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### Erratum:

Line 17 of p.71 of this thesis should read '...inevitably incomplete' not '...inevitably complete'.

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*The policy, process and impact of whole school inspection at primary level in the Republic of Ireland from the perspective of some inspectors and teachers.*

**DOCTOR OF EDUCATION (EdD)**

**Patrick Paul O'Connor, MA, MEd.  
(M7155362)**

**January 2001**

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*The policy, process and impact of whole school inspection at primary level in the Republic of Ireland from the perspective of some inspectors and teachers.*

**Abstract**

This thesis explores whole school inspection in the Republic of Ireland since its inception in 1976. It is located within the tradition of qualitative research and examines government policy, the process of inspecting and the impact of the operation on selected schools from the vantage point of participating inspectors and teachers.

The research is centred on three primary schools that underwent whole school inspection during the school year 1998-1999. A total of twenty teachers in all together with the three inspectors who conducted the inspections were interviewed immediately after the inspections, they were allowed a wide measure of freedom to express their views on the operation and their responses were analyzed. The senior management of the primary inspectorate was also interviewed and their views on official policy and on the efficacy of whole school inspection in general were elicited. The schools were revisited some six to nine months later and the teachers were once more interviewed in an effort to determine the level of impact made by the inspections and to gauge any change of view.

What emerges is a lack of consensus among the key players on what constitutes the primary purpose of whole school inspection. In general the teachers saw it primarily as a surveillance exercise that generated high levels of anxiety, whereas the inspectors were more inclined to emphasise the developmental dimension. The teachers were unanimous in their perception of the inspectors

as persons of sensitivity, courtesy and credibility and appreciated the fact that they engaged actively with the children in the classroom. However, they declared that the inspections had made little or no useful impact, and the field inspectors expressed a similar opinion. Given the lack of consensus on what constitutes the role and function of inspectors, the research questions the validity of this judgement. It is argued that whole school inspection is best seen as an exercise located within the naturalist paradigm, and that its impact is percolative in nature and not readily amenable to positivist measurement. While acknowledging shortcomings especially in the area of reporting, the problematic nature of identifying the direction of causality is discussed in support of this position. Arising from this, suggestions for development are offered and these centre on a vision of whole school inspection as an operation that seeks to validate assisted self-review arrangements by the provision of high quality evaluation and strategic advice. The lesson for the Department of Education and Science is that school self-evaluation ought to be promoted on a systematic basis nationally. The implication for inspectors is that they should be released from the discharge of great many duties that distract them from their core work of providing information and analysis on the individual school and on the system in general. It is suggested that to the extent this happens whole school inspection will be nearer the realisation of its potential.

## **STATEMENT**

*This is to certify that this thesis, neither on whole nor part, has previously been submitted for a degree or other qualification of this or any other university institution.*

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

In October 1831 a state-supported system of primary education was established in Ireland. The central administration based in Dublin vested formal control in a Board of unpaid dignitaries designated 'Commissioners' and charged them with overseeing the system with the support of a phalanx of civil servants and officials (Akenson, 1970:114-156; Coolahan, 1981:12-14; Ó Buachalla, 1988: 20-23). The Commissioners set about their duties with great zeal and by 1833 there were no less than 789 'national schools' in operation throughout the country (Akenson, 1970:136). Some of these were established almost entirely with the help of grant aid from an annual parliamentary vote disbursed by the Commissioners. The remainder - those that already had been in existence at the inception of the system - were accepted under the direct supervision of the National Board and thereby shared the several entitlements of their newly established counterparts. The Commissioners paid the salaries of all 'national' (i.e. primary) schoolteachers, they possessed the right to dismiss individual teachers deemed unsatisfactory and they exercised full control over the use of all textbooks and teaching materials used in the schools. A large measure of authority was devolved upon local authorities, and the local managers (usually the Roman Catholic parish priest or his Protestant counterpart) assumed responsibility for the maintenance of buildings and the hiring of teachers subject to the rules and regulations of the National Board of Commissioners.

The 'national' system of education as this state system of mass education came to be called was set up by means of administrative fiat rather than an act of parliament. Quite simply, the Chief Secretary, Lord Stanley, outlined the guidelines under which the system would operate in a letter to the Duke of

Leinster who accepted the invitation therein to assume the presidency of the Board of National Commissioners (Akenson, 1970:400). This, the celebrated 'Stanley letter', stipulated that the annual parliamentary vote should be disbursed on the discharge of six specific purposes. The second of these is of particular relevance to the study on hand in that it specifically provided for 'paying inspectors for visiting and reporting upon schools' (the others had regard to grant aid for school construction, teacher training and book production).

Thus it is clear that from the very beginning of the State system of primary education in Ireland it was intended that parliamentary funds should be spent judiciously. Accordingly, in May 1832 four men were appointed as inspectors with the right 'to visit and examine the schools whenever they think fit' in the districts assigned them (Ó hEideáin, 1967:36). In 1837 a witness before the Select Lords Committee of Inquiry on Irish Education summarized the duties of the National Board's inspectors under three headings. They were charged with investigating new applications for aid; they were to visit schools being built; and they were to visit schools actually in operation and to examine the work of the teachers and monitors therein (Ó hEideáin, 1967: 128). The third duty became by far the most important, in practice it began to occupy most of the inspectors' time and indeed has continued to do so up to the present time.

A gradual numerical expansion of the inspectorate took place more or less in line with the increase of schools attached to the National Board and, for example, by 1859 there were seventy inspectors spread throughout the four provinces and visiting a total of 5 496 schools with a total of 806 510 children on roll (Akenson, 1970: 74, 275). When British rule ended in 1922 and the new Irish state came into being the total establishment of the inspectorate had increased only slightly to seventy-five (O'Donovan, 1992:366), and at the end of 1998 when the field work for this study was being undertaken there was a total of seventy-one inspectors serving some 3 305 schools in which 466 769 pupils were enrolled (Ó Fiachra, 1998: 2; Department of Education and Science, 1999: 10, 15).

In the next chapter some attention will be devoted to the history of developments in the primary inspectorate insofar as they contribute to an adequate understanding of inspection in this country at the present time, and in particular the relationship between inspectors and teachers will be brought into focus. Notably, it will be suggested that the high level of stress experienced by some teachers today may be viewed largely as a legacy of the oppressive nature of nineteenth-century inspection. The subject matter will be presented in a concise fashion but sufficient detail will be presented to enable the reader unacquainted with the Irish system place the material in a meaningful context. At this point it will be of value to consider the structure of the primary inspectorate as it is constituted at present so that the reader may have an awareness of the status of the key players and the relative importance that attaches to their position in the order of authority when s/he encounters them in due course.

### **Structure of the primary inspectorate**

The Irish inspectorate is divided on a hierarchical basis and comprises five distinctive grades stretching from Chief Inspector (who also has responsibility for post primary inspectors) to 'District' Inspector. Whereas the Chief Inspector has official responsibility for inspection at primary and secondary level (children aged four to twelve and twelve to eighteen respectively), in practical terms the primary sector is controlled by one Deputy Chief Inspector and four Assistant Chief Inspectors, all of whom are based either at headquarters in the Department of Education and Science in Dublin or in offices in the provinces. Personally these officers do not inspect schools and their function is entirely supervisory and administrative. There is a lower tier of twenty-two 'Divisional' Inspectors and below these a further forty-four 'District' Inspectors, most of whom undertake school inspection in a total of sixty 'districts' throughout the country (Ó Fiachra, 1998:1). (These are December 1998 figures, when the field research was undertaken, and the fact that some Divisional Inspectors manage 'districts' arises from a shortfall in inspector numbers in recent years). This study features evidence drawn from every tier of the inspectorate in respect of

the inspection of schools insofar as these different players perceived it at a particular time in 1998 and 1999.

The work of the inspectors and their relations with the Boards of Management of schools and teachers are governed by Rule 161 of the Rules and Regulations for National Schools as amended by Department of Education and Science Circular 11/76 issued in 1976. Rule 161 is of particular interest in respect of this study in that for the first time the notion of a relatively comprehensive 'School Report' containing 'an assessment of the organisation and work of the school as a whole' was introduced. The amended Rule provided for the furnishing of a Report by inspectors on a four-year cyclical basis to follow on from what may be termed a whole school inspection. (In general parlance the Gaelic term *Tuairisc Scoile* - literally 'School Report' - is used to refer to the operation.) Moreover, Rule 161 (Section 6a) is of further relevance in that it provides for the systematic inspection of individual teachers whose work is seen by the inspector to have deteriorated to the extent that the official rating 'satisfactory' is no longer merited. This is of particular significance in that it affects how teachers perceive inspectors *at all times*, notwithstanding the duty on which they are primarily engaged at a particular juncture.

Their principal functions of inspectors have been set out at their most comprehensive in a later Circular, *Inspection of Schools*, as follows:

- (a) to provide the Minister with the information and advice he/she may require on matters pertaining to individual schools and on education matters in general;
- (b) to co-operate with management authorities and teachers in the work of the schools, especially by stimulating interest in curriculum content and methodology and by assisting teachers in need of guidance.

(Department of Education, 1982, *Circular 31/82*)

Hence, on all occasions - including when undertaking whole school inspection - inspectors are expected to exercise an advisory and a supportive function. Allied to this is a supervisory role: they are expected to advise the Ministers for Education and Science on matters of concern to them; they are required to be at the service of school management and teachers with particular reference to curriculum and pedagogy; and also they are expected fulfil a supervisory or quasi policing role. It may be observed that the functions of inspectors as set out in Circular 31/82 are so wide ranging that almost any matter of an educational nature can be viewed as appropriate for reference to an inspector. In fact this is what happens, as will be shown in the next chapter - the inspector discharges a multiplicity of duties to the effect that increasingly s/he is taken up with matters of a more administrative rather than inspectoral nature to the ultimate diminution of time available for actual inspection of schools. First-hand evidence presented later will show that this is a matter of considerable concern for at least some inspectors who believe that to a much greater degree their work should be centred on the functioning of schools and happenings in classrooms.

Inspectoral visits may be divided into three categories:

- *Informal visits* ('beagchuartheanna', or 'small visits', as they are officially known in Irish) which are unannounced and paid on a random basis by the inspector to any of the fifty or so schools in his/her area. Usually a visit of this kind lasts no more than half a day and often the inspector will have no particular reason to visit other than to maintain contact with the school which s/he may not have seen for up to a year. The informal visit is seen as valuable by inspectors in that it enables them maintain a watchful eye on the operation of the school in what might be seen as its 'natural' or everyday state detached from perhaps the distorting effect of an impending official visit.

- *Whole school inspections*, or '*Tuairisci Scoile*' in Gaelic. Under current arrangements these take place once every six years approximately and, in the case of large schools, say twenty teachers plus, may be undertaken both by the local inspector and a colleague from another district. The whole school inspection, as the name suggests, attempts to cover the whole life and work of the school, and a 'School Report' is issued subsequently.
- *Surveys*, perhaps one per year, tend to focus on a particular aspect of the curriculum and are undertaken in conjunction with a research institution that ultimately analyses the data and produces a report. Here the role of the inspector tends to be little more than that of test administrator.

The main focus of this study is the second category, the whole school inspection, instituted in 1976. An attempt is made to determine what inspectors and teachers see is the policy of the Department of Education and Science in conducting whole school inspection in approximately 500 primary schools throughout the country each year. The processes in which the inspectors engage while undertaking the inspections are also examined and finally the perceptions of inspectors and teachers in respect of the ensuing impact is considered. The research centres on three case studies of primary schools which underwent whole school inspection during the school year 1998-1999 and in the main consists of an analysis of data derived from a series of twenty interviews with teachers in these schools and an interview with each of the three inspectors directly involved in the operation. In addition, the four most senior figures in the inspection service hierarchy were interviewed in an effort to examine the notion of policy more closely and to gauge how whole school inspection contributes to the development and implementation of State policy.

The study is seen to be particularly significant at the present time because the Department of Education and Science has reached the final stage in its preparations to institute a new system of whole school inspection to include second-level schools for the first time as well as primary schools. Over the last four years a pilot project involving no less than thirty-five schools was

conducted, guidelines designed to facilitate consistency of procedure between inspectors were trialled as part of the process and it is envisaged that within a year what is now termed 'whole school *evaluation*' (in deference to teacher sensitivities that found the term 'whole school *inspection*' distasteful) will become a regular feature in all first and second-level schools (Department of Education and Science, 1999: 9-10). In essence the new arrangement differs from whole school inspection only to the extent that measures designed to facilitate procedural objectivity will henceforth be used i.e. observation schedules and performance criteria, thereby reducing the extent to which judgements tended to be what might be termed impressionistic. The fact that one of the two second-level teacher unions has refused to co-operate (and indeed will continue to do so until certain reservations have been overcome) serves to underline the importance of devising an inspection system deemed satisfactory to all the key players. It is envisaged that this study will have the potential to make a useful contribution to clarifying issues of policy, procedure and expected impact when whole school evaluation is amended after a trial period of some years. Further, and in particular having regard for the inevitable opposition from some quarters as outlined above, it is inevitable that the role of the inspector will come under no little scrutiny. It is likely that fundamental question pertaining to their *raison d'être* will be raised. What have inspectors to offer the education system? What impact, if any, do they make? Can we measure their impact? How ought we to attempt to do so? Are the procedures designed to ensure validity and reliability in research evaluation appropriate in addressing the trustworthiness of judgements made during whole school inspection?

Hence, perhaps now more than ever it seems appropriate that the Department of Education and Science should engage in presenting a conceptual framework that would serve to underpin the practice of whole school inspection. Clearly missing at present is a shared understanding of the essential character of whole school inspection, a convincing validation of its methods and a clarification of its contribution to school development. In consequence, inspectors display a definite ambivalence when asked to explain the nature of their role and in

parallel, as the study demonstrates, many teachers show no little cynicism in respect of what whole school inspection has to offer.

This research undertaking highlights the ambiguity that attaches to whole school inspection by reference to the perspectives of inspectors and teachers involved in the exercise at a particular time. With regard to the inspectors, what clearly emerges is a level of ambiguity inappropriate to a body of professionals that believes it is engaged in an operation of some value. For example, when invited to arbitrate between judgement (that is, accountability) and school development as their *immediate* objective when conducting whole school inspection, they are seen to be at some loss and their responses oscillate between both poles (though, of course all would agree that *ultimately* school improvement is their main aim). In contrast, the teachers display no such ambiguity: to them whole school inspection clearly is an exercise in rendering them accountable to the State and any improvement that ensues is seen as a mere a by-product.

Within this scenario it is of no little importance that the practice of whole school inspection should be examined, and especially so at the present time in anticipation of a new era of whole school inspection procedures. The policy of the Department of Education and Science needs to be clearly spelt out, the processes undertaken by inspectors when in the schools need to be examined and an attempt should be made to gauge the impact of whole school inspection. To do so would go no little way in dispelling the unfortunate ambiguity attaching to the operation, an ambiguity that in effect takes from the necessary confidence that people need to have in the exercise as a trustworthy evaluative procedure. In simple terms, it would serve to define what whole school inspection is, and what indeed it is not. Further, it could lead to the development of realistic expectations on the part of the key players, inspectors and teachers, in respect of what whole school inspection can achieve, and indeed what is asking too much of it.

This study attempts to address these issues by reference to the experiences of inspectors and teachers involved in three whole school inspections. To the extent that it achieves this objective it will render some service to all those involved in promoting children's development in the schools. In particular it will be of some value to officials in the Department of Education and Science, both members of senior management in the inspectorate and officials in the planning sections, as these are the main agents responsible for steering inspection in new directions in the coming years. This then is the rationale for the study and its importance is further accentuated by the fact that, as demonstrated in the third chapter, little or no research into whole school inspection has taken place in Ireland. Interestingly, the situation was little different in the UK in the middle 1990's, a circumstance that prompted two celebrated researchers in the area to comment that despite some individual efforts 'inspection remains under-researched and, partly as a consequence, under-theorized' (Wilcox and Gray, 1996: 49).

In order to pursue the study with an appropriate sense of direction four research questions were drafted. Essentially they address the three main themes outlined in the thesis title i.e. policy, process and impact, and do so in that sequence too, thereby maintaining the sense of story which the research attempts to embody.

