	7.14% 2
Parents	0.00% 0	15.38% 4	69.23% 18	15.38% 4	0.00% 0
Students	0.00% 0	28.57% 8	57.14% 16	14.29% 4	0.00% 0
Governing bodies of individual schools	0.00% 0	21.43% 6	42.86% 12	35.71% 10	0.00% 0
Governing bodies of networks	0.00% 0	7.14% 2	42.86% 10	35.71% 16	0.00% 0

Phase 3: Interviews. The quantitative phase of the study provided an exploratory analysis of issues concerning network priorities and the development of methodologies and standards for the network. Follow-up interviews with participants of the network allowed the researchers to explore these issues in greater detail as well as other matters such as the degree to which competition and power structures affect the overall functioning of the network. Eighteen 1-hour interviews were conducted with school leaders within the network from March to August 2016. Selection of participants was based on a purposeful sampling strategy, the objective of

Table 9. West Belfast Area Learning Community GCSE performance: 2010 to 2015.

GCSE	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Number of pupils in Y12	893	775	840	894	851	819
Number of eligible pupils (Summary of Annual Examination Results)	827	734	780	826	789	767
Percentage of ineligible pupils	7.4	5.3	7.1	7.6	7.3	6.3
Percentage receiving five or more at grades A*–C	79.2	80.8	84.5	85.7	91.9	92.2
Percentage receiving five or more at grades A*–C including English and Maths	52.4	49.0	49.1	50.7	61.2	61.3
Percentage receiving seven or more at grades A*–C	60.0	63.6	69.5	70.5	80.2	80.4
Percentage receiving seven or more at grades A*–C including English and Maths	50.7	46.5	47.7	48.7	59.4	59.2

Source: Belfast Education and Library Board.
GCSE: General Certificate of Secondary Education.

Table 10. West Belfast Area Learning Community A-level performance: 2010 to 2015.

A level	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Number of pupils in Y14	697	666	793	710	783	801
Number of eligible pupils (Summary of Annual Examination Results)	560	536	564	573	626	632
Percentage of ineligible pupils	19.7	19.5	28.9	19.3	20.1	21.1
Percentage receiving two or more at grades A*–C	92.3	89.9	93.3	91.1	93.8	93.3
Percentage receiving three or more at grades A*–C	50.2	51.1	55.0	58.1	66.8	61.6

which is "to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study" (Patton, 2002: 46). Semi-structured interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate type of interview for this study and, consistent with Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) "allows depth to be achieved by providing the opportunity on the part of the interviewer to probe and expand respondent's responses" (157).

Furthermore, we also took cognisance of (Miles et al., 2013) who are of the view that the power of the analysis can be reduced if interviews are not focused. The authors argue that "if interview schedules or observation schedules are not focused, too much superfluous information will be collected. An overload of data will compromise the efficiency and power of the analysis" (39). The interview coding and analysis framework of this phase of the research used Creswell's (2008) data analysis process and Miles and Huberman's (1994) "Components of Data Analysis: Interactive Model" and consisted of three analytical stages (transcription of interviews, data immersion and coding and analysis). All interviews were thematically coded using NVivo 10 Software.

Phase 4: Document analysis. This phase of the study consisted of a cross-case analysis of area and youth inspections together with an analysis of the ETI area inspection report of West Belfast (ETI, 2010b) and the West Belfast Partnership Board's (2012) response to the inspection. Using data provided by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, the Department of Education and the West Belfast ALC, data sets relating to externally devised

Table 11. GCSE-level performance for students entitled to free school meals (FSM): 2013 to 2015.

GCSE level	2013	2014	2015
Number of FSM pupils in Y12	330	314	368
Number of eligible FSM pupils (for Summary of Annual Examination Results)	289	275	346
Percentage of ineligible FSM pupils	12.4	12.4	6.0
Percentage of FSM pupils achieving five or more at grades A*–C	76.5	84.0	88.7
Percentage of FSM pupils achieving five or more at grades A*–C including English and Maths	31.1	41.1	45.4
Percentage of FSM pupils achieving seven or more at grades A*–C	56.1	65.8	73.4
Percentage of FSM pupils achieving seven or more at grades A*–C including English and Maths	28.4	39.3	43.4

GCSE: General Certificate of Secondary Education.