The research questions are as follows:

- (1) What is the policy of the Department of Education in conducting whole school inspections?
- (2) What were the processes in which inspectors engaged as they conducted the whole school inspections, what was the basis for their choice of methodology and what were the perceptions of the teachers?
- (3) To what extent does the research show that the whole school inspections have had an impact in terms of securing accountability and/or in effecting

change and improvement in the three schools during the following nine months?

- (4) Arising from the findings, what are the lessons for Department of Education and Science planners in the development of evaluation procedures for primary schools?

At first sight it may appear that the study is of a more comprehensive and ambitious nature than in fact it is and hence it needs to be emphasised that essentially the research is no more than a study of perceptions relating to whole school inspection in three schools at a particular time. Nowhere is it claimed that the schools have a representativeness in a statistical sense and thus one is not entitled to generalise from the evidence to the totality of primary schools in Ireland and conclude that what appeared true in the case of these three case studies will be true for all or most schools. This study is best seen as located within the naturalistic rather than the positivistic paradigm and in a later chapter argument will be presented in support of this position. This means that the interpretation of the data pivots on the notion that the positivist viewpoint of a world existing 'out there' is not appropriate, and particularly if it is seen to be a world capable of statistically significant measurement. Instead, it is argued that the world of meaning is best seen as one of multiple constructed realities rooted in mutual simultaneous shapings which corresponds with Eisner's framework-dependent view of cognition (Eisner, 1993: 54). Moreover, it is submitted that the same principle holds true in respect of whole school inspection, in the judgments it makes and, crucially, in the manner in which the direction of causality is treated when an attempt gauge impact is made. In respect of this study the reader is invited to engage in an interactive process of interpretation, and it is suggested that the meanings derived therefrom can best be viewed as constructs unique to himself/herself rather than reflections of an undisputed reality 'out there'; and by the same token the same holds true for whole school inspection and the manner in which one most appropriately weighs up its judgements in the generality of cases. These are issues that will be discussed in some detail presently. For now it is perhaps sufficient to propose that the value

of the research to the research community, to key figures responsible for policy formulation and planning in the Department of Education and Science and indeed to inspectors and teachers in general is in its relatability - that is, in the extent to which the reader can identify similarities to his own situation and relate the findings to his own understandings. In simple terms, it will be up to readers themselves to ask what is there in this study that they can apply to their own situations, and what clearly should they reject. An honest response holds the promise of growth and development. All these are issues that will be discussed in greater detail presently when the rationale is further developed.

## CHAPTER 2

### Whole School Inspection: Origins and Development

One striking aspect of each interview was willingness on the part of almost all teachers to share with me their reactions to the whole school inspection. In fact, six of the teachers specifically thanked me for affording them the opportunity to describe how they had felt during the inspection and expressed a desire that I should convey their story to inspector colleagues. It was as if I had become a catalyst for the exorcising of a spectrum of pent-up emotions that varied in intensity between individual teachers. Conceivably the fact I was a District Inspector, one who most likely would share the perspective of the inspectors who had conducted the whole school inspections in their own schools, proved to be a powerful stimulus for them to speak freely. The fact I was a stranger, an inspector attached to another Region and unlikely ever to be assigned to their area, seemed to prompt a dispensing of the individual teacher's more characteristic sense of wariness that is routinely sensed by inspectors when visiting schools. At the end of each interview virtually, I was left with the impression that whole school inspection had generated a strong emotional response and most particularly, though not exclusively, in the lead-up period. Central to this was a degree of foreboding and anxiety that appeared rooted in a fear of failure and, often coupled with this, an uncomfortable disclosure that one perhaps could have done a better job. The reaction has been explained in the following manner:

We now believe that anxiety is a natural syndrome that arises from two sources; first fears of exposure and incompetence in the more public teaching environment and, second, the giving up of reasons why learning cannot be improved.

(Joyce *et al*, 1989: 23)

The extent to which whole school inspection generated anxiety in teachers who participated in the study will be treated at some length in a later chapter and thus need not be detailed here. But, if one seeks to understand why many of the teachers reacted with such intense emotion one must turn to the history of inspection in Ireland and to the myth of inspector as ogre. This, a relic of an often strained relationship between the dictatorial and domineering inspector and the meek and mild teacher, is firmly rooted in teacher folklore and reaches back to the beginning of Ireland's National System of Education. Its explanatory power, and that of all the significant developments since 1831 up to the present time, holds much promise. Most particularly, it provides us with a framework within which we may view the process of whole school inspection. To this we now direct attention.

### **The early inspectors**

As has been stated, the first four inspectors were appointed in May 1832, a mere seven months after the establishment of the National System of Education. The Code of Instructions of 1842 outlines the most important principles of the various early codes and offers a useful insight into the role of the inspector from the start. Insofar as routine visits were concerned, he (throughout the nineteenth century all inspectors were male) was expected to call on schools in his district three times each year, and in any order he wished. Further, he was to endeavour to arrive unexpectedly (Ó hÉideáin, 1967: 129). Reporting to a Special Committee of inquiry in 1837 one inspector had the following to say:

*I would not venture to report positively on the character of the school unless I came upon it unawares; and when I cannot succeed in doing so I always take another opportunity of coming upon it unexpectedly, before I make up my mind as to the character of the school.*

(Ó hÉideáin, 1967:100)

Having arrived, he was required to inspect the schoolhouse and its state of repair, and in each classroom he was to ensure that the fundamental regulations

of the National Commissioners were being observed. When a rule had been breached he was charged 'with pointing out such violations of the rule or any defects... and he is to make such suggestions, as he may deem necessary' (Ó hÉideáin, 1967: 90). Section 8 of the Code required that he examine all classes 'so as to enable him to ascertain the degree and efficiency of the instruction imparted', and Section 9 stipulated that he was to verify the accuracy of enrolments recorded in the official registers of the school. In effect the inspector was to be the eyes and ears of the National Board, and in reporting to his superiors in Dublin he was required to specify what were the suggestions made at the previous inspection, whether they had been put into practice and whether or not the standard of work had improved (Ó hÉideáin 1967: 93).

Clearly the role of the inspector was to ensure that the various rules and regulations were adhered to - in other words his priority was to seek accountability, or the rendering of an account on foot of a rigid surveillance. A witness at Special Lords Committee in 1854, Inspector William McCreedy, gave an interesting and detailed description of an inspection at the time which clearly demonstrates the inspectoral nature of the role, one that could be summarised as enforcing compliance with rules rather than promoting good practice.

*Generally speaking the first thing I do[sic] on entering a school was to see that the time-table was up; that is, the setting forth the order of business as regards subjects taught and particularly the time set apart for religious instruction. I then looked to the class rolls to see whether they were properly kept by the teachers, compared them with the registers and report books; the object of comparing them being to test their accuracy and to see that the teachers were not exaggerating the number in attendance, or in any way falsifying accounts. After taking these statistics of the school, I proceeded to call upon the teachers to summon the classes before me.*

(Ó hÉideáin, 1967: 97-8)

It takes little imagination to suspect that the unfortunate teachers found the inspector's visit a cause of no little distress. In general they themselves had acquired only an elementary level of education, up to the turn of the century, most had had only a very limited training even by the standards of the time and all of this must have accentuated a sense of vulnerability in the presence of the agent of the National Board (O'Connor, 1977: 5-16; O'Connor, 1973: 22-47).

### **Payment by results**

A further source of stress, and indeed resentment, was the payment by results scheme which was introduced in 1872, nine years after Robert Lowe presented the Revised Code and a corresponding arrangement in England (Curtis and Boulwood, 1967, 4<sup>th</sup> edn: 70-73; Coolahan, 1981: 25-30). This new deal provided for the payment of a modest sum in addition to salary for each eligible pupil whom the inspector adjudged had made satisfactory progress during the year (Dowling, 1971: 125; O'Connell, 1968: 403). The programme of work to be followed was set out in minute detail for each class and the inspector was obliged to keep within the strict limits of the syllabus when conducting the examination. Payment by results was to last for nearly thirty years, it remains in the folk memory to this day as a symbol of teacher oppression by the inspectorate and to considerable degree it colours the perspective of many teachers in their relations with inspectors.

### **Merit pay**

In the twenty years up to the foundation of the Irish state in 1922 a system of merit marking constituted a major irritant for teachers. Payment of annual increment was dependent on the personal merit mark given each year by the inspector on foot of an impressionist general verdict arrived at by the District Inspector in the course of an unnotified visit (Ó Buachalla, 1988: 90). In addition, throughout those years the office of the National Commissioners in Dublin imposed a very rigorous discipline: regularly teachers were reprimanded, demoted, fined or dismissed on foot of inspectors' reports. According to the teachers' union president, a 'state of unrest, indignation and

panic' existed, to the effect that most of her organisation's energies were being spent 'practicing the arts of war' (Ó Buachalla, 1988: 89). For example, in 1912 the District Inspector for Tipperary appeared to have embarked on a wholesale reduction of teacher merit grades in the area, and in October of that year Edward Mansfield, vice-president of the teachers' union (the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, commonly referred to as 'the INTO'), was dismissed from his teaching position in Tipperary on foot of his refusal to withdraw statements that today appear to be no more than mildly critical of the inspector in question (O'Connell 1968: 405-412). Also, during the same period it appears that at least some inspectors appear to have been found wanting in their observance of normal courtesies which civil intercourse requires, and in 1911 an INTO president described them as 'the worry of the teachers and the ruin of education' (Ó Buachalla, 1988: 90). Giving evidence to a government committee in 1912, Miss Mahon, granted perhaps not an entirely reliable source as she had become president of the INTO for that year, stated:

*The one unerring test by which the pupils always recognize an inspector is that he does not shake hands with the teacher.*

(O'Connell, 1968: 420)

### **Inspection in the new State**

With the disappearance of the Board of National Commissioners in 1922 any hope that relationships would improve substantially was dashed when the new State decided to retain the system of merit marking that placed individual teachers on a continuum stretching from 'highly efficient', to 'efficient' and on to 'non-efficient'. However, in response to the systematic urging of the primary teacher union, in 1926 the Department of Education set up a committee to report on the inspection of primary schools. When it issued its report in the following year it suggested that attention should be directed not merely to the controlling function of inspection, but also to its function to 'as a guiding and inspiring influence'. To the committee it was clear that 'the main purpose of school-inspection was the fostering and promotion of a high quality of education' (Hyland and Milne, 1992:107), and 'the chief defect' of the

inspection system was that 'too little attention was attached to the directive and specifically educational aspect of inspection in comparison with its aspect as a controlling agency'. Most appropriately, teachers should be encouraged to see the inspector as a 'co-operator in the school work' and as an advisor rather than 'an examiner'.

In the two decades that followed the rating system continued to operate, albeit 'with some modification. The focus of inspection still centred on the individual teacher and in fact the rating system with its inevitable implication for promotion would continue until 1949. In April of that year the Department of Education bowed to the growing militancy of primary teachers (who had conducted a seven-month strike in Dublin schools in the previous year in an effort to secure a general improvement of conditions) and modified the rating system. Henceforth, only two grades would prevail, 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory', and to this day this arrangement has continued (O'Connell, 1968: 417; O'Donovan, 1992: 511). In this way a major irritant to teachers was removed and the course was set for a systematic improvement of relationships between teachers and inspectors. As the official biographer of the INTO wrote:

As the years went by it became increasingly evident that the objectionable rating system had been responsible for creating and keeping alive the discontent among the teachers and the want of good relations between the administration, the inspectors and themselves...it was an insult to the best teachers and a perpetual source of worry and discontent for the whole service.

(O'Connell, 1968: 415-416)

### **Whole school inspection: the beginnings**

However, the demise of merit marking in respect of overall teacher performance was not to signal the end of assigning a grade *at subject level*, and for nearly another decade the success of individual teachers in achieving a grade of 'very good', 'good' or merely 'fair' in the teaching of a particular subject was recorded during an annual inspection. This also rankled, inspectors

were accused of acting unfairly and high levels of tension characterised relations between both parties. Clearly, the removal of merit marking in 1949 had not gone far enough to achieve the desired positive relationships fundamental to professional evaluation.

The matter was not settled until 1958. Following discussions between the Department of Education ('Science' has only been added to the Department title within the last five years), management authorities and the INTO it was agreed to introduce a 'School Report', to be furnished every two years and to abolish merit marking for success in the teaching of individual subjects (Department of Education, 1965: Rule 161 (8); Department of Education, 1959: Circular 16/59; O'Donovan, 1992:514). The School Report would be no more than 'a short minute on the work of the school as a whole' and would specify strengths and weaknesses identified therein. Here then for the first time was the forerunner of the more formalised whole school inspection of today with its primary focus on the school as the central unit. As for individual inspection of teachers, this would continue but in practice only on an infrequent basis (for probated teachers) because of competing demands on inspectors' time, and finally merit marking of any type would end in 1976.

The 1959 Circular also directed some attention to the desirability of maintaining 'friendly relations' between inspectors and teachers - arguably an admission that relationships were often far from warm - and inspectors were exhorted to be 'a model of correct and courteous behaviour' at all times. 'A new and enlightened system of inspection had come into being,' recorded the General Secretary of the INTO (O'Connell, 1968: 420) and an important step had been taken in the genesis of whole school inspection. The scene was set for a warmer relationship between inspectors and teachers and the unseemly experiences of former years perhaps could be forgotten. But, as will be seen presently, to a considerable extent the memory lingers on and to this day is seen in the anxieties generated in many teachers when the impending whole school inspection is announced.

## **Abolition of Primary Certificate Examination and introduction of new Primary School Curriculum**

In the period of little more than ten years following, two major developments took place that were to change dramatically the nature of primary education in Ireland and the manner in which it was to be delivered. The first was the abolition of the Primary Certificate Examination in 1967 sat by all final year pupils, and the other was the introduction of *The Primary School Curriculum* in 1971.

It was clear from its inception on a compulsory basis in 1943 that the Primary Certificate examination had played a major part in a neglect of subjects other than the three examined - Irish, English and Arithmetic. Much to the chagrin of teachers, they felt that in practice they had little choice but to devote most of their energies at senior level to preparing their pupils of whatever ability to meet an external standard (Coolahan, 1981:43; Ó Buachalla, 1988:63; O'Connell, 1968: 421-431). Apart from affecting the life chances of pupils, it was widely believed that failure to do so would reflect badly on the reputation of individual teachers.

The introduction of *The Primary School Curriculum* in 1971 signalled the first major curricular alteration in over forty years. It represented a fundamental change of direction, it was the brainchild of the primary inspectorate and was written in its entirety by teams of inspectors. Cultural nationalism as reflected in the emphasis on the teaching of Irish, together with the attainment of a predetermined level of achievement in a narrow area of intelligence without reference to pupil ability, was replaced by a philosophy of education which located the child at the centre of the educational process (Bennett, 2000: 17). Henceforth, to quote the teacher handbook, the curriculum would 'endeavour to cater for the full and harmonious development of each child and...be sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of children of widely varying natural endowment and cultural background' (Primary School Curriculum, 1971, Part1: 13). From now on formative rather than summative assessment would have primacy, progress would be plotted by the teacher on a record card recently

devised by the Department of Education and individual pupil achievement would be self-referenced rather than measured against a national putative norm.

Clearly the inspection system would also have to change in order to reflect this new reality and from 1971 inspection of teachers as individuals became less frequent and less rigorous. In the experience of this writer (who was a primary school headteacher from 1971 until 1976) the school report process (i.e. the forerunner of today's whole school inspection) was cursory in nature and completed in almost all schools in just one day. After some weeks the School Report, a brief document generally no more than ten lines in length, would issue from the Department of Education. In broad outline the Report confirmed that teachers in schools were diligent in attending to their teaching duties, and *regularly included were some words of praise often coupled with an exhortation to lay greater emphasis on some element of the curriculum.*

### **The Annual Report**

By 1976 and the inception of whole school inspection the picture that emerges is one of a formerly reviled and feared inspectorate that has undergone substantial reform in accordance with changing conditions in the schools. Merit marking in all its manifestations has disappeared, inspection of probated teachers as individuals occurs only infrequently, the Primary Certificate has been abolished and a new curriculum based on progressive pupil-centred principles has been introduced. Teachers appear happy with the evolving role of the inspector, s/he appears more amenable and demonstrates high levels of empathy, understanding and assiduity in promoting the fledgling curriculum. The School Report does not represent a threat and, according to the Deputy Chief Inspector (interview dated July 29, 1999), this is in accord with a deliberately contrived though unstated policy of the Department of Education to ensure that the new curriculum gains a foothold in a poorly resourced school system. Relations between inspectors appear to have improved in tandem with these developments and are in high contrast with what obtained in the first half of the century. For testimony of this one has to look no further than utterances of the INTO which up to the present time constitute a useful gauge of opinions

shared by the general body of primary teachers. Whereas inspection and its perceived shortcomings featured no less than seventeen times in INTO presidential addresses at annual conference in the years 1900 to 1950, not once was inspection mentioned in the period 1960 to 1980 (Ó Buachalla, 1988: 106).

But not only was it State policy that the inspectorate should engage in the inspection of either individual teachers or schools as a unit, but from the foundation of the National System the inspectorate also was required to publish an overview of the working of the system by means of an Annual Report on primary education. However, from the middle 1930's the quantity and quality of published reportage had diminished considerably and by 1962 the Annual Report extended to no more than nine pages compared to the fifty-two for 1935-36; and of this nine, no more than three were devoted to a summarization of inspectors' reports on curricular issues. An examination of these Reports shows they contained no discussion of educational aims or principles, and Departmental policy was not evaluated. The inspectors' contribution was not considered as quasi-independent commentary on the schools and system and as one writer dealing with the thirty years from 1934 put it:

Instead of perfecting skills of analysis and appraisal, inspectors were more than ever confined to the particular and to the details of the education system. Initiative and creativity were not valued and promoted. Instead, loyalty, conformity, safety and circumspection, were the hallmarks of official life for inspectors.

(O'Donovan, 1992: 478)

When the School Report that issues after whole school inspection is discussed presently, it may be inferred that the situation has not have changed to any marked degree to this day. The same sense of circumspection mentioned above pervaded the document received by the schools that participated in this research, in all cases it was characterised by high levels of ambiguity and blandness, and indeed so much so that *members of the inspectorate's senior*

management interviewed expressed impatience at the apparent failure to apply a greater level of rigour to the exercise.

And the Annual Report is no more. It may be said, however, that in producing an Annual Report for over three decades, one that informed at least to some degree on the state of primary education in the country as a whole, and in deploying inspectors to contribute to the exercise, the National Commissioners and the Department of Education anticipated the need for a broader perspective in the administration of its affairs. In this they foreshadowed an emerging trend in the European Community that seeks to utilise inspectorates in the provision of commentary and analysis of the working *of the system* rather than the individual school for the sake of good planning and policy formulation (Altrichter and Specht, 1997: 39-54; Pepin, 1999: 21-22; Kallen, 1996: 15-20). This dimension of the primary inspectorate's orientation was allowed fade away, largely to be replaced by a multiplicity of administrative functions and, in due course, whole school inspection. Consequently, the neglect inherent in the failure to produce a critical analysis of the system, one that gainfully might be supported by evidence drawn from inspection, has been the subject of some critical comment by foreign observers in the last decade (OECD 1991: 44,61; Hopes, 1991: 39-44). For inspectors the abandonment of the open publication of commentary and description meant a grievous loss of status as their public image as critical observers was eroded, and the voice they had within the political and administrative framework, albeit limited, was diminished further (O'Donovan, 1992: 478).

*It is clear that insofar as it had a policy at all in respect of the primary inspectorate, the Department of Education's primary focus of interest was to centre on the collection of evidence on individual schools, and most particularly so in the years subsequent to 1962. Hence it is likely that the abandoning of the annual report with its system orientation would have been a matter of no great concern.*

It was in keeping with its emphasis on the individual school as its main focus, in 1976 the Department of Education finalized discussions with the INTO to introduce a revised model of whole school inspection designed to be more in keeping with the spirit of the new curriculum still in its infancy. Whole school inspection was ushered in and with it regular inspection of teachers as individuals rather than as members of whole school units came to an end for probated teachers. Henceforth, only those who formally sought individual inspection (usually a small number almost solely seeking to enhance promotion prospects), and those few identified as less than satisfactory during whole school inspection, would be subjected to formal individual inspection - and then only some time after the whole school inspection had been completed. To the details of whole school inspection, its purposes and its working, we now turn our attention.

### **Whole school inspection**

The 1976 agreement between Department of Education, the INTO and the school authorities was given practical expression in the issue of a government Circular providing for the conduct of a whole school inspection in each primary school in all inspectoral districts on a four-year cyclical basis (Circular 11/76). Following on from this a *Tuairisc Scoile* (School Report) would be furnished by the inspector who conducted the inspection (normally only one inspector is involved).

The arrangement was spelt out in greater detail soon afterwards (Circular 12/76). The School Report would be based on knowledge of the school gained as a result of incidental visits and visits of general inspection of individual teachers, and it would contain 'an assessment of the work and organisation of the school as a whole'. It was intended that the whole school inspection would be wide-ranging and its focus of attention would be on three main areas:

- (a) environmental factors which influence the effectiveness of the teacher's work;

(b) the organization and atmosphere of the school and the general programme of work which is in operation;

(c) the general development of pupils and their progress in the various areas of the curriculum.

(Circular 12/76)

Whole school inspection began that year and inspectors throughout the country initiated a programme of inspections in selected schools in their districts. Teachers presented the relevant items of documentation to inspectors, they took lessons while the inspectors observed and inspectors themselves also took class. In due course the new arrangement became an established feature in the life of teachers and inspectors. Both sides complained of the extra pressure that whole school inspection exerted in contrast with the earlier more modest arrangement of 1959, but in general both sides cooperated to an adequate extent in ensuring that the inspection was completed in what was seen to be a satisfactory fashion.

In 1982 Circular 12/76 was superseded by another, Circular 31/82. This introduced only minor change and may be characterised as no more than a fine-tuning of procedures already current. It was emphasised that inspectors were required to 'discuss with the staff the organization and work of the school as a whole' before furnishing the School Report. Apparently some inspectors had been remiss in doing so and this formal insistence on a gesture of collaboration could be expected to go some way in facilitating the necessary ownership of the findings which is fundamental to the effecting of change (Morrison, 1998: 16, 79,90,123,130; Carter, 1998: 3; McGilchrist,1997: 15; Gray, 1995: 252). Curiously, the paragraph requiring the inspector to base the School Report on his incidental visits was omitted, but from incidental conversations with colleagues at the time I know that inspectors continued to view the document as the written product of observations made during incidental visits in the previous months, even years, as well as those made during the formal whole school inspection.

In February 1983 the INTO, the teachers' union, concluded an agreement with the Department of Education on procedural details. The School Report 'would be an assessment of the organisation and work of the school as a whole' and would be based 'on knowledge gained over a period and not on a single visit or a single examination of the school' (Department of Education and Science and NCCA, 1990:122). Thus the whole school dimension was clearly endorsed to assure teachers who had lingering doubts, and the importance of the incidental visit as a fundamental element of whole school inspection was formally recognised.

Further discussions were initiated by the INTO with the Department of Education some weeks later and two refinements to the original agreement followed. In brief, these required of inspectors (a) that the relevant schools be notified of the intention to conduct a whole school inspection by the end of September of the school year in which it would take place and (b) that a request should be entertained from schools that wished the operation would be completed over a short period (INTO, 1995: 132; Department of Education and Science and NCCA, 1990: 122).

This agreement is of some significance in that it meant that the element of surprise was removed. (Interestingly, in the course of conducting whole school inspection over a period of twenty years as a District Inspector I have received complaints from some school headteachers protesting that the removal of the surprise element insults them in that it implies, unfairly in their opinion, that a forewarning of inspection is necessary to ensure that teachers discharge their duties in a conscientious manner.)

Henceforth schools would be in a position to make timely preparation for the visit of the inspector and, conceivably, dimensions of the Hawthorne effect were likely to come into play so that in actual fact the internal validity of the Report would be susceptible to challenge. Thus, from that point on a question of some significance is whether or not the inspector views the normal operations of the school or those of a contrived and exceptional nature peculiar

to the period surrounding the inspection. As far as most teachers were concerned it makes no difference in terms of practice to be forewarned of whole school inspection, and most particularly so when the inspector has been located in the area for some time, a circumstance which no longer is uncommon. For example, the three inspectors who conducted the whole school inspections in the study had been assigned to their respective districts at least more than ten years previously and already these would have gathered a substantial body of evidence on the school on the basis of a number incidental visits paid without prior notification. Hence, the teachers argued, it is likely they would detect exceptional and uncharacteristic efforts that might serve to invalidate findings.

Moreover, as stated earlier and as will be seen presently in some detail, one of the core messages of school improvement research is that change is a slow and complex process (MacGilchrist *et al.*, 1997: 9; O'Leary, 1995: 25-27; Fullan, 1996: 1-6). Hence, it is more than conceivable that forewarning of schools of an impending whole school inspection would be unlikely to make a significant difference in terms of facilitating so great a turnabout in operations that the inspector might be misled. The import of all of this is that it is unlikely the removal of the element of surprise would make a substantial difference in bolstering the validity of the School Report as a description and evaluation of typical performance.

In respect of the agreement to conduct the whole school inspection over a short period instead of spreading it out 'over a series of incidental visits', this in effect meant that schools were granted the right to dictate the pace of inspections. Equally, the same argument as that which relates to the issue of forewarning schools can be advanced with regard to the introduction of the short 'snapshot' inspection - that is, that it probably makes no great difference unless the inspector has been appointed recently to the district. (In such a circumstance it is probable s/he would not yet have had the opportunity to become acquainted with his/her cohort of schools and hence the validity of her judgements would then be more susceptible to challenge.) All things considered, in theory it may be preferable for inspectors to have the discretion

to conduct whole school inspection over whatever length of time they in their professional judgement think fit, and equally it may be desirable not to require them give notice that a whole school inspection is pending. However, it is conceivable that the arrogation of such level of discretion to inspectors would come at a cost - the vital loss of trust between the key players so essential to effecting school improvement, for example - and hence on balance, and for the cogent reasons cited above, it is probable that the Department of Education made the most prudent deal feasible when it allowed forewarning and the 'snapshot' inspection. Nevertheless, the issues might gainfully be revisited at some future date when new arrangements are being negotiated. Moreover, it is not likely that these issues would have had a significant bearing on the study to hand in that the three inspectors were well acquainted with their schools and hence would have been less susceptible to view the exceptional and contrived as normal.

Finally, the agreements between the Department of Education and Science and the INTO were given formal recognition by means of Circular later in that year in which the working arrangements for the conduct of the School Report were set out as a series of eight points (Circular 12/83).

Essentially, as in 1976, it was stipulated that the School Report would be conducted at regular intervals of approximately four years, but henceforth the actual report that issued would be based 'on the knowledge gained as a result of periodic visits, *including visits during the school year in which the School Report is furnished*' [my italics]. The qualification in respect of visits during the school year was an addition to the previous arrangements and could be taken to imply that there would be no restriction on having regard for data collected during incidental visits during a previous school year. This would allow for a broader evidential base and potentially, therefore, a School Report of greater validity. The choice given to schools to opt for inspection over a short period was not specified but, again from conversations with colleagues, both inspectors and schools accepted it as an agreed element. In addition, the expectation was that one inspector would conduct the inspection in all but the

biggest schools (not defined, but in practice that above twelve teachers). In that case an immediate superior, a Divisional Inspector who would have some acquaintance with the school, might be deployed; and a second colleague, if available, might be called upon to assist in the case of twenty-four teacher schools and more. It was also specified that the actual School Report would be drawn up after consultation with the headteacher and staff as a whole, and as the focus was not to be on the individual teacher it would not be necessary to assess all aspects of the curriculum in all classes. However, it was expected that a comprehensive assessment of other aspects would also be made e.g. the school building, social and learning environment, organization and planning, methodology etc'. Following on from this the Deputy Chief Inspector (i.e. Chief Inspector, primary) issued a five point list of guidelines to inspectors which confirmed the contents of Circular 12/83 and particularly the direction that each aspect of the curriculum need not be examined in each classroom (Ó Mordha, 1983).

The foundations of whole school inspection as we know it were now in place. The focus of the inspection would be on the whole school as a unit and data collected during incidental visits in the previous months might be included. In this way the shortcomings of the snapshot inspection, much reviled by teachers in England for example, would be avoided (Laar, 1997: 8). Consequently, as the interview evidence will demonstrate presently, the inspectors' findings would be less open to question and be seen by teachers to have a high degree of validity. Moreover, though the School Report would be limited in its comprehensiveness, it was envisaged that this would not be at the cost of omitting essentials. In other words, when writing their reports inspectors would be expected to walk a rather thin line in striking a balance between the critical and the less vital elements on which the School Report is grounded. The deal with the INTO appears to have been founded on pragmatic principles. The Department of Education and Science believed that the middle ground had been found between what was desirable and what was feasible, given that the goodwill of teacher was vital to maintain the impetus of inspection. Thus, the exercise of inspection would not be seen to compromise the promotion of the

innovative but poorly resourced *Primary Curriculum* of 1971. There is no doubt that this was seen to be of importance to the Department of Education and Science at the time (interview with Deputy Chief Inspector, 29 July 1999).

Since then inspectors have conducted whole school inspection in strict accord with the conditions agreed upon in 1983. There has been but one essential change: nowadays whole school inspection is undertaken once only every six years because of work demands in other areas of the education system and because of shortage of inspector personnel. In common with inspectorates throughout the EU, Irish inspectors tend to be engaged in the discharge of a multiplicity of duties, many of which have only a tenuous relationship with the core work of inspecting but which occupy a large proportion of their time. As in other EU countries, a tension often exists between administrators and inspectors to the ultimate effect that inspectors are frequently misused at the instigation of administrators. As one reviewer of the Irish situation put it in 1991:

Instead of developing a balanced mechanism - on the one hand administrators helping the inspectorate define problems for inspection and on the other hand inspectors helping the administrators with information collected, the inspectors are kept out and used as errand boys, jacks of all trades, or as one international observer has termed them, the "handmaidens of the administrators" .

(Hopes 1991:39)

This has meant that in addition to, or parallel with, regular visiting and inspecting of schools, primary inspectors in Ireland (and in many EU countries too) find they are required to discharge a growing number of duties each year. An international report by the OECD on schools and quality presents a list of the tasks customarily carried out by inspectorates, and what is particularly remarkable about it is the comprehensive and wide-ranging nature of the tasks expected to be undertaken (OECD, 1989:109-110). These include the following:

- ensuring that statutory regulations are observed
- reporting and making recommendations to the responsible authority on particular schools or particular curricular developments
- promoting the improvement of education through consultation
- planning, taking part in and monitoring in-service education of teachers
- promoting curriculum development
- assisting in the implementation of policy decisions
- judging the performance of individual teachers
- *being an appeal authority for parents with complaints about their children's treatment*

Irish inspectors would recognise each and every one of these as duties which they also discharge on a regular basis and, in addition, they might legitimately add the following extracted from a landmark review of primary education in Ireland in 1990 and an unpublished consultancy report on all branches of the inspectorate undertaken in 1991 (Department of Education, 1990: 88-89; Hopes 1991:16-17, 24):

- special education – enduring compliance with regulation and supporting official policy in the area even to extent of preparing affidavits and appearing in Court in defence of Department of Education and Science policy in respect of individual special needs children
- overseeing schemes for the disadvantaged

- advising on school building and equipment
- acting as members of committees both within and outside the Department of Education and Science
- providing guidelines and advice to education publishers
- contributing to the production of Department of Education and Science documents e.g. Circulars, academic journal, newsletters, press releases
- liaising with colleges of education
- preparing speeches or speech notes for Minister

Significantly, the list of duties has grown substantially over the last decade, a fact to which the inspectors in the study referred with no little exasperation in regretting the increasingly limited nature of their association with schools in their divisions and districts. In 1981 the total number of staff in the Department of Education stood at 1 165, and at the end of 1999 it stood at to a total of 965 - all grades, professional and general (figures supplied by Department of Education and Science, 2000; Department of Education and NCCA, 1990: 85). Though circumstances are changing at the present time and personnel numbers show a pattern of increase once more because of the improved economic situation, it is widely believed by inspectors that they will continue to support the Department of Education and Science by functioning as a convenient stopgap. To the extent that this judgement has a validity may be gauged by reference to the mandate of the inspectorate published in its Strategic Management Plan (Department of Education, 1994: 31), by reference to its recent Business Plan (Department of Education and Science, 2000) and also by reference to the recently enacted Education Bill. It would appear from the manner in which the functions of inspectors are expressed in all three documents that any duty with only the most tenuous link with education could

be construed as appropriate for the attention of inspectors if the Department of Education and Science so decides. For example, the Strategic Business Plan for the inspectorate published at the beginning of 2000 as part of the Strategic Management Initiative of the Department of Education and Science identifies two 'principal objectives'. These are:

1. To develop and implement systems for evaluation and supporting quality and effectiveness in education.
2. To contribute to the achievement of the Department's statutory goals and functions.