Table 12. A-level performance for students entitled to free school meals (FSM): 2013 to 2015.

A level	2013	2014	2015
Number of FSM pupils in Y14	211	213	290
Number of eligible FSM pupils (for Summary of Annual Examination Results)	174	155	207
Percentage of ineligible FSM pupils	17.5	27.2	28.6
Percentage of FSM pupils achieving two or more at grades A*–E	86.2	89.0	99.0
Percentage of FSM pupils achieving two or more at grades A*–C	44.3	52.3	59.4

GCSE- (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and A- (Advanced) level results were also analysed for patterns of performance following the area inspection (Tables 9 to 12).

The GCSE is the main qualification that is available to 14- to 16-year-old post-primary school students in Northern Ireland. After the GCSE is obtained, students can also spend another 2 years studying for an A-level qualification, the results of which can be used as a point of entry into higher education courses at university level. The dominant mode of assessment for both qualifications is during the provision of externally devised written examinations that are available to students once per year. The results obtained by schools are also compared with the Northern Ireland average as well as being used by the ETI as a determinant of quality during school inspections.

Phase 5: Convergent phase. Finally, phase 5 of the study consisted of converging the previous phases to form an overall interpretation of the study, as reported in the findings section of this article below.

Findings

The research focused on a number of key indicators to evaluate both the functioning and, to the extent possible, the impact of the network. The role of the inspectorate in leading and guiding the network, as perceived by the members, was of particular interest. We have integrated the

survey and interview data in the following sections, with representative quotations from interviews with school leaders reported immediately after the table to which they are relevant.

Purpose of the network

This section provides an analysis of the activities, successes and failures of the network. On one hand, where areas such as evaluation and planning, curriculum development (CPD) and assessment, peer learning and support and equity of access are concerned, for the most part, they are viewed as being either high priority or essential priorities of the network (Tables 1 to 3 and 6). The majority of participants also view collaborative learning and joint CPD as being either high priority or essential priorities of the network. However, what is somewhat surprising is that the majority of participants view strong education organisations supporting weak education organisations in improving as being of a low or medium priority (Table 3). This is also the case when priorities such as the sharing of infrastructural resources is concerned (Table 4). From this, one could infer that despite the benefits of being part of an educational network, in education systems where competition between schools prevails, members of the network may also be reticent to engage in certain aspects of collaborative networking such as the sharing of infrastructural and human resources. Indeed, as stated by the Department of Education,

> All the evidence indicates that, as long as competition between schools for pupils and resources continues to be the predominant policy, it will remain very difficult for them to develop a strong agreed vision for all the young people in their areas and for others to persuade them to collaborate so that the interests of all these young people can be fully and effectively served. (DENI, 2009b: 9)

Areas of perceived success

A perceived success of this network is enhanced cooperation between primary and post-primary schools not only on the transfer of pupils but also in relation to curriculum development. The first two tables (Tables 1 and 2) and comments from the interviews illustrate this point:

> The network worked well on the numeracy issue. There is now a numeracy network, and numeracy has now advanced significantly as they look at pedagogies. They have shared practice, they have been in and out of each other's rooms, they have shared experiences, and that has been one of the jewels in the crown. It is now a very strong relationship. (Participant 1)

> We had the Principal from our local primary school in to talk to the English Department about strategies they use, and she left resources that worked for them and could work for us. It was great to see this sharing in a key area like literacy. (Participant 2)

> Collectively by being part of the network, we can also share CPD initiatives. Enhancing middle management was something we wanted to improve in our school. So, we invited a member of ETI in to talk about Middle Management, and we networked. (Participant 3)