There can be little doubt that inspectors will embrace the first objective as an essential and appropriate function, but it is likely that they will find the second objective to be problematic in that in effect it allows the Department of Education and Science to assign them duties that have only a rather tenuous link with the core work of inspection. The outside observer who seeks an explanation of the apparent lack of resistance by inspectors to their ever accumulating range of duties needs to refer to the official position of inspectors as civil servants and also to the tradition that underpins their discharge of duties. Quite simply, as 'established' (or full status) civil servants they are subject to the usual work conditions that underpin the civil service in these islands. In effect this means that on the whole they accept whatever duties come their way insofar as they are seen to have some bearing, however tenuous, on the Department's requirements. Protestation is rare and essentially constitutes little more than a grumbling among colleagues. In respect of tradition, it needs to be understood that the inspectorate is in general a highly conservative institution and operates against a strong background of devotion and loyalty to the Department of Education and Science. There is a strong respect for authority which in part, at least, can be traced back to the fact that all have been teachers and thus are favourably disposed towards valuing the observation of rules, regulations and directions. Indeed, in the circumstances that obtained when they secured places in the colleges of education, a high standard of academic

achievement as defined by skill in passing examinations was necessary. Arguably, this meant that many of those who secured selection tended to be compliant and conformist by nature and most likely this is not the type of candidate disposed towards upsetting an inherited system that operates within a framework of respect for authority and position. The authoritarian strain that pervades Irish culture and which is mirrored here has been commented on by some writers (Whyte, 1971: 21), but the essential message for us is that inspectors by nature and tradition will tend to accept with little resistance whatever duties are assigned them. In doing so they often attempt to explain their acquiescence by reference to a perceived legal obligation but, arguably at least, this may be interpreted as little more than a rationalisation of an inherent timidity. Referring both to teachers and inspectors, an Assistant Chief Inspector whose interview is featured presently had the following to say about the docility of the main players:

*Maybe the people who need to teach the children of Ireland, maybe the teachers, are not necessarily the best people to teach them. I think the people who teach are the conformists, that is the people who were top of the class, those who dotted their 'i's', and 't's', did their homework, had the right answers to the questions and so on. Are you going to depend on those to change the world? . That's across the civil service, across the teaching profession and in the inspectorate. I was part of that, but not now.*

(H.I.)

The significance of the foregoing is that the time pressures of which inspectors are most critical will persist and whole school inspection will continue to operate within a framework that inevitably limits its potential for developing schools. The issue will be considered in greater detail presently when supporting evidence from interviews with inspectors and teachers will be featured.

## **Whole School Inspection: the modus operandi**

The provision of some procedural detail is likely to enhance the understanding of those unfamiliar with the operation of whole school inspection and the Irish system of education in general, and to this end the provision of a brief outline of the arrangements that surround the inspection seems appropriate.

Each year the local inspector selects approximately one-sixth of his schools for whole school inspection on a rota basis generally starting with those whose previous whole school inspection predates all others. In accordance with an agreement with the INTO, sometime in the month of September s/he contacts the listed schools either in writing or by telephone and informs them that the inspection is scheduled for that school year (INTO, 1995: 132). In practical terms this causes little surprise because the schools will have worked out beforehand on the basis of experience that the whole school inspection is likely to be undertaken in that year.

As a general practice, at some point in the following weeks the inspector visits the school at an appointed time and a meeting with Staff is convened. Usually this is conducted on an informal basis - commonly at break time - and details of procedure are discussed. Insofar as it is possible for him/her to do so, the inspector agrees to undertake the work at a date deemed convenient by the school, but as the wish of most schools is that the work be concluded in either the first or second term and within as short a period as possible, it is inevitable that some schools are disappointed with guide dates. (All dates are no more than guide dates because of the nature of the inspector's work as constituted at present. This in effect usually requires him/ her to give priority over whole school inspection to any other duty assigned by the Department of Education and Science.) Perhaps two celebrated lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* serve best of all to capture the mood of schools at the time and explain most aptly why schools in general desire an early inspection:

If it were done when 'tis done then 'twere well  
It were done quickly.

(Macbeth I.vii.1)

In addition, the last term tends to be broken up by a variety of public and church holidays together with school tours, parent visiting days and, further, there is an expectation of warm weather. All this gives rise to the belief that children will be less focused on schoolwork towards the end of the school year (i.e. June 30<sup>th</sup>) and that this will create an inaccurate impression of their true worth. Consequently, schools are especially keen to have whole school inspection completed by May at latest.

Usually the pre-inspection meeting is of brief duration and often lasts no more than fifteen minutes if the inspector has conducted a whole school inspection of the institution previously. The discussion tends to circulate around the answering of teachers' questions on points of procedure and the offering of assurances that the experience ought to be seen as an enriching one for all. (To quote Fullan and Hargreaves (1992: 56), 'The helping hand strikes again'.) The most common queries centre on the interaction within the classroom: will the teacher be required to interact with the children and, if so, for how long; will she be required to teach a formal class; will the inspector take the class and for how long; will lesson notes be scrutinised etc.

Generally one week before the whole school inspection the inspector gives the precise date s/he proposes to commence and confirms the range of time within which the inspection will take place. Also at this stage s/he tends to agree the class sequence. In general s/he starts with the infant department and moves upwards to the higher classes while spending half a day on average with each class group.

It appears from informal conversation with colleagues that the work pattern followed in each classroom can vary - one cannot be sure as no research on procedures has been published - but the tendency is for the different inspectors

to observe the interaction between teacher and pupils for varying periods of time and then to take the class themselves. Teachers are not asked to take a *formal* lesson but they are requested to give some exposition of what the children have learned. Children's written work is examined, and also teachers' lesson notes and 'records of pupil progress' may be scrutinised. Regularly the visit ends with a short discussion in the classroom between inspector and teacher. The former outlines his/her perceptions of the work and the teacher's response *may* be elicited. (I use *may* advisedly because of the non-existence of a literature on what precisely happens, and my sources are based on informal conversations with colleagues over the course of twenty years). However, it was reported that the presence of the children in the classroom inhibited the free and frank exchange of ideas.

Throughout the period of the inspection the inspector liaises with the school Principal who offers background information on the operation of the school in all its manifestations. This may take place at break time or during the inspection of the Principal's classgroup if s/he has teaching duties. (At the time of the research headteachers or 'Principals' had charge of classes in schools which had staffs of up to eight class teachers.) On the final day of the inspection the official school records i.e. Roll books, Pupil Registers, Daily Attendance Book, may be scrutinised and the School Plan taken away for examination by the inspector.

After a period of time, perhaps one or two weeks, the inspection 'arranges to discuss with the staff the organization and work of the school as a whole' (Department of Education, Circular 31/82, 4.2). In general the school is closed for the last two hours of the day and children are sent home to enable the inspector present his/her findings and discuss issues of significance that have been identified. At this meeting the inspector adverts to perceived strengths and weaknesses but in doing so s/he is scrupulous in ensuring that discussion progresses at a general level. This means that no teacher is readily identified and, hence, is in accordance with the principle that the school as a whole is the focus of concern and not the individual teacher.

Finally, and in practice usually no less than six months later, a School Report is issued by the Department of Education and Science to the school authorities and the school Principal. This signals the final act in the whole school inspection process and schools in question heave a collective sigh of relief. Happily, six more years will elapse before they undergo the experience again.

## CHAPTER 3

### Conceptualising Whole School inspection

#### **An ill-understood concept**

A major impulse behind the undertaking of this study was the perception that inspection in Ireland proves to be an ill-understood concept. Conversations with colleagues and administrators within the Department of Education and Science, together with discussion and debate with teachers in the course of my work as a District Inspector for a period in excess of twenty years had led me to believe that the ambiguities and obvious myths surrounding the practice needed to be addressed; and as one with access to all the key players in the enterprise it appeared I was better situated than most to undertake the exercise.

A reason for the limited understanding of inspection soon became apparent when I set about embarking upon the literature review. Notwithstanding the rigour one applied to searches conducted in most of the third-level education institutions in the Republic, it became clear that there existed a substantial dearth of literature on inspection in this country. On the positive side this offered the consolation of underlining the potential importance of the study but, nonetheless, it also presaged an encounter with a topic that could prove to be more problematic than initially anticipated.

Significantly, the paucity of studies on inspection has also extended to the UK, up to recently at least, and in the middle nineteen-nineties respected scholars in the field express surprise that despite the heightened interest in inspection 'it has remained a relatively under-researched area of educational activity'

(Wilcox and Gray, 1994:1), and that 'there has been little serious research into the effects of school inspection' (Wilcox and Gray, 1996: 49).

An examination of the index of theses in UK universities in 1997 yielded no more than five studies of inspection, and only one thesis on the topic (that of O'Donovan, 1992) features in the Irish university list. (This deals with the inspectorate in its administrative context from 1832 until 1962 and hence proved of little value in terms of processes and impact, especially at the present time.) Inspection features equally sparsely in the Irish education journals and in fact only four papers were located in an extensive search (Bennett and Kavanagh, 1996: 14-25; Sugrue, 1995; Sugrue, 1996; Quinlivan, 1987:77-87). The first three are of some value in their elaboration of teachers' responses to a recent experience of whole school inspection, but the fourth is rather whimsical in nature, rich in anecdote but devoid of analysis and reference to whole school inspection. In addition, a one-hundred page history of primary inspection in the nineteenth century was published in 1967, and three deceased primary inspectors have published entertaining reminiscences that partly cover the early days of inspection in the state before the institution of whole school inspection. (Fenton, 1948; O'Connor, 1951: 243-291; Breathnach, 1966). These have little to offer in the study of present day inspection. What is particularly lacking is a literature on how the practice of inspection in Ireland is conducted. One searches in vain both within the Department of Education and Science and without for documentation that describes even in the slightest detail how inspectors, both as individuals and in teams, engage in the tasks of collecting evaluative data and transforming them into descriptive accounts and reasoned educational judgements. Remarkably, this is true even of the total of three reports on the inspectorate instigated by the Department of Education and Science in the last twenty years (Department of Education, 1981a; Department of Education, 1981b, Hopes, 1991). Given the importance of inspection and its importance for school development as evidenced in recurring Ministerial utterances one might reasonably have expected that a different situation would have prevailed by now. But not so, and hence this study may prove to be of some significance.

There are many reasons for the limited attention paid to inspection in the literature of education both here and abroad, but the fact it is not an element of the public education system in the USA from which a great proportion of the writing on evaluation derives goes a long way to explain the neglect of this particular form of educational evaluation (Wilcox, 1989: 166). In addition to this, the inspector in Ireland has traditionally operated in a discreet fashion - discretion has been seen as an important value in the public service of most countries down through the years - and, accordingly, inspectors as a matter of course have been less than welcoming of efforts from outside to penetrate the metaphorical veil of privacy akin to secrecy. To some degree this may be attributed to a desire to maintain an enduring myth of inspector as possessor of high levels of educational knowledge and to close down those who by chance or design might discomfort them by mounting a challenge to the generations' old image. The implication of this would be that only a colleague - one of their own - might easily be accepted by inspectors as a trustworthy author of a fair and balanced assessment of inspection in Ireland. The fact that I was an inspector, and also a former primary headteacher, meant I was in a relatively unique and advantageous position. I could be seen as a researcher who would be both credible and fair but also one who by virtue insight based on experience would be in a position to separate fact from self-serving exaggeration.

To further complicate the difficulties that beset the researcher is the fact that no manual of the structure, organization, functions and activities of the primary inspectorate exists within the Department of Education and Science. Quite simply, the importance and usefulness of such a document appears not to have been recognized, notwithstanding the recommendation of a consultancy report in 1991 that a comprehensive set of guidelines should be issued that would include 'the broad principles of the purposes and objectives of the inspectorate' (Hopes, 1991: 57). At the time an abundance of working papers were made available but, nevertheless, the consultant was surprised to learn there was no single file readily available that related to the state of the structure of the Department of Education and Science or to the purpose of the inspectorate (either primary or post-primary). On the whole, work appeared to be undertaken

on a day to day basis with 'no time' for reflection about objectives (Hopes, 1991: 37). It appears that this situation still obtains - four of the five inspectors interviewed remarked on the constraints imposed upon them by the chronic shortage of time - and an effect has been that inspection as a concept and as a practice has continued to ill-understood. This is an issue that is fundamental to any analysis of inspection in Ireland. Essentially, one must ask what is inspection and where most appropriately is it located as an evaluation practice.

In order to address these questions satisfactorily one needs to go even further back to a consideration of evaluation as a concept and practice. What is meant by evaluation? What are the central issues inherent in the concept? What are its purposes and methodologies? We now turn our attention to addressing these fundamental questions.

### **Educational evaluation defined**

There are many definitions of educational evaluation. They tend to draw on review, assessment and appraisal, they vary in level of abstraction and regularly they reflect the concern and bias of the formulator (Morrison and Ridley, 1988: 142-147). Ofsted, for example, refers to 'its emphasis on the value or effectiveness of what is provided rather than on simple audit' (Office for Standards in Education, 1998:6). Essentially, evaluation is about determining value and worth to enable the making of judgements by those who have a stake in the operation. It is not so much about checking that what is intended happens, but about whether or not what happens is of value. It involves asking questions relating to purposes underpinning the area for evaluation and typically it provides description and interpretation of process. Conclusions are drawn and usually a report of some kind is produced. Generally this will include recommendations for future action designed to help improve what has been evaluated and/or to justify its cost). In many circumstances the recommendations contained in the report will have a binding effect on those whose work is evaluated - for example, in England, where Ofsted's inspections must be followed by a definite, specified course of corrective action - but the notion of evaluation as a less threatening enterprise is also current in the

literature. In keeping with this interpretation Ernest House (1980), for example, proposes a concept of evaluation as an act that 'persuades rather than convinces, argues rather than demonstrates, is credible rather than certain, is variably accepted rather than compelling' (quoted in Nixon and Ruddock, 1994:113).

For the purposes of this study the definition offered by C.E. Beeby (1977) seems particularly useful for its comprehensiveness and apparent applicability to inspection as a method of evaluation. He describes evaluation as '*the systematic collection and interpretation of evidence, leading, as part of the process, to a judgement of value with a view to action*' (quoted in Wolf, 1987: 8). It may be noted that this extended definition embraces four significant attributes. First, that evaluation should be based on evidence that is collected in a systematic way. Second, that the meaning of the evidence is rarely unambiguous and consequently needs to be interpreted. (High dropout rates need not be interpreted, as failure of an educational programme, for example, if the students are enticed to leave by the blandishments of prospective employers impressed with the course.) Third, that judgements of worth are made in respect of the effectiveness of the educational institution or programme in meeting its goals. Fourth, that evaluation is action oriented, that is to say that it is intended to lead to better policies and practices in education (Wolf, 1987: 9). The implications of this will become evident presently when an attempt is made to gauge the impact of whole school inspection in the schools selected for the study. Suffice it to say now that to the extent that the inspections do not seem to have the potential of effecting change and improvement when judged over a certain period, then by this definition as evaluation exercises they will be of little value.

Beeby's definition is of particular value in that it provides a framework within which whole school inspection can be viewed. Its comprehensiveness and precision afford it a high level of credibility, and it contrasts in a marked fashion with the kind of evaluations that people commonly make in their daily

intercourse with friends and acquaintances when ultimately little may be at stake in expressing a judgement or opinion.

There are no simple answers to pressing educational problems and no research method can guarantee that an education problem will be solved. It is patently clear from the literature on evaluation that educational research is an inexact process. (Hoyle *et al.*, 1998: 142). There is a considerable diversity in respect of the assumptions, methods and purposes adopted by practitioners and immediate solutions cannot be expected. McDonald (1976), for example, identifies and distinguishes between bureaucratic, autocratic and democratic forms, all of which hinge on the power of the evaluator and the recipients of the evaluation to decide on a course of action (Morrison and Ridley, 1988:147).

However, notwithstanding the diversity inherent in the apparently contending models of evaluation, it is useful to visualize them as existing on a continuum that stretches from systematic judgement with a concern for measurement of quantifiable measures at one end, to a level of everyday judgement with a concern for holistic understanding on the other. The two ends of the evaluation continuum can be seen to encompass two contrasting paradigms, the naturalistic and the positivist, which are of very great significance not only indeed for educational research and evaluation, but also for science and the nature of knowledge generally.

The distinction between the two had its modern day genesis in the middle 1960's when a growing body of evaluation theorists began to react to what they felt was an unjustified dominance of mechanistic and insensitive approaches to evaluation in education. The contribution of the main players, such as Stake (1967), Guba (1969), Lincoln and Guba (1985), McDonald (1974), Partlett and Hamilton (1976), Kemmis (1977) and others has been succinctly summarized in the literature (see Worthen and Sanders, 1987: 127-143 for details).

The apprehension of these scholars was rooted in an uneasiness that evaluators were unduly concerned with devising and classifying objectives, designing

elaborate evaluation systems, developing technically defensible objective instrumentation and preparing lengthy reports. (And to this might be added the relatively recent interest in the production of 'performance indicators' (Gray and Wilcox, 1995a: 25-27; FitzGibbon, 1996: 23-32). It appeared to these writers that this resulted in evaluators being diverted from what was really happening in education and, moreover, in many cases was reflected in evaluators conducting large-scale evaluations without once visiting the participating classrooms. A burgeoning literature of a critical nature grew as more and more practitioners began to question whether many evaluators had an adequate understanding of the phenomena that underlay the various numbers, charts and tables (Worthen and Sanders, 1987: 127). A central concern was that the human element, which was reflected in the complexities of everyday real life and the different perspectives of the various actors, was being missed in great many education evaluations. Quite simply, given that objectivity was problematic, what they said was that the methodology of the traditional research can never guarantee that truth is actually exposed. All of it can be seen to be in line with phenomenological and post-modernist critical theory which take the extreme and provocative line that all forms of interpretation are a problem. That is, we create our own meanings, all knowledge is a construction or product and what we 'read', for example, is in principle what we have 'written' ourselves - and this is so notwithstanding the comprehensiveness of schedules and procedures designed to achieve truth (Winkley, 1999: 35; Hammersley, 1993: 213, 217; Gitlin *et al*, 1993: 207). Moreover, the matter is further complicated by the problematic nature of defining good teaching practice because of its complex, multi-layered and conditional nature (Burke, 2000:17-26). As one writer has put it: 'Definitions of teacher quality and the "good" teacher are social constructions and subject to change at different historical moments' (Troman, 1996:33).

As a consequence of the perceived deficits inherent in traditional research approaches a new orientation to evaluation gained momentum throughout the 1970's and 1980's (Worthen and Sanders, 1987:128). The human element began to assume a central place in educational evaluation and with it an

acknowledgement that evaluators must have particular regard for the complexities of everyday reality. In effect, this meant that account needed to be taken of the multiple perspectives of all of those engaged in the educational enterprise, and that the judgement of good practice ought not to depend solely on the values, attitudes and perspectives of those with power - in the context of this study the Department of Education and Science and its inspectors. Consequently the practice of *naturalistic* and *participant-oriented inquiry* became the preference of most of those who had grown disenchanted with the traditional positivistic perspective (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn: 489). To quote Ernest House:

[naturalistic evaluation]attempts to arrive at naturalistic generalisations on the part of the audience; which is aimed at non-technical audiences like teachers or the public at large; which uses ordinary language; which is based on informal everyday reasoning; and which makes extensive use of arguments attempting to establish the structure of reality. In this category I would include case study evaluation.

(House, 1980: 279)

Those who had become disenchanted with the positivist outlook questioned the notion that scientific enquiry was the only valid means of acquiring reliable knowledge and argued that knowledge arrived at in this way should be treated as suspect. In their opinion the world was not 'out there' independent of human beings and governed by discoverable laws. To them, far closer to the mark was the notion that universal laws (i.e. objective truths) do not exist independently waiting to be discovered. Rather, they arise from an interaction with nature and hence in all evaluations the significant involvement of those who are participants in the entity being evaluated is central (Worthen and Sanders, 1987: 28). The position is elaborated with no little authority by Eisner and Phillips in celebrated papers (Eisner, 1993: 49-56; Phillips, 1993: 57-72), and Kessen (1979) sums it up aptly in a sentence when he says: 'The positivist promise of pure objectivity and eternal science has been withdrawn' (Kessen,

1991: 30). The practical significance of all of this will be considered presently when the advantages of *principled* negotiation and the inclusion of alternative interpretations by the key players during whole school inspection will be discussed.

Guba and Lincoln have produced the most significant works in the area of naturalistic inquiry. To them the naturalistic evaluator studies the educational activity as it naturally occurs. S/he sees herself in the role of a learner and all those with whom s/he interacts are her teachers. S/he is conscientious in avoiding manipulating, controlling or constraining operations in the school, and in collaboration with her informants she arrives at what are in effect mutual constructions of the reality (Worthen and Sanders, 1987:139; Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 150-157; Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 97).

Inevitably every evaluation is confronted by the question of the trustworthiness of its findings (Wilcox, 1989:170). In the positivist tradition trustworthiness is judged by reference to the concepts of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity but in the naturalistic tradition there is no general agreement for judging the trustworthiness of the research. Indeed, the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiry never can be seen as unassailable:

One is compelled to accept its trustworthiness. But naturalistic inquiry operates as an open system; no amount of member checking, triangulation, persistent observation, auditing, or whatever can ever compel, it can at best persuade.

(Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 329)

Guba and Lincoln (1985) have attempted to address the issue by suggesting the substitution of a range of different criteria. They propose four analogous terms for assessing trustworthiness: they substitute 'credibility' for internal validity, 'dependability' for reliability, 'confirmability' for objectivity and 'transferability' for external validity (that is 'relatability', or the extent to which a phenomenon can be seen to bear similarity with another). In doing so they are

not without their critics who argue that by suggesting substitute criteria they fall into the trap of attempting to adapt positivist criteria thought appropriate for the study of the social world when in effect research can never be objective, capable of replication or directly representative of a reality 'out there' (Scott and Usher, 1996: 79). Wherever the truth lies, it is probably fair to say that these concepts could be usefully deployed in reflecting on the validity of inspection reports now and in the future.

Of the four criteria suggested by Guba and Lincoln for judging the rigour of the evaluation, the notion of credibility is probably the most crucial. They propose that credibility is enhanced

- to the extent that the study has been triangulated
- to the extent that a sufficient level of member checks have taken place
- to the extent that it enables a transferability of insights by reader to related cases, a circumstance that requires the inclusion of 'thick description' in descriptions
- to the extent that the data is factual, auditable and confirmable

(Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 289-331)

To this list of checks for trustworthiness might be added a further three requirements taken from *Standards for Evaluations of Educational Programs, Projects and Materials* (1981), a celebrated report by the American Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (McMillan and Schumacher, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn: 476-477). They suggest that the primary characteristics of utility, feasibility and propriety should also be inherent in a programme of evaluation. That is, with regard to utility, any evaluation must have the prospect of being useful to someone; in respect of feasibility, it must be seen to have realistic targets and carried out in a practical, diplomatic manner with an eye for

cost effectiveness; and with regard to the characteristic of propriety, high ethical standards must be adhered to and operations should not stray from legality or indeed acceptable measures of courtesy between researchers and those evaluated.

The value of these standards for us, and Department of Education and Science planners too, is that they provide a basis for adjudicating on the value of the present School Report and in addition they can be deployed to guide future revisions. The Report will be considered presently but at this stage the primary concern is that the reader recognises as a central contention of this study the notion that whole school inspection, and indeed inspection in general in Ireland, is a particular manifestation of qualitative research and that it is best understood in terms of the naturalistic rather than the positivist paradigm. This position is more clearly understood when the nature and practices of qualitative research are considered.

### **Qualitative research**

Essentially qualitative research expresses its truths about complex social situations in the form of prose (and in this it contrasts with quantitative research where there is an emphasis on expressing evidence and conclusions in numerical form). Its *raison d'être* is understanding rather than proof and hence it is more concerned with generating hypotheses rather than testing them. Quoting Guba and Lincoln (1982) and Skrtic (1985), Hopkins and colleagues underline the value and appropriateness of qualitative approaches whenever 'the phenomena to be studied are complex human and organizational interactions and therefore not easily translatable into numbers' (Hopkins *et al*, 1989: 62). The exercise of whole school inspection fits neatly into this scenario. As a form of educational evaluation that centres on the production of qualitative data (but not entirely so, of course), it exists somewhere near the naturalistic pole of a continuum that stretches from the measurement of quantifiable variables at one end to a concern for rich naturalistic description at the other (Wilcox, 1993: 93). And this is more clearly so from the fact that it is conducted in a natural setting - the school in operation- and that it adopts a

methodology that is qualitative (including observation, interview, progressive focusing, purposeful sampling and a particular concern for tacit knowledge). When the details of whole school inspection in the selected schools is presented in a later chapter the reality of this position will become clear. Essentially, what happens is that when making a judgement inspectors focus their attention precisely on the *qualities* of what is presented to them rather than on their simple occurrence and frequency. Moreover, inspectors does not enter the classroom with the intention of following with a pre-ordained design, but in a relatively close and interactive relationship with teachers they set about the collection and interpretation of data in a holistic manner. Finally, they report in terms of the particular situation and in a form that closely resembles the case study approach favoured by qualitative researchers. In a few words, whole school inspection can be suitably conceptualised as a modified form of naturalistic inquiry.

## CHAPTER 4

### **International Trends and the Irish Response: Policy in Evolution**

*'There is greater clarity now within the Department of Education about the purposes of inspection and about the relative significance of the different purposes. School inspection is first and foremost about school improvement.'*

These words are taken from a speech delivered by Gabriel Harrison, Assistant Chief Inspector, in March 1996 and they are significant in that they offer the reader some indication of the levels of ambiguity that have surrounded the practice of whole school inspection and its purposes up to the middle 1990's. Further, evidence from interviews conducted as part of this study suggests that a lack of clarity in respect of policy underpinning whole school inspection still existed among the key players during the 1998-1999 school year. This data will be presented in a forthcoming chapter and need not be considered further at this stage. At this point the focus centres on a growing international consensus on the importance of evaluating education provision and on the perceived role of inspectors and other external evaluators in the enterprise.

The occasion of Mr Harrison's speech was a conference of the education partners (i.e. management authorities, teacher unions and parents associations) that was specially convened in Dublin in order to present the current position of the Department of Education in respect of a proposed restructuring of the system of whole school inspection in the near future. The proposal made was that the new arrangement would be instituted after due consultation, and an

important feature was that the operation would be extended to second-level schools (those catering for children aged twelve to seventeen) for the first time.

For the purposes of this study the Harrison speech is particularly significant in what it appears to imply. Delivered in the presence of the Chief Inspector of the time and approved by him, the speech can be interpreted as an official admission that up to then Department of Education policy in respect of inspection had lacked clarity, to say the least. Most certainly, in general terms the central features were well known - the functions of inspectors were to monitor, advise and support schools, and then report the findings to the Minister (Circulars 12/76 and 31/82). However, there was little or no indication in official documentation or official speeches about the relative importance of each function or, for example, how this information might be used for the maintenance and development of individual schools or the system overall.

### **The new consensus**

Mr Harrison now went on to outline the new consensus in respect of whole school inspection: *'First and foremost (it is) about school improvement...the improvement of the quality of education in (individual) schools is seen as the primary purpose'*. He then went on to say that the second purpose would be system improvement, and the securing of school accountability would rank third (Harrison, 1996: 16-17). Speaking in tandem with the current Chief Inspector in a subsequent briefing of teachers in 1999, another Assistant Chief Inspector endorsed this position and ranked the underlying purposes of whole school inspection according to the same priority sequence: the revised arrangements would recognise that the first priority was individual school improvement, and after this would come system improvement and accountability respectively (Gearóid Ó Conluain, lecture at Marino Institute of Education, January 20, 1999, unpublished). (In the interests of accuracy, it ought to be stated that he used the newly-agreed designation 'whole school evaluation', arrived at in response to teacher unions whose sensitivities were offended by the term whole school *inspection*.)

Mr Harrison went on to promote the notion of an interactive inspection procedure that would have due regard for the contribution of all the key players.

*We realise that we are not operating in isolation in the area of inspection. It will no longer be the case that there will be those who do it and those to whom it will be done. In the future, the inspectorate, the teachers, the Boards of Management and the parents are all going to be involved-together. We are going to have to pull together because we have a shared responsibility for school and system improvement. School inspection will not be done to a school but with a school. The whole school community is being invited to collaborate in school inspection. The purposes of whole school inspection are worthwhile and necessary and can only be achieved in a spirit of co-operation and mutual respect.*

(Harrison, 1996: 18)

In effect therefore it was now proposed that the Report following a whole school inspection would be based on what had been a collaborative exercise, and the judgements of inspectors expressed therein would be enhanced by a consideration of the position of management authorities, teachers and parents.

The policy position outlined above was endorsed by all senior members of the inspectorate and may be viewed as the official policy of the Department of Education and Science today - and, though nowhere written, it can be taken as the position that had come to obtain over the last decade. It marks the final-point in a process of evolution that had its genesis in the surveillance and compliance procedures of the nineteenth-century inspectorate and ends with the recognition of the primacy of effecting improvement as the main purpose of inspection - that is, individual school improvement first of all, and then system improvement. Appropriately, the requirement of accountability has not been

omitted but it has been accorded a lower status. In all of this we see an endorsement of a central message from the literature on change, one that celebrates the value of co-operation and collaboration among key players in an atmosphere of trust and free from tension. Thus, the professionalism attaching to teaching is acknowledged - the notion that teaching deserves the status of profession has been well made in recent literature (Burke, 1992: 84-102; Burke, 2000: 16-21) - and this is suitably balanced by reference to the requirement of accountability.

It is likely that the policy of the Department of Education and Science in respect of school evaluation will meet the approval of those who have regard for the messages from the literature on school effectiveness and improvement, and indeed of those who value the democratic approach as crucial to the effecting of worthwhile change in the world. To accord those who have contributed to its formulation some degree of credit is justified but its measure may be tempered by a recognition that the policy they championed was by no means revolutionary in the context of the time. In fact, in broad outline the policy reflects a number of trends coming to the fore internationally over the last two decades. To these and to parallel developments in Ireland we now turn so that in due course when the research evidence is presented the significance of the data embodying the actions of the different players may be more usefully contextualised and understood.

### **The major trends**

An examination of literature on the evaluation and reform of education systems internationally identifies a number of trends common to many countries (Skilbeck, 1989: 24-27). Though many and varied, they can be reduced to three in the OECD countries (OECD, 1996: 11-15):

1. a concentration on specific reforms and programmes (e.g. mother tongue development, acquisition of reading skills, mathematics development) in a piecemeal form and an avoidance of major structural reforms;

2. a tendency to view the education system as part of the economy, subject to the laws of supply and demand and pivotal to the securing of the country's economic and material success.
3. a growth in democratization and a consequent change in governance structures.

The issue of the specific and 'piecemeal' reform as opposed to that of a structural nature, though of importance in its own right, hardly needs to concern us here but the perception of the education system as an integral part of national economies is entirely relevant, as is the democratizing tendency with its implications for the involvement of a wider, interested audience.

In respect of the role education now is seen to play in the development of the national economy, it is held that the school should be regarded as an enterprise charged with securing the best possible output in the most efficient way, given the level of input. Arising from this is a determination that education policies and schools can and should be evaluated, and that this should form a vital part of policy making, education planning and reform (OECD, 1996:16).