> For example, we created a common curriculum between P7 and 1st year. Teachers from primary and post-primary work together to facilitate transition and to minimise waste of time. (Participant 4)

> The biggest and most welcome development from my perspective was the creation of links between primary and post-primary. Primary and Post Primary Principals are represented on each other's committees, and this ultimately facilitates the progression of children. (Participant 1)

> We created a transition proforma, which was great as a way of making us all aware of the information that we needed to get to make the transition easier. (Participant 5)

Areas of limited progress

As noted above, while there was strong support for collaborative learning and joint work on teacher professional development, there was also evidence of limitations in cooperation and a degree of surviving competitiveness. In this regard, it is noteworthy that while one of the key objectives of the network was to enable students from one school to take a course or courses in another, we found no incidence where this had happened. Such a level of cooperation, implying, for example, joint timetabling was well beyond what was deemed feasible or indeed desirable. The following three tables (Tables 3 to 5) and comments illustrate this point:

> Not all sweetness and light, still a "healthy" competition between schools. You have to be conscious of not going into areas that might be problematic. We concentrated on areas where we could develop things that made sense for all of us. (Participant 3)

> Collaboration may start positively, but then schools get back into competitive mode with each other in a locality. Schools competing with each other, being suspicious of one another, different sectors working together, e g., will a grammar school wish to be assessed alongside a non – grammar school? (Participant 6)

> There was an understandable concern at the beginning of the process as schools were seen as being in competition. This never actually disappeared but mechanisms were developed to allow schools share ideas, resources and staff to improve the quality in areas where the threat of comparison was seen as being less important than the opportunity to improve quality across the area. (Participant 7)

A similar study in England also raised this issue of continuing competitiveness within networks. Pedder and MacBeath (2008) in reference to England's "Learning How to Learn Project" found that, even where teachers had a positive disposition towards networking as a means of improving organisational learning, this was not always carried through in practice; "schools typically seemed to struggle in developing ways of supporting networking as a means of developing expertise with staff at other schools" (Pedder and MacBeath, 2008: 221).

It seems, therefore, that there may be considerable constraints on the level of cooperation possible, certainly in a voluntary network. Nonetheless, there was widespread agreement that a critical role and success of the network was to work together to promote educational equity and inclusion across what is a very deprived area:

> We are all united in the fact that our children are extremely deprived. They come from the most deprived area in Britain […] We are very much aware of the challenges that they face. (Participant 8)

Stakeholder involvement in setting standards and methodologies used to evaluate the network

We were also interested in the perceived roles and importance of the various stakeholders in the network. In this project, we define a stakeholder as "any person or party with an interest or "stake" in the project. By implication, most stakeholders are also able to influence the project to some degree' (Hillson, 2011: 78). By probing the following areas, we hoped to examine perceptions

about roles and power in the network and the extent to which the inspectorate and other stakeholders are the main partners in the development and implementation of evaluation methodologies (how standards are evaluated) and standards for the evaluation of ALCs (what is evaluated).

What emerged was that while all the mentioned stakeholders were considered significant (except for the managing group of the network itself), school leaders were clear that it was primarily themselves and the inspectorate that were to be the drivers of network activity and quality (Tables 7 and 8). The importance of the inspectorate to the network is further illustrated by the comments below.

Evaluation methodologies (how standards are evaluated)

Developing evaluation standards. It has to involve all of the different groups, but that is where it becomes messy, and it is hard to see all this coming together without the resources and the input of the inspectors and in particular the District Inspector. (Participant 3)

In the context of wider debates about the role and function of inspection, it is noteworthy that the role accorded to the inspectorate, in this case, is one of support and development rather than accountability. However, it should be noted that while this network has a statutory basis and gets public money, the involvement of schools and other organisations is voluntary which certainly limits the accountability aspect of inspection of the network. Also of interest in this regard is the emphasis which the inspectorate itself places on self-evaluation in the schools of the network as being the basis on which inspection of the network rests:

> Our area inspector should be our trusted colleague that guides the process. It is the only way that this can work. A trusted colleague inspector who guides the process. (Participant 9)

> The fragility of polycentric anything is whether or not schools want to do it or not. You cannot impose this model of evaluation outcomes on anyone. (Participant 10)

> Polycentric inspection will not work if it is a directive. It needs to be more of an appreciative inquiry as opposed to a hard-hitting model. (Participant 11)

Impact of the network

Student performance. Since the foundation of the network and the first polycentric inspection (ETI, 2010b), analysis of GCSE- and A-level examination results shows that the overall examination performance for schools that form part of the polycentric network has consistently increased during this period (Tables 9 and 10). This is also the case for students entitled to free school meals (Tables 11 and 12).

However, it would be naive to suggest that successive yearly increases in examination results can be directly attributed to the creation of the polycentric network as it is always challenging to link particular outcomes to causes in a field with the range of variables to be found in student achievement (Baker et al., 2010). There are many plausible explanations as to why student performance can improve.

Improved student performance in examinations can be attributed to, for example, grade inflation in education systems and across the continuum of education (see, for example, Acquah, 2013; Johnes, 2004; Oleinik, 2009). This corroborates with Smithers (2014) analysis of A-level results in the United Kingdom when he states: "Ofqual has successfully brought grade inflation under

control, though it admits that it has no way of distinguishing inflation from genuine improvement" (p. 2). In the case of disadvantaged communities and pertinent to the context in which this case study took place; Lupton and Thomson (2015) also state that the least advantaged students in England opted for vocational subjects to attain GCSE expected levels, "possibly because they have been pushed into them by schools keen to raise their results, but also possibly because they have found them more engaging and motivating" (p. 13).

On the other hand, as becomes clear from the comments below, principals interviewed for this research unambiguously link improvement in examination results to the polycentric network and this explanation or part explanation is supported by previous research on the impact of educational networks (Chapman and Muijs, 2014; Moolenaar et al., 2012). Similarly, inspection impact research more generally suggests similar performance improvements and links them, at least in part (Ehren et al., 2013,) to indirect effects such as, improved collaboration between schools and with other members of the community which are a particular feature of school networking. For example, one school leader commented that collaboration between members of the network resulted in capacity building in core areas such as literacy and numeracy:

> Our Literacy, Numeracy, SEN coordinators sat together, and part of it was how do you do this, what does it look like, and that was a springboard for where we are now because we realised that there's so much excellent practice around us and about us. (Participant 2)

Leadership and staff development. While acknowledging that there are varying the styles of leadership that are purported to affect student performance (see, for example, Leithwood et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 2008), according to participants, another indirect effect of being part of the polycentric network, related to improvements in leadership practices and the creation of emerging leaders. As one leader stated,

> Meetings were not just meetings; they became places to develop leaders. This was important because it fed into their ability to improve the quality of education across the whole network and ultimately, the students, the community and the schools benefitted. (Participant 12)

This perspective resonates with Day et al. (2016) whose study on the impact of leadership on student outcomes in English schools highlighted the fact that improvement in schools did not necessarily relate to the style of leadership that was exhibited by school Principals. Rather, as was the case with the polycentric network in West Belfast, student outcomes related to the ability of Principals to have "clearly articulated organizationally shared educational values through multiple combinations and accumulations of time and context-sensitive strategies …" (222).