The main trend in the area of growing democratization can be seen in a push towards decentralization (Dalin, 1998: 3-24). This arises from a perception that the complexity and dynamic nature of social change is rendering out of date and inefficient the control of education systems from the centre. In reviewing international approaches to quality assurance at a conference in Athens which I attended, the Austrian delegate, Werner Specht, declared: 'Long term solutions for regionally different and rapidly changing problems can no longer be centrally decreed' (Altrichter and Specht, 1997: 40). Accordingly, there is a delegation or devolution of power away from central administration and a significant increase in the level of autonomy granted the school. As a result schools are expected to assume a greater responsibility for their own management and, in tandem, parents (and, to a lesser extent, the business

community) are granted entitlement to a voice in the affairs of the school - with all this entails in terms of securing evaluative documentation to guide their decisions (Skilbeck, 1989: 24-27).

In summary, the lessons for evaluation are twofold:

1. Evaluation has become an 'educational policy issue' and its importance is seen not only in its ability to monitor and control the system and the schools therein, but also in its power to guide educational policy.
3. There is consensus that education policies can and should be evaluated, and that the results of school evaluation should form a vital part of policy making, education planning and reform. Further, in all cases - and this also includes the USA and Australia - the school rather than the teacher in the classroom is seen as the unit of focus (OECD, 1996: 17, 20; Reynolds *et al*, 1996: 63; Pepin, 1999: 12).

It takes only a very modest leap of the imagination to see the problematic nature of the developments outlined for national governments, professional evaluators and teacher bodies. Given the desirability of securing a stronger sense of accountability - with due regard for the rights of all the various parties to be informed and generally involved - how can one at the same time preserve the professionalism of teachers and the integrity of schools? To answer this question we turn again to the international experience and to an emerging consensus with regard to what constitutes an efficient and effective system of school evaluation (McBeath96: 1). The new emphasis is seen in a determination to help *individual* schools to help themselves maintain what they have achieved and to develop themselves further by means of an ongoing and systematic process of self-reflection (MacBeath, 1999:1; Sanders, 1999: 414-418); McGilchrist, 2000), or as Barber calls it, 'restless self-evaluation' (Barber, 1996:137-139). Essentially it concerns itself with equipping teachers with the expertise to enable them evaluate the quality of learning in their schools

without an undue reliance on official processes of external review. It is envisaged this will lead to a growing self-confidence that will reflect in the welcoming of the official process of external review by inspectors because of its potential to enhance and strengthen good practice already identified.

A brief outline of the current experience internationally is presented in forthcoming Tables and the essential message contained therein is that throughout the developed world countries are attempting to introduce systems that will secure a stronger sense of accountability while at the same time respecting the professionalism of teachers and the integrity of the school itself as a confident and competent self-evaluating institution. This is reflected in a moderate level of success in the promotion and growing institutionalisation of 'autoevaluation', as it is termed in Spain, but a parallel concern for system evaluation has not yet achieved the same level of prominence, partly because a satisfactory methodology has not yet been developed. Thus, the translation of individual school self-evaluation data into valid and reliable generalised data reflective of what is happening in the system as a whole continues to present a challenge that has yet to be overcome by central administrations. But, as a general statement it can be said that procedures to enable *system* evaluation in this way are at an early and tentative stage of development in most countries (Pepin, 1999: 25; Hopes, 1997).

The Norwegian academic Alvik has offered a useful typology of internal and external evaluation (MacBeath, 1999: 90). He identifies three different forms - parallel, sequential and cooperative - and his typology is enlisted here to provide the reader with a general impression of the international scene devoid of unnecessary detail. It is seen to be particularly useful in the context of this study in that it offers a framework within which we can locate where whole school inspection in Ireland has stood and what now is its probable destination.

In brief the three forms are:

- *Parallel* - where both school and external reviewers conduct their own evaluations separately, but afterwards they may share and compare findings.
- *Sequential* - where the school conducts its own evaluation and then the external reviewers use that as a basis for its own review arising from which findings are issued as a basis for development.
- *Cooperative* - where both parties debate and negotiate the process, and at the same time regard is had for different interests and viewpoints of both parties.

In broad outline it may be said that a great many countries throughout the world are seeking to find the optimum balance of internal and external evaluation, and this is true whether or not a national or regional inspectorate exists within their boundaries. Moreover, it worth noting that not all European countries have inspectorates, and where these exist they are undergoing a process of review (MacBeath, 1999: 91). The following Tables provide a brief but adequate overview of the position that exists in many of the European countries and further afield, and they are presented to help ensure that the emerging Irish arrangements may be seen in appropriate context.

**Table 1** *Inspection in European countries*

**Austria**

National inspectorate exists, but is in process of changing to become less of a monitoring body and more of a resource for schools. Future role will be to support schools, following Alvik's 'co-operative approach'.

**Belgium**

Inspection systems exists - in fact the inspectors are headteachers in Belgium -and moves towards finding a school based approach to evaluation combined with external review are afoot.

**Denmark**

There are no inspectors for the *Folkeskole* which serves children aged six to sixteen, but increasing public interest in value for money combined with demands for accountability has recently led to authorities and unions engaging in discussions aimed at securing higher levels of accountability in a country where the teacher has traditionally enjoyed a high degree of independence from external scrutiny. Consequently, it is reported that external evaluation is on its way as a bridge between the old and new.

**England and Wales**

Here arrangements for school inspection are controlled by a non-Ministerial governmental body called Ofsted that supervises regular cycles of whole school inspections by specially trained teams contracted for the purpose. The approach is essentially external and top down (Alvik's parallel stage with a growing hint of the sequential), with the balance of support dependent on the general character of any given inspection team. Subject to considerable criticism - much of which seems unfounded - Ofsted supports a process of internal review as a positive step towards school improvement.

**France**

In-depth evaluation of primary and secondary schools by whole school self-review.

**Germany**

Burden of administrative work on inspectors has meant that a tradition of systematic school evaluation did not emerge until recently. Arrangements to promote school self-review now being considered.

**Table 1 (contd.)**

**Greece**

Inspectorate abolished in 1982 and replaced by new institution of 'school advisors' whose main orientation has been guidance and support of teachers. 'Long and vigorous debate' follows throughout the 1980's on appropriate functions of advisors and the promotion of internal evaluation procedures. Finally, Education Act of 1997 sees formulation of new evaluation policy that sees advisors and others involved in the promotion of school self-evaluation.

**Netherlands**

National inspectorate exists within highly decentralised system of education. 'Sequential' system being established in which school will conduct its own evaluation first and the primary role of the inspectorate will be to validate schools own internal processes.

**Italy**

National (and regional) inspectorate exists within highly decentralised system of education, but there has never been a systematic evaluation of schools. At the present time self-evaluation with technical support from the centre being promoted.

**Scotland**

The Scottish approach is rooted in a conviction that when teachers are trusted they will surprise the doubters and willingly recognise the need for continuous development. The inspectorate conducts whole school inspections on a systematic basis and sets target for the individual schools in the Reports that issue subsequently. In the process it builds on the schools' self-evaluative work - which is largely based on the inspectorate's comprehensive and enlightening set of self-review guides- and the approach may be described as being at a transition stage between Alvik's parallel and transitional models.

**Spain**

Country has no external inspection but progressively moving towards a 'sequential' model of evaluation with documentary and other support from the Ministry.

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**Source:** Ferguson *et al.*, 2000: 131-140; MacBeath, 1999: 90-91, 96, 99-101; Solomons, J. (ed) *Trends in the Evaluation of Education Systems: School (Self-) Evaluation and Decentralisation: European Workshop-Papers, Reports, Discussion Outcomes*, Hellenic Ministry of National Education and European Commission D.G.XXII; Hopes, 1997.

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**Table 2** *Inspection in Scandinavian countries*

**Finland**

Increasing interest here also in value for money and this has led to an assault on the traditional attitude of 'my classroom is my castle attitude' in recent past. Curricular reforms in the early 1990's have led to an abandonment of an inspectorate but a move towards school self-evaluation (without reference yet to external review) is reported.

**Sweden**

No inspectorate, but 'external observers are visiting the schools regularly and try to document the work going on'. There is some school self-evaluation but, in contrast with other Scandinavian countries, arrangements are only in their infancy here.

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**Source:** Solomons, J.(ed) *Trends in the Evaluation of Education Systems: School (Self-) Evaluation and Decentralisation: European Workshop-Papers, Reports, Discussion Outcomes*, Hellenic Ministry of National Education and European Commission D.G.XXII; Hopes, 1997; Webb *et al*, 1998.

**Table 3** *Inspection in North America*

Traditionally the sanctity of the classroom here has been seen to be a sacred creed and inspection as we know it in Europe does not feature. However, it is reported that 'an interesting mosaic of practice' exists in a variety of States and a systematic search is ongoing to find an optimum balance between quality and accountability is taking place.

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**Source:** MacBeath, 1999: 93-94.

**Table 4**      *Inspection in Australia*

Here sequential models of inspection feature throughout the continent. In Victoria, for example, there is a process of independent, external review by inspectors but it takes as its focus what might be called in Irish terms the 'School Plan' which essentially is a profile document drawn up by the school itself and containing its code of practice and its listing of priorities.

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**Source:** Cuttance, 1995: 97-108; Ferguson *et al*, 2000: 119-130; MacBeath, 1999: 94-95.

Thus it may be seen that many countries throughout the world have begun to promote evaluation systems geared to securing a stronger sense of accountability while at the same time respecting the professionalism of teachers and the integrity of the school itself as a trusted, self-evaluating institution. But, though valuable, this approach cannot be deemed adequate because the self-evaluation may lack, or appear to lack, a sufficiently self-critical approach for reasons ranging from a competence deficit inherent in the school to reluctance to self-incriminate by exposing weakness. Inevitably, this threatens the validity of the evaluation because the credibility of any self-evaluation process will pivot on whether or not it is checked and moderated by agents independent of the school, that is people who will assess the rigour and validity of the school's internal review and ensuing reporting. This does not mean, of course, that the external assessors must be inspectors with perhaps the full status of civil servants as in the Republic of Ireland, but it does highlight a challenge facing all administrations that champion internal review. That is, they must endeavour to ensure that teachers become technically competent and confident in rigorous self-evaluation which can then be used as the launching point for an evaluation useful to those external to the school. This matter will be

returned to in a later chapter whereas we now turn to a consideration of developments throughout the last decade that became the impulse behind the adoption of the current position in respect of whole school inspection. Here we will see that the policy statements expressed by members of the higher inspectorate quoted above are rooted in a consensus that had been developing in a great many countries throughout the world as well as in Ireland. As we have seen, these official utterances promote the cause of individual school inspection, they point to an intensifying search for system improvement through inspection, and accountability is cited 'as the third purpose of inspection'. Granted the higher inspectorate do not mention self-evaluation specifically in their statements but their commitment to it is clear. In particular it can be judged by reference to their systematic promotion of the process in publications on school development planning which have been distributed to every education institution on the country within the last year (Department of Education and Science, 1999) and in frequent endorsements of the 1990 report of a Government appointed review body on the curriculum that recommended the promotion of the exercise in all primary schools (Department of Education, 1990: 90-91). Moreover, it can be argued that the main principles of self-evaluation are contained in the policy speeches quoted at the beginning of this chapter when the notion of the involvement and collaboration of all the key players 'in a spirit of co-operation and mutual respect' is encouraged. Hence, insofar as it can be ascertained in the light of a dearth of official documentation, Department of Education and Science policy underpinning whole school inspection at the time of this study fits into the mainstream of an emerging international consensus concerning the importance of evaluating education quality. That is, schools need to be evaluated for the purposes of improving individual institutions, for generating data useful to the system and for accountability; and the notion that the schools themselves have a major collaborative part to play in the process is acknowledged.

Education in Ireland in the decade of the nineties can be characterised as a period of intense activity culminating in the Education Act of December 1998 which provided a legislative basis for the actions of the Minister for Education

and Science. As stated at the outset, until then the system had operated on the basis of tradition and Ministerial directive regularly expressed in terms of Departmental circular - there was no education act governing the system as a whole. Then at the dawn of the new millennium, and in the light of rapidly change and growing complexity in all spheres of government, a consensus had emerged that saw the introduction of an education act as a vital underpinning of further development. Total expenditure on education had grown dramatically in the decade too, adding to the urgency of the issue - in 1990 it stood at £1 349m, but by 1999 it reached no less than £2 815m (Department of Education and Science, 2000b). And in respect of primary education, total expenditure reached £512m in 1990, but by 1999 had grown to £936m. In these circumstances, and particularly so in the light of the growing interest abroad in securing best value for investment in education (especially so in England, as witnessed to by the establishment of Ofsted in 1993), it became inevitable that an examination of education policy in Ireland would follow; and the focus on evaluation that arose in the process would not be lost on Department of Education and Science policy makers and the senior inspectorate.

In the following paragraphs we consider a series of milestones throughout the decade that have underpinned the education debate and have served to shape Department of Education and Science policy in respect of primary school evaluation of schools in the closing years of the millennium. For us they contextualise the operation of whole school inspection at the time of the study and point to the inevitability of a growing importance attaching to the process.

### **The OECD Review 1991**

In 1991 a review Ireland's education policy in Ireland was published by the OECD (OECD, 1991). While acknowledging the significant progress that had been achieved in the previous thirty years, it highlighted several issues and problems, including the consequences of rapid social and economic change. Constraints weighing on the system were outlined, and particular reference was made to the limitations on its functioning imposed by its centralized nature and structural complexity. In stark terms the examiners highlighted a lack of

sophisticated machinery for providing the Minister with comprehensive and authoritative information and advice. Further, they asserted that the Department was over-stretched simply to administer the education system and that it was 'neither conditioned nor appropriately equipped to advise systematically on policy' (OECD, 1991: 39). It appeared to the examiners that the Minister had no obvious body or agency to generate discussion available to him and hence a more calculated use should be made of the inspectorate 'as a source of innovative ideas and an engine of change' (OECD, 1991: 41). To them it seemed that the inspectorate was underused and almost deliberately so:

*The inspectorate has been used occasionally and haphazardly as a source of intelligence but that is not seen as one of its regular functions. It is almost as though there has been an in-built resistance to creating any permanent machinery for facilitating the policy-making process.*

(OECD, 1991: 40)

Identifying the inspectorate 'as a major potential resource' for change if freed from some of its current tasks, they acknowledged the views of critics of whole school inspection who suggested that the School Reports (following whole school inspection) were too subjective in nature. They themselves were in no doubt that the Reports were of value (they did not offer any basis for this), but they were 'not a substitute for a sophisticated continuing review of what is happening inside the entire education system' (OECD, 1991: 44). In their estimation there was a need for a rethinking of the role and tasks of the inspectorate and a consequent shedding of certain existing duties. Specifically, they proposed that consideration should be given to the establishment of an inspectorate with quasi-autonomous status designed both to evaluate and support the performance of individual schools and to report to the Minister (OECD, 1991: 44). As to whether the primary inspectorate was up to the task the examiners were in no doubt, asserting that 'collectively they constitute a formidable body of professional expertise' and that teachers held them 'in evident respect not too far removed from deference' (OECD, 1991: 43). Hence,

there should be a 'rethinking' of the role of the inspectorate leading to a reduction of the multiplicity of tasks assigned it and, in consequence, a greater concentration on evaluating school performance and reporting to the Minister. In all of this the OECD could be seen to re-echo the concerns of the Department of the Public service in their report on the inspectorate ten years before when they said that 'the Primary Inspectorate should be a leading contributor to the growth of public knowledge on education rather than be a reactor to media and interest group pressure' (Department of the Public Service, 1981: 47). Clearly little had changed since then.

### **The Government Green Paper 1992**

In June 1992 the Government issued a Green Paper as a preliminary discussion document before the production of a White Paper which would set out the general parameters of an Education Bill to follow (Government of Ireland, 1992). In the foreword the Minister expressed the hope that the proposals for radical reform contained therein would serve to initiate a wide national debate among all those who had a commitment to quality in education. Echoing concerns expressed by the OECD in the previous year, he asserted that an adequate system of quality assurance was lacking and that policy-making was hampered by a lack of adequate quantitative data on educational attainment, particularly in respect of the primary school years. Moreover, the system as a whole lacked openness and parents were largely excluded (ibid. p.4). Accordingly, he proposed 'six key aims' for the system, the fifth and six of which are of particular interest in the context of this study viz.,

5. To create a system of effective quality assurance
6. To ensure greater openness and accountability throughout the system and maximize parent involvement and choice.

(Government of Ireland, 1992:5)

Moreover, if the best use were to be made of education resources it would be necessary to devolve decision-making and responsibility, thereby creating a

new dimension of autonomy for schools. The individual school should become a self-reliant institution, it should manage its own affairs and 'only matters which cannot be administered effectively at that level should be done elsewhere' (Government of Ireland, 1992: 17). In the first instance the Boards of Management at individual school level should be responsible for the quality of education in their school and the evaluation of individual teachers should become the duty of school headteacher (Government of Ireland, 1992:19). As a consequence, the responsibility for day to day administration would be shifted to the individual school and the Department of Education and Science would be free to concentrate on what it saw was its main roles, viz:

- Formulating strategic policy
- Assuring quality throughout the system
- Allocating budgetary resources

Following from this the inspectorate, constituted on a statutory basis, would have a new role. Freed from 'certain tasks', it would withdraw from the detailed activities of schools and its main responsibilities would be to evaluate schools generally, to disseminate good practice and to contribute to the formulation of policy by reference to ensuring and maintaining quality. Inspection 'would be "whole school" inspection, using a team approach', it would relate to 'overall school performance' and individual teacher inspection would arise only at the request of a board of management 'in cases of particular difficulty' (Government of Ireland, 1992: 174).

And so we see the Department of Education and Science setting the scene to follow international trends: administrative responsibility would be devolved and the individual school would become the basic unit of what was now acknowledged to be the vitally important process of wide-ranging evaluation.

## **The National Education Convention 1993**

The National Education Convention which took place in Dublin Castle from 11<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> October 1993 has been described as ‘an unprecedented, democratic event in the history of Irish education’ (The Convention Secretariat, 1994:1) Representatives from a total of forty-two bodies ranging from the Department of Education, teacher unions and social partners, came together to engage in a process of sustained and structured discussion on the key issues of education policy at every level in the State. In the introduction to the Report of the Convention it was suggested rather proudly that ‘over the nine days there was a remarkable gestation of ideas, refining of ideas, analyzing of ideas, challenging of ideas. Ideas were on the move’.

In respect of the new role envisaged for the inspectorate, the Secretariat, composed of ten eminent academics from within and without the State, reported a consensus view to the effect that the proposed distancing of inspectors from individual schools was inappropriate in that it brought with it an inevitable diminution of their advisory role (The Convention Secretariat, 1994: 63).

The inspectorate is held in high regard by these groups (*i.e. the forty-two bodies referred to above*); they appreciate the inspectors’ role in the system, have high expectations of their contribution in supporting schools and the teachers in their work, and are apprehensive of the implications of their withdrawal from their traditional contact with schools.

(The Convention Secretariat, 1994: 63)

Consequently, the Secretariat remarked that the proposed withdrawal from close contact with the schools raised ‘fundamental questions’ and hence the proposed withdrawal should be gradual in nature (The Convention Secretariat, 1994: 64).

The views expressed by both management and teachers at the Convention are important in that they provide a useful insight into the value of the inspectors’

work in schools as perceived by most of the main stakeholders. One cannot of course infer from this that the high approval rating referred to whole school inspection exclusively because the inspector also pays incidental visits on a random basis which are related only indirectly to the more formal operation. But, to say the least, it is reasonable to suggest whole school inspection is included. That this high level of satisfaction was the position of the INTO (the teachers' union) is certain, a fact attested to in correspondence I have examined between the union and the Department of Education and Science in 1996 (Carr, 1996).

### **Government White Paper 1995**

Early in 1995 the Government issued a White Paper as a necessary preliminary step towards the drafting of an education bill (Department of Education, 1995). Affirming the State's desire to achieve 'economic prosperity, social well being and a good quality of life within a democratically structured society', five educational principles were outlined on which the education act should be grounded: pluralism, equality, partnership, quality and accountability. Two of these, quality and accountability, are of particular relevance in the context of whole school inspection. In respect of quality, it was proposed that the State should develop 'rigorous procedures for the evaluation of educational effectiveness and outcomes, with due regard for the legitimate autonomy of individual institutions'. As regards accountability, it was asserted that 'appropriate processes must be operated at various levels, to evaluate the effectiveness of educational policy, provision and outcomes'. It was made clear that such 'processes' should cover the duty of accountability owed to the schools' clients (students, parents and wider community) and the national authorities (Department of Education and Science, 1995: 8). To that end it was suggested that the State should ensure that effective systems were in place for evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency with which limited resources were used.

In considering how best to meet these proposed obligations the Paper proposed that the inspectorate should be organized into two tiers, a Central Inspectorate

and a Regional Inspectorate in keeping with a new national administrative structure of Regional Boards, in broad outline corresponding with LEA's in England. The former would play a key role in contributing to the formulation and development of national education policy as well as attempting to devise benchmark data against schools could be measured, while the latter's duties would be centred on carrying out in-depth inspections on a range of schools 'with a whole school focus' on a regular, cyclical basis (Department of Education, 1995: 187).

The operations of the Regional Inspectorate were spelt out in some detail. Inspectors would visit classrooms and 'consider' the work of individual teachers in the support of self-evaluation practices to be promoted in the schools. A report would follow focused on the whole school and strengths and weaknesses would be identified within each school. Where a school appeared to be experiencing a particular difficulty the Board of Management would be expected to produce an plan to deal with the problem and the local inspector (i.e. a member of the Regional Inspectorate) would be on hand to make follow-up visits of a supportive nature.

### **The Education Act 1998**

In December 1998 the Education Act was passed into law with a time schedule that would see all of its provisions in force by December 2000. By then I had completed the major part of the fieldwork and the perceptions I recorded generally refer to the period before enactment. For this reason I do not dwell on the Act but in the interests of completeness some of the more salient provisions are offered here. The notion of regionalisation was dropped and with it the intention to have a two-tier inspectorate; it remains one undivided body. For the first time the inspectorate was placed on a statutory basis and its role and functions were defined, thereby according it a sound and unquestioned standing in the education community. In broad outline its functions would be as obtained before: in addition to advising the Minister inspectors would 'evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the provision of education in the State'; also they would 'visit recognised schools....(and) ....evaluate the organisation and

operation of those schools....including the quality of teaching.... (and) report to the Minister....(and)....support and advise schools, centres for education and teachers on matters relating to the provision of education' ( Government of Ireland, 1998: Section 13). Whole school inspection/evaluation was not mentioned specifically but now for the first time there would be a statutory basis for a version of that operation that might evolve. At this very time planners in the Department of Education and Science are working on a revised version of the whole school inspection operation which forms the focus of this study. Having secured a framework into which we may fit the operation, we now turn to the examination of whole school inspection as seen from the perspective of teachers and inspectors in three schools during the 1998-1999 school year.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Design, Methodology and Implementation**

School inspection can be designated a complex social process consisting of a great many interactions between inspectors, teachers and others. Its object is to 'know' the school so that good may follow. However, a central consideration contained in this apparently innocuous and uncontentious statement of mine is the obdurate nature of truth, something that has engaged the attentions of epistemologists for generations and which means that ultimately inspection of schools will always prove problematic and its judgements regularly contested. In this respect Stenhouse speaks of the tentative and personal character of all knowledge (quoted in Hammersley, 1993: 222), he suggests that the determination of objectivity is impossible and hence we all create our own reality. Similarly, to Hammersley all knowledge is a construction and we have no direct knowledge of the world' (Hammersley, 1993: 215), and Eisner agrees, seeing teaching 'at its best is an art and education evaluation a form of connoisseurship that profitably employs the approach of critics of the arts when they appraise' (Eisner, 1985:1). Arguably, and in opposition to the positivist stance, there is no world 'out there' and our knowledge is both socially and personally constructed and our understandings inevitably complete. Instead, we inhabit a world of multiple constructed realities and our research procedures should reflect this position. For the purposes of this study what this means is that the truths which whole school inspection attempts to discover should not be seen to exist 'out there' waiting to be discovered by the shrewd evaluator. Rather, it is nearer to the truth, and hence more productive, to view whole school inspection as an interactive process involving inspector and teachers, and ultimately leading to consensual constructions. If this is so, then by the same token it seems appropriate to suggest that a research study that has as its

central focus the perspectives of a variety of interacting players should reflect this position. Accordingly, a research strategy that was fundamentally qualitative seemed to hold out the greatest promise in addressing the research questions I had posed. That is, I would follow a naturalistic rather than positivist approach. Only by adopting such an approach could I go hope to gain the 'insider's' view and examine it in depth sufficient to expose the internal dynamics that operate during whole school inspection. But I determined that the approach would not be entirely qualitative and an attempt would also be made to quantify when quantification of response would appear to add a measure of credibility to conclusions. And by no means would this be unique in that nowadays the complementary nature of the qualitative and quantitative paradigms is recognised and promoted in a rapprochement between both traditions (Sammons and Reynolds, 1997: 129; Hopkins and Bollington, 1989: 61-62, 76).

In accordance with these guiding principles I resolved to follow an adapted version of the case study mode and focus my attention on three primary schools that were due for whole school inspection in the school year 1998-1999. 'Case study' is not a term for a standard methodological package but, instead, stands for a methodology that is eclectic - that is, it employs a variety of techniques for collecting evidence (Nisbet and Watt, 1984: 74; Adelman *et al*, 1984: 94). These techniques share a commonality with a wider tradition of sociological and anthropological fieldwork and include observation, interviews and the examination of documents or records of children's work (Bassegy, M, 1984: 119). The researcher uses a holistic framework, s/he accepts as given the complex scene in which s/he is placed and makes no attempt to manipulate, control or eliminate. Eschewing any claim that every aspect of the totality is accounted for, s/he gradually reduces the breadth of the enquiry by means of a progressive focusing to give a more concentrated attention to emerging issues. Finally s/he provides an analysis that is well set to avoid the reductionism inherent in much research that follows a positivist approach - such as that inherent in the survey, for example, which by its very nature with its preordained agenda often fails (Nisbet and Watt, 1984: 76).

But, equally, it is important to recognise that case study has a number of weaknesses. The evaluator who undertakes a case study has to be selective and his selectivity is not open to the checks and balances of systematic enquiries. For example, the results cannot be represented as generalisable thereby enabling a measure of predication (unlike the survey) except perhaps by means of an exercise in intuition that suggests that 'this case' is similar to 'that case'. Moreover, it is impossible to gauge how the observer's personal bias, has affected the responses of participants in a direct fashion during interview, for example, or indirectly by the observation of the interaction in the classroom.

To sum up, relatability is the methodological stance of the case study researcher and the merit of the study to hand will lie not in the extent to which it can be generalised but in the extent in which the audience will be enabled to relate it to their own framework of understandings. (In Chapter 1 'the audience' was defined as all those interested in promoting children's development in schools, and also evaluation policy planners in the Department of Education and Science). The final judgement will be vested in the person identifying the relationship; ultimately all this study can achieve is a reconstruction of understanding that makes possible a judgement of transferability to other sites (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 217). Quite simply, as Walker (1980) puts it:

It is the reader who has to ask, what is there in this study that I can apply to my own situation, and what clearly does not apply?

(Quoted in Wilcox, 1992: 49)

### **The semi-structured interview**

Given that the focus of this study, whole school inspection, constitutes a complex, multi-layered social situation, and having regard for the rich potential of the naturalistic paradigm to pick up vital (and unanticipated) pieces of information that hold the key to a situation, I chose the semi-structured interview as the primary data collection device. Having regard for the

constraints of time with which I am constantly confronted, I was initially disposed towards choosing the questionnaire as the primary research tool; it would have been considerably more convenient to have done so. However, the experience gained at pilot stage in 1997 demonstrated that the questionnaire would be unlikely to have the necessary flexibility to allow for a systematic probing of deep-seated sensibilities to enable hypothesisation; quite simply, its inflexibility characterised by the following of a predetermined design would tell against it. The same argument weighed against the employment of the structured interview, whereas the third type, the unstructured version, is claimed to demand a level of skill that renders it an inappropriate tool in the hands of the uninitiated and hence I decided against it (Wragg, 1984: 184-185). Thus it seemed that the semi-structured interview held the greatest promise, and I resolved to proceed inductively in the manner of the grounded theorist, all the time attempting to follow Glaser's counsel that data should not be contaminated by *a priori* conceptualisations and understandings (Scott and Usher, 1996: 78). But it was equally clear that there had to be some measure of balance if the central questions of the research were not to be neglected. Hence I resolved that though interviewees would be allowed a relatively free rein and encouraged to set their own pace in accordance with the naturalistic stance informing the research, certain limits would need to be imposed. I envisaged this stratagem would serve both to discourage excessive rambling and needless anecdote, and also ensure that the interviewee would stay on task in terms of my research objectives. Granted perhaps that this would constitute a threat to the validity of the study in that some - an undefined number - of the emerging themes and emphases could be said to be mine and not those of the respondents, I conjectured that this was a risk that had to be taken. After all, I reasoned, no research tool is devoid of limitations or shortcomings - for example, some explanatory accounts given during interview may constitute no more than post-hoc rationalisations (Scott and Usher, 1996: 205). But on balance this seemed to be the wisest approach if the research questions were to be addressed in a manner that would facilitate analysis leading to a useful illumination of the matter on hand. Accordingly, I would allow themes, patterns and categories emerge as naturally as possible from the raw data (i.e. the interview evidence),

but also I would endeavour to ensure that some comment on the questions central to the research would be offered. Central to all of this would be a determination to *progressively focus* on a pattern of recurring concerns with successive interviewees. In this way there would be a moving back and forth between the analysis of raw data and its recasting in the form of the development of tentative analyses to lead on to more abstract levels of synthesis (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn: 414). As we shall see presently, in broad outline this is what happened ultimately.

### **Selection of research sites**

In accordance with the naturalistic principle of endeavouring to see the phenomena in their natural state insofar as that is possible, I resolved to base the research in three schools in which I was not known nor to which I might be assigned as inspector at some future date. By doing so I calculated that this would facilitate the necessary openness between interviewer and interviewee that is central to the requirements of case study. Accordingly, I decided to enlist the support of three inspector colleagues who work in three counties adjoining that in which I live and work.

In May 1998 I arranged short meetings lasting no more than ten minutes with each inspector. I explained that I wished to examine the process of whole school inspection as part of my doctoral studies and respectfully sought their cooperation in the study. I assured each colleague of confidentiality and advised that the participating teachers equally would be accorded the same standards. In effect this would mean that neither the names of inspectors nor the schools would be divulged to anybody without the express permission of participants. I advised each inspector that if he (coincidentally all were male) were to agree to facilitate the study he should nominate one school from his whole school inspection list of the following school year i.e. September 1998 to June 1999. The selection of the participating school would be his and the only proviso in this respect was that he should choose a school in which all the permanent staff would be present for the duration of the school year. This would ensure that I would engage with trained teachers only rather than substitutes (who in the

circumstances of teacher shortages at the time were likely to be untrained and not have an informed interest in whole school inspection). Further, though not necessarily so, I asked that each inspector would select schools whose staffs were relatively experienced and thus would have a certain maturity of view about inspection and in particular whole school inspection. In other words I was suggesting he should arrange that I would deal only with those who were likely to have developed a view on whole school inspection based on some reflection over a period of years. A further condition would be that the whole school inspection should take place in the period November 1998 to January 1999, if at all possible, so that I could return to the school at least a full six months later in order to discuss the impact of the whole school inspection. There would be little point in returning at an earlier time if conceivably I wished to record the emergence of appreciable change. Moreover, given that my proposed deadline for completion of the fieldwork was September 1999, the whole school inspection had to take place sometime within that designated period.

I added that at some stage early in the school year, probably in September 1998, I would visit each school. I would then explain the nature of the project - that it had as its object the examination of perceptions of all the key participants, both teachers and inspector, in respect of the process and impact of the forthcoming whole school inspection - and state that in practice this would require participants to speak with me on an individual basis for about half an hour or so soon after the inspection, and again approximately six months or so following this. I would impress upon them that full confidentiality would be guaranteed so that in effect neither inspector nor teacher would know at any stage what had been the opinion of the other. By the same token, no inspector or teacher would be informed of the views expressed by individual colleagues unless permission were granted at some future stage.