The impact of the inspectorate. Finally, although the inspectorate had a specific remit for the polycentric inspection in West Belfast described as quality assuring the networks collaborative self-evaluation as well as deciding what aspect of quality to evaluate in the area (ETI, 2010b), members of the network were also of the view that inspectors had an indirect effect on the network by providing strategic leadership. This, according to participants, ensured that there was a continuous improvement agenda for identified areas and evaluation of progress in those areas. As stated by one participant,

> Too often, many initiatives come and go and fall off the bandwagon as a result of goodwill fatigue and schools are left trying to find other ways of keeping the show on the road. This, to my mind, is the crux of the whole improvement thing. Someone needs to have a strategic overview of this. The

network and the active role of the inspectorate provide this […] I suppose it is the glue that keeps it going. (Participant 9)

Discussion and conclusion

This article presented the results of a case study into area (polycentric) inspection of schools in West Belfast. The case study formed one part of a 3-year Erasmus+ funded project titled Polycentric Inspection of Networked Schools that involved four European countries (Bulgaria, England, the Netherlands and Ireland). Prior to this research taking place, the project partners had conducted research on the impact of single school inspections and established that school inspection can act as a useful tool for both accountability and improvement (Brown et al., 2018; Ehren et al., 2013; McNamara and O'Hara, 2012). The research also highlighted the limitations of school improvement possibilities in individual schools since there are clearly problems which no one school can tackle in isolation. In relation to such problems, improvement might best be achieved through cooperation with other schools and other types of institutions such as training agencies, employers and social services (Chapman, 2019).

For these reasons, the idea of linking schools and other stakeholders in networks has become influential (Díaz-Gibson et al., 2017), but for networks to achieve their potential, there clearly has to be mechanisms for cooperation, knowledge exchange and evaluation (Janssens and Ehren, 2016). One proposed mechanism, which has received little or no attention in the research literature, is through inspecting networks as a whole, or what is described in this research as polycentric inspection. The theoretical proposition is that polycentric inspection might act as an enabling agent or catalyst to effective networking.

West Belfast was chosen as the Irish case study for this research because it has a flourishing community education network under the ALC and the Inspectorate of Northern Ireland has conducted area-based inspections of this network. West Belfast, therefore, presented a perfect opportunity to study the working of a geographically based educational network, and the impact that area-based, or polycentric inspection has had on the development of the network.

An important question is whether it can be shown that activities such as polycentric inspection of networks which undoubtedly improve cooperation and provide professional development opportunities for teachers does lead to the most important outcome of all, improved student performance. While it is always difficult to establish such related effects in educational research, most of the respondents stated that improving results in recent years in GCSE and A-level examinations in West Belfast could be attributed, to some extent at least, to the work of the partnership and related inspection activities. In terms of impact on the work of the network as a whole, there was strong agreement that inspection and particularly the ongoing engagement of the inspectorate with the network was vital if not essential in driving forward the improvement agenda and in breaking down barriers.

However, it must also be acknowledged that there are potential drawbacks to polycentric inspection that should not be overlooked. In the case of this network, while participants had an extremely positive disposition towards both networking and inspection, they also placed considerable value on the impact of single school inspection. According to one participant, "school inspection will always be the gold standard, it is what gets absolutely everyone in the school motivated, but I'm not sure if this can be the case with polycentric inspection as its less accountability focussed" (Participant 13). Another participant was of the view that, because polycentric inspection provides an evaluation of an aspect of quality in the area as opposed to making value judgements on individual schools, weak schools in the absence of single school inspections can, according to this participant "hide behind stronger schools and become lacklustre when it comes to school improvement" (Participant 14).

Another limitation of polycentric inspection relates to the resource requirements needed to conduct this mode of inspection both because of the extensive inspection resources required to inspect an aspect of quality in all schools in an area and because of the role of almost constant involvement afforded to the inspectorate in the network. As previously stated, members of the network were of the view that the district inspector had a critical role in providing strategic decision making and ensuring that areas for improvement were kept to the fore. It is evident that this resource intensive role of itself could limit the amount of inspectorate resources required for single school inspections.