Each inspector agreed without hesitation to support the project if the co-operation of the schools could be secured. Furthermore, one enthusiastic colleague cautioned that a certain economy in the delivery of detail should characterise my initial briefing of teachers lest, forewarned, they might choose

to act in a manner different from their norm and thereby skew results (the Hawthorne effect). This I had already foreseen and for the same reason I had ensured that my meeting with inspectors would be brief!

As stated in Chapter 1, a primary school undergoes whole school inspection once every six years which means in effect that the inspector assigned to the district aims to conduct a whole school inspection of one-sixth of his/her schools each year. In practice, each inspector selects approximately ten schools in September 1998 and, in accordance with the agreement with the teachers union (see p. 25), advises each school before the end of the month that a whole school inspection will take place some time during that school year. Moreover, there is a loose convention that provides for the nominated schools to opt for the inspection to take place either in the period before or after Christmas. Having regard for this consideration and allowing for the fact that I sought schools staffed largely by experienced teachers who insofar as could be determined were not likely to be absent for an extended period of time during the school year, the element of discretion allowed each inspector in the selection of the research school turned out to be quite limited. In fact one colleague almost had no choice in that in some of his ten listed schools at least one teacher was due to be absent on maternity leave. Consequently this raised the strong possibility of an untrained substitute as replacement and, in fact, eventually he had to nominate a school in which there were two teachers out of a total eight who had no more than four years teaching experience. Further, this school was located in my own county but, happily, nearly thirty miles from my central area of operations, and I was unknown to the staff. In the final analysis the limitation of choice experienced by the inspectors can in fact be considered fortunate in that it reduced their leeway to select schools with which they might have had a rather special and perhaps unrepresentative relationship. In this the credibility of the study was increased, though it may again be appropriate to add that the research makes no claim for their representativeness of the three schools in a statistical sense. Inevitably, to claim representativeness would render the study prone to a justified measure of criticism from the research community. As outlined above, the value of the research must be seen in its

transferability, as argued by Lincoln and Guba (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 124; Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 224) and it is for those who read it to take their own meanings from the evidence and analysis provided.

In September 1998 each inspector advised the Principals of the selected schools by telephone that a whole school inspection would be conducted by him (alone) during that school year, and it was agreed that it would take place probably some time in the period November to Christmas. He added that a colleague would visit in the near future to invite them to participate in a personal research study.

### **Preliminary meetings with the schools**

The three schools chosen I shall term C, G and M and, having made a telephone appointment with the Principal, I visited each on separate days between 15<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of October 1998. I met the headteachers of each school initially and outlined in general terms the nature of the study. I endeavoured to stress the fact that little or no research had been conducted in the area of inspection in the Republic of Ireland and thus it was timely to do so. Each Principal expressed a willingness to cooperate if their staffs were happy to do so. A meeting of staffs was convened in each school and over a period of approximately one-hour I outlined to teachers the details of the study. I placed particular emphasis on the primary aim of the study to examine the process and impact of whole school inspection from the perspective of all the key players. Also, I again I referred to the fact that inspection in Ireland had been the subject of little or no examination and thus the research had the potential of being important to a variety of people in the education community. In particular I stressed that the project would entail little or no extra work on their part - in effect all I was asking them to do was to agree to two undemanding interviews, one soon after the whole school inspection had been completed and another approximately six months later.

In response to questions of a detailed nature I explained that the central methodological features of the study would be as follows:

- I would interview each teacher individually soon after the completion of the whole school inspection had been completed and attempt thereby to elicit their reactions to the exercise in all its manifestations. I would do so while the experience was still fresh in their memories, but if they were to maintain a diary of the whole school inspection in which they recorded various thoughts, reactions and critical events as they happened then the process would be considerably enhanced. These notes would have the potential to serve as a valuable aide-memoire and a source of profitable insight in the days following the inspection and in the lead up to the interview. Moreover, they might also serve to pinpoint for them the main areas of perspective that might be discussed during the interview. I myself would have to hand a short list of probes to serve as a personal kind of aide-memoire to ensure that the interview had some sense of direction and discipline, but it was to be understood these would be of secondary importance to what they themselves wished to discuss, and indeed might not be used at all. (Happily, it transpired that I was not asked to supply the list, for to do so would have run the risk of predisposing teachers to making a deliberate preparation for the interviews. Potentially this could have led to a loss of spontaneity and a consequent dilution in the quality of response.)
- I hoped to use a very small tape machine no bigger than one's hand to record their responses. This would enable me capture accurately all they might say and ultimately would prove less of a distraction and less threatening than a jotting down exercise - this I had learned at pilot phase a year earlier. In addition, it would mean that in practice I would not be forced to engage in an almost futile task of attempting to distinguish potentially important responses from those that seem less so. The illuminative potential of data often only can be gauged at a later time when it is juxtaposed with other evidence and hence it is prudent to secure as much evidence as possible for later analysis.

- I would interview each teacher again at the beginning of the next school year in an effort to ascertain how they felt about whole school inspection in the light of mature reflection. At that time in particular I would be interested in attempting to gauge what impact the exercise had had insofar as they perceived it.
- Teachers and inspectors, including the most senior members of the inspectorate, would be interviewed and complete confidence would be assured. In effect this would mean that neither teachers nor inspectors would be party to what was said by others during the various interviews. Further, when the study was written up only code names would be used when referring to participants or schools so that the possibility of identifying who expressed a particular opinion, and in what situation, would be extremely difficult if not impossible to ascertain. Accordingly, they could be confident that a deliberate and conscientious effort would be made to prevent disclosure of identity so that they might feel free to speak their minds and certainly not feel inhibited in the expression of criticism. Also, the Chief and Deputy Chief Inspector had been briefed on the study and both had accepted these conditions without question.

The response of all teachers in the three schools was positive both in respect of the study in general and with regard to the prospect of being recorded on tape. Indeed many expressed no little enthusiasm for the project and particularly so on the basis of a promise that I would return to the schools in due course when the study was complete so that I might share the findings with them.

### **The interviews begin and the schools described**

The whole school inspection was completed by the end of November 1998 in schools C and G and, on being informed of this by the inspector, I visited each

school and conducted the interviews in the first fortnight of December. The inspector responsible for school M took ill at some point in December and in effect this meant that the whole school inspection there extended over three months. In fact it was not completed until the end of February 1999 and hence it was not possible for me to conduct the interviews until the second week in March. In this case therefore staff memories of the inspection were unlikely to be as sharp as in the other two schools, but on the whole this probably made little difference except for those who were inspected at the beginning of December.

Each school served a different population, as will be seen, ranging from a settled rural community to inner city. Two of the schools were located about fifty miles from my base, in counties Limerick and Tipperary and the third was situated approximately nearly thirty miles away in County Cork. I was a stranger to all but two of the twenty teachers interviewed - it transpired that I had made the acquaintance of two over twenty years ago but had not seen them since - and, accordingly, it would be less likely that respondents would prove reticent in outlining their perceptions and offering criticism of inspection.

Whole school inspection was completed in School G first of all and accordingly it was here that I began the interviewing process. The school is situated in a small village in County Tipperary and at the time had an enrolment of eighty-one pupils and a staff of four teachers whose teaching experience ranged from fifteen to thirty-six years. One of these did not have charge of a class but served as a learning support teacher and was shared with two other rural schools. Nevertheless, her contribution to the operation of the school would (and did) form part of the inspector's remit when undertaking the whole school inspection. Initially I visited each classroom and spoke with the teacher. Also, and at the invitation of the teacher, I engaged with their classes in a ten-minute question and answer session on different aspects of the curriculum. The visits were useful in that they afforded a view of the challenge that had confronted the teacher and inspector during the inspection.

Interviews with the four teachers took place in the staff room and lasted approximately forty minutes on average. While I interviewed one teacher another took responsibility for her class (all teachers were female) who were assigned some written work. I interpreted the willingness of teachers to facilitate me in this way as an indication of the level of seriousness with which they viewed the study and as a desire to enable the collection of valid evidence. Further, it lent some credence to an intuition formed during interviewing that every teacher was prepared to speak frankly and without affectation when outlining her perspective on whole school inspection.

School C is located in a small town and has an enrolment of approximately 200 and a staff of eight teachers, both male and female. Three teachers had qualified in the middle or early 1990's and had not experienced whole school inspection before. The rest had taught for a period that ranged from seventeen to thirty-two years and had experience of whole school inspection on two to four previous occasions. Here interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes on average and were held in the headteacher's office. Again colleagues supervised the interviewee's class during interview.

School M, a city institution, is situated in an area of social and economic disadvantage. There was an enrolment of 225 and a staff of twelve female teachers and one male, the headteacher. I interviewed seven during the first phase and eight when I returned in the following school year (one had been engaged in supervisory duties when I first came to interview but desired to make a contribution when I returned for the second session in October 1999). Those I did not interview had been engaged in out of school or supervisory activities and hence were not available to me. However, the others assured me they had consulted with their absent colleagues and were in a position to reflect their views accurately. In this school a combination of group and individual interview was chosen at the suggestion of school staffs. All five infant teachers were free from class contact in the afternoon and four elected to speak with me then as a group that in broad terms represented all teachers of the youngest children; the absent fifth colleague joined them in October, as explained above.

I interviewed four other teachers on an individual basis: the headteacher (who in contrast with the two others did not have direct responsibility for a class) and three class teachers who had charge of Third Standard (age eight), Sixth Standard (age twelve) and the Special Class (SEN) teacher. I thus had access to a useful cross-section of teacher opinion throughout the school.

### **The process of interview**

As stated above, in effect I did not know any of the teachers. This was fortuitous in that therefore friendships would not be threatened, and consequently the possibility of securing a greater level of frankness was increased. If the interviewee is to provide honest responses s/he must feel comfortable with the interviewer. Appearance and demeanour provide a profitable basis for the establishment of an appropriate relationship and rapport, and hence I endeavoured to be friendly, relaxed and pleasant. I hoped it would be clear that I had a genuine interest in the welfare of the teacher interviewees in particular and to this end I engaged each one with talk of a rather trivial nature at the beginning in order to establish an easy relationship.

As a general rule, at the beginning of each interview - whether with teachers or the three inspectors who conducted the whole school inspections - I briefly explained once more the objects of the study and informed interviewees they were free to discourse on whatever theme they wished insofar as it had a bearing on whole school inspection. Again I reminded them that their identity would not be disclosed without their permission. However, I also interviewed individually the four members of the senior inspectorate who guided whole school inspection and its development at the time, that is the Chief Inspector, the Deputy Chief Inspector and two of the four primary-sector Assistant Chief Inspectors. Clearly it would be almost impossible to cloak their identity in the text and at the same time show that the particular comment had come from an influential member of management whose viewpoint therefore should be seen as significant. As a compromise I suggested to each of the six that I would guard against damage to their reputations, and if what might be termed an indelicate utterance were to be made, then I would be prepared to disregard the

comment at their express request. The four professed this to be satisfactory and in fact all asserted they were prepared to stand by whatever they would say. And again none had any objection to the use of the tape recorder. In fact, ultimately no interviewee requested a withdrawal of any response and it is likely that my preparedness to do so contributed to a useful openness on their part. Further, it did occur to me that I might adopt the practice of some researchers and offer a transcript of interviews in a further effort to encourage a free expression of opinion. However, on balance I judged it better not to do so because, in accordance with the high levels of caution and discretion exercised by civil servants in Ireland and indeed in most administrations, it might lead to a retraction of critical but privately-held opinions.

### **The interview schedules**

The interview schedules were devised to elicit *inter alia* interviewees' perspectives in respect of a core set of themes and by resorting to a series of *probes* I encouraged respondents to elaborate, clarify and further develop their position (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989: 269, 409). Conscious of the mood and sensitivities of interviewees, and noting in particular that not all teachers had views on many elements of whole school inspection (which perhaps in itself is indicative of a low level of impact), I adopted a general policy of not pursuing each thematic area. That is, I saw little validity in pressing home an eliciting of reactions to particular probes when it appeared they could be categorised as little more than responses offered on impulse and unlikely to be based on prior deliberation. The set of core themes and probes are presented in Appendix 1 to which the reader is now referred.

### **Some procedural details**

The tiny but powerful, voice-activated tape recorder was placed on a nearby table. Approaching the interview as if it were a conversation with a friend, I desisted from note-taking for the reasons outlined earlier. Instead, immediately on completion of the interview I embarked on a preliminary process of note writing. Essentially this was an attempt to identify the more salient themes as they emerged and to interpret them in the light of current information. The

procedure generated a variety of hunches to be followed up with succeeding interviewees and alerted me to the rich potential of a progressive focus on a particular topic.

The interviewing took place in two phases:

- *Phase 1*: soon after completion of the whole school inspection.
- *Phase 2*: six to nine months later - in the case of school C in September 1999, and in October 1999 in respect of schools G and M.

The interviews in each of the three schools took place over the period of one day. On completion of interviews in the first school, School G, and before proceeding to the next school, School C, I expanded on the fieldnotes as outlined above and listened to the interview tapes. This facilitated the process of progressive focusing and helped in the identification of new and possibly rich spurs to discussion that might usefully be raised in the next school. Ideally the interviews should have been transcribed at this time - this would have allowed a more rigorous examination of evidence and a more profitable data analysis likely to enrich the succeeding interviews. Unfortunately, time constraints arising from work pressures rendered this impossible.

When interviewing was complete in the third school I resisted a temptation to engage clerical assistance and deliberately undertook the task of transcribing each interview personally on a word processor. This meant that I developed a greater familiarity with the data as I typed, and all the while I was subjecting it to a preliminary analysis that ultimately proved profitable in the foreshadowing of tentative themes and hypotheses.

Eventually a total of approximately 60 000 words were entered on my database, comprising the content of interviews with twenty-seven persons in all and presented in a series of pages with generous margins to facilitate the insertion thereon of 'labels' and tentative interpretations.

## **The analytic process**

In their celebrated work on qualitative analysis Miles and Huberman declared that, in contrast with quantitative research, there are few agreed or procedures for the analysis of qualitative data (Hopkins and Bollington, 1989: 62, 67). To me it seemed clear that the same could be said of qualitative evaluation such as mine, and especially so as it was conducted in an atmosphere of severe time constraint. But Miles and Huberman (1984), offered a general framework and I resolved to adopt an analytic process that might be characterised as a modest adaptation of their 'tactics' for generating 'valid, repeatable, right' meanings and guidelines; and I supplemented this by drawing from McMillan and Schumacher's classic on research in education, together with a number of other publications (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989: 414-421; Strauss and Corbin, 1994: 273-285; Scott and Usher, 1996: 78; Nias, 1989: 154-165; The Open University E835 Study Guide, 1996: 61). My strategy would not embrace the wealth of categories and detail outlined in the various volumes, but it might be seen as a useful working model for the busy inspector/teacher researcher.

In broad outline the analysis of data embraced the following steps (adapted from McMillan and Schumacher, 1989, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn: 417- 419; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Huberman and Miles, 1994).

- Reading through all the evidence (derived in most part from interviews and School Reports) in a process of 'making sense' and with the aim of securing a general picture.
- Returning to each interview and School Report and beginning a process of scanning for possible categories, themes and patterns. Themes labelled on margins, short interpretations inserted (McMillan and Schumacher, 1989, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn: 418; Miles and Huberman, 1984) and the direct speech underpinning each theme compiled into separate folders by means of word processor. Eventually I ended up with no less than twenty-eight folders on a database (and in hard copy too in order to facilitate further analysis and

note-taking). In practical terms this meant, for example that if I wished to access the direct speech of any particular interviewee underpinning, say, such themes as stress, cosy relationships, power relations etc, all I had to do was refer to the folder of that name, examine the direct quotation contained therein and attributed to the particular respondent, and cut and paste to main document as required. (The full list of themes is provided in Appendix 3.)

- Constructing a 'data display' (after McMillan and Schumacher, 1989, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn: 419), that is my own version of the flow chart, in order to provide a coherence between the different elements together with the sense of story favoured in the Open University guidelines on dissertation writing (David Scott to EdD students, February 2000).
- Revisiting text and engaging in further categorisation