In conclusion, the significance of this research involves a conceptualisation of how linked schools and agencies with the support of an external actor such as a school inspectorate, can progress in areas beyond that of schools acting in isolation. There does not seem to be any reason why such networks could not work as well in other places. Certainly, West Belfast has, for a variety of reasons, a history of educational community cohesion but evidence suggests that other networks in Northern Ireland have also achieved good outcomes. As stated by one interview participant, "we think that these concepts have a wider application towards improving standards across our system and in other systems. We have started something" (Participant 15). However, as previously stated, there are unresolved issues to this mode of evaluation that need to be further explored such as, the need to examine ways in which polycentric inspection can become less resource intensive and aligned with findings derived from single school inspections. Finally, there is also a need to test this model of evaluation on other aspects of quality assurance such as classroom teaching and learning which, together with other potentially contested areas, was largely avoided in the context of polycentric inspection.

Funding

ORCID iD

Martin Brown https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5436-354X

References

Acquah D (2013) An analysis of the GCE A* grade. *The Curriculum Journal* 24(4): 529–52.
Altrichter H, Kemethofer D, Ehren MC, et al. (2016) Wirkungen und Nebenwirkungen europaischer Inspektionssysteme. Schulinspektion als Steuerungsimpuls? In: Altrichter H (ed.) *Schulinspektion als Steuerungsimpuls?* Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 285–324.
Baker EL, Barton PE, Darling-Hammond L, et al. (2010) *Problems with the use of student test scores to evaluate teachers*. Report no. 278, 14 June. London: Economic Policy Institute.
Barber M, Chijioke C and Mourshed M (2010) *Education: How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*. London: McKinsey & Company.
Brown M (2013) *Deconstructing evaluation in education: The case of Ireland and Northern Ireland: Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)*. Northern Ireland Assembly, Northern Ireland.
Brown M, McNamara G and O'Hara J (2015) *School Inspection in a Polycentric Context: The Case of Northern Ireland*. Dublin: EQI.
Brown M, McNamara G and O'Hara J (2016) Quality and the rise of value-added in education: The case of Ireland. *Policy Futures in Education* 14(6): 810–29.

Brown M, McNamara G, O'Hara J, et al. (2017) Striking a balance? The continuing evolution of inspection and school self-evaluation in Ireland. In: Baxter J (ed.) *School Inspectors: Policy Implementers, Policy Shapers in National Policy Contexts*. London: Springer, 71–96.

Brown M, McNamara G, O'Hara J, et al. (2018) Integrated co-professional evaluation? Converging approaches to school evaluation across frontiers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 43(12): 76–90.

Burt RS, Kilduff M and Tasselli S (2013) Social network analysis: Foundations and frontiers on advantage. *Annual Review of Psychology* 64: 527–47.

Chapman C (2008) Towards a framework for school-to-school networking in challenging circumstances. *Educational Research* 50(4): 403–20.

Chapman C (2019) From hierarchies to networks: Possibilities and pitfalls for educational reform of the middle tier. *Journal of Educational Administration* 57: 554–70.

Chapman C and Hadfield M (2009) *Leading School-based Networks*. London: Routledge.

Chapman C and Hadfield M (2010) Realising the potential of school-based networks. *Educational Research* 52(3): 309–23.

Chapman C and Muijs D (2014) Does school-to-school collaboration promote school improvement? A study of the impact of school federations on student outcomes. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 25(3): 351–93.

Creswell JW (2008) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd edn. (Kindle Edition 1.10.1). Thousand Oakes, CA: SAGE.

Creswell JW (2012) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. New York: SAGE.

Daly AJ and Finnigan KS (2010) A bridge between worlds: Understanding network structure to understand change strategy. *Journal of Educational Change* 11(2): 111–38.

Daly AJ and Finnigan KS (2012) Exploring the space between: Social networks, trust, and urban school district leaders. *Journal of School Leadership* 22(3): 493–530.

Day C, Gu Q and Sammons P (2016) The impact of leadership on student outcomes: How successful school leaders use transformational and instructional strategies to make a difference. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 52(2): 221–58.

Dedering K and Muller S (2011) School improvement through inspections? First empirical insights from Germany. *Journal of Educational Change* 12(3): 301–22.

Department of Education (DENI) (2009a) *Every School a Good School: A Policy for School Improvement*. Bangor: DENI.

Department of Education (DENI) (2009b) *Together Towards Entitlement: Delivering the Entitlement Framework through Area-Based Planning*. Bangor: DENI.

Department of Education (DENI) (2010) *Delivering the Entitlement Framework by 2013: Guidance for Schools on the Next Phase of Implementation*. Bangor: DENI.

Díaz-Gibson J, Civís-Zaragoza M and Guàrdia-Olmos J (2014) Strengthening education through collaborative networks: Leading the cultural change. *School Leadership & Management* 34(2): 179–200.

Díaz-Gibson J, Zaragoza MC, Daly AJ, et al. (2017) Networked leadership in educational collaborative networks. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 45(6): 1040–59.

Earl L and Katz S (2007) Leadership in networked learning communities: Defining the terrain. *School Leadership & Management* 27(3): 239–258.

Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) (2005) *Report of A Pilot Area Inspection within the Greater Newry Area*. Bangor: Department of Education Northern Ireland.

Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) (2009) *Education and Training Inspectorate Area-Based Inspection: West Belfast Area Project*. Bangor: Department of Education Northern Ireland.

Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) (2010a) *An Evaluation of the Quality of: Strategic Planning; Learning; and Transition Arrangements for Education and Training in the Ballymena Area*. Bangor: Department of Education Northern Ireland.

Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) (2010b) *An Evaluation of the Quality of: Strategic Planning; Learning; and Transition Arrangements for Education and Training in the West Belfast Area*. Bangor: Department of Education Northern Ireland.

Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) (2010c) *Chief Inspector's Report*. Bangor: Department of Education Northern Ireland.

Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) (2010d) *Together Towards Improvement: A Process for Improvement*. Bangor: Department of Education Northern Ireland.

Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) (2014) *Chief Inspector's Report 2012–2014*. Bangor: Department of Education Northern Ireland.

Ehren MC, Altrichter G, McNamara G, et al. (2013) Impact of schools inspections on improvement of schools – Describing assumptions on casual mechanisms in six European countries'. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 25(1): 3–43.

Ehren MC and Visscher AJ (2008) Towards a theory on the impact of school inspections. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 54(1): 51–72.

Ehren MC, Janssens F, Brown M, et al. (2017) Evaluation and decentralised governance: The case of inspections in polycentric education systems. *Journal of Educational Change* 18(3): 365–83.

Feys E and Devos G (2015) What comes out of incentivized collaboration: A qualitative analysis of eight Flemish school networks. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 43(5): 738–54.

Gustafsson J, Ehren MC, Conyngham G, et al. (2015) From inspection to quality: Ways in which school inspection influences change in schools. *Studies in Educational Evaluation* 47: 47–57.

Hallinger P and Heck R (1996) Reassessing the principal's role in school effectiveness: A review of empirical research, 1980–1995. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 32(1): 5–44.

Hands C (2010) Why collaborate? The differing reasons for secondary school educators' establishment of school-community partnerships. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 21(2): 189–207.

Hertting N and Vedung E (2012) Purposes and criteria in network governance evaluation: How far does standard evaluation vocabulary takes us? *Evaluation* 18(1): 27–46.

Hillson D (2011) Enterprise risk management: Managing uncertainty and minimising surprise. In: Bourne L (ed.) *Advising Upwards: A Framework for Understanding and Engaging Senior Management Stakeholders*. London: Routledge, 57–89.

Hitchcock G and Hughes D (1995) *Research and the Teacher: A Qualitative Introduction to School-Based Research*, 2nd ed. London: Taylor & Francis.

Hopkins E, Hendry H, Garrod F, et al. (2016) Teachers' views of the impact of school evaluation and external inspection processes. *Improving Schools* 19(1): 52–61.

Iorio S (2004) *Qualitative Research in Journalism: Taking It to the Streets*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Jackson D and Temperley J (2007) From professional learning community to networked learning community. In: Stoll L and Louis KS (eds) *Professional Learning Communities: Divergence, Depth and Dilemmas*. Berkshire: Open University Press, 45–62.

Janssens FJ and Ehren MC (2016) Toward a model of school inspections in a polycentric system. *Evaluation and Program Planning* 56(2): 88–98.

Johnes G (2004) Standards and grade inflation In: Johnes G and Johnes J (eds) *International Handbook on the Economics of Education*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 462–83.

Leithwood K, Harris A and Hopkins D (2008) Seven strong claims about successful school leadership. *School Leadership and Management* 28(1): 27–42.

Leithwood K, Jantzi D and Steinbach R (1999) *Changing Leadership for Changing Times*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Lima J (2010) Thinking more deeply about networks in education. *Journal of Educational Change* 11(1): 1–21.

Lupton R and Thomson S (2015) Socio-economic inequalities in English schooling under the Coalition Government 2010–15. *London Review of Education* 13(2): 4–20.

McCormick R, Fox A, Carmichael P, et al. (2010) *Researching and Understanding Educational Networks*. London: Routledge.

McNamara G and O'Hara J (2012) 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. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 24(2): 79–97.

Miles M and Huberman A (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Source Book*, 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Miles M, Huberman A and Saldaña J (2013) *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. London: SAGE.

Moolenaar NM (2010) *Ties with potential: Nature, antecedents, and consequences of social networks in school teams*. PhD Thesis, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam.

Moolenaar NM, Sleegers PJ and Daly AJ (2012) Teaming up: Linking collaboration networks, collective efficacy, and student achievement. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 28(2): 251–62.

Muijs D, Chapman C, Ainscow M, et al. (2011) *Networking and Collaboration in Education*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Muijs D, West M and Ainscow M (2010) Why network? Theoretical perspectives on networking. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 21(1): 5–26.

Nevo D (2010) Internal and external evaluation. In: Peterson P, Baker E and McGaw B (eds) *International Encyclopedia of Education*, 3rd edn. London: Elsevier, 781–85.

Oleinik A (2009) Does education corrupt? Theories of grade inflation. *Educational Research Review* 4(2): 156–64.

Patton M (2002) *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, 3rd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Pedder D and MacBeath J (2008) Organisational learning approaches to school leadership and management: Teachers' values and perceptions of practice. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 19(2): 207–24.

Provan K and Kenis P (2008) Modes of network governance: Structure, management, and effectiveness. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 18(2): 229–52.

Rincón-Gallardo S and Fullan M (2016) Essential features of effective networks in education. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community* 1(1): 5–22.

Robinson VM, Lloyd CA and Rowe KJ (2008) The impact of leadership on student outcomes: An analysis of the differential effects of leadership types. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 44(5): 635–74.

Siciliano M (2012) *Networks and performance in public organizations: Theory, models, and measurement*. PhD Thesis, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA.

Smithers A (2014) *A-Levels 1951-2014*. Buckingham: CEER.

West Belfast Partnership Board (2014) *West Belfast Partnership Board Education Initiatives Status Report*. Belfast: West Belfast Partnership Board.

West Belfast Partnership Board (2012) *West Belfast Partnership Board Education and Training Forum 2011–2012 Outcome Report*. Belfast: West Belfast Partnership Board.

Witziers B, Bosker R and Krüger M (2003) Educational leadership and student achievement: The elusive search for an association. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 39(1): 398–425.

Yin RK (2014) *Case Study Research, Design and Methods*, 3rd edn. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Martin Brown is a research Director at EQI, the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection, School of Policy and Practice, Institute of Education – Dublin City University.

Gerry McNamara is Professor of Educational Evaluation and a Director at EQI, the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection, School of Policy and Practice, Institute of Education – Dublin City University.

Joe O'Hara is President of the European Educational Research Association, Professor of Education and a Director at EQI, the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection, School of Policy and Practice, Institute of Education – Dublin City University.

Paddy Shevlin is a senior research fellow at EQI, the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection, School of Policy and Practice, Institute of Education – Dublin City University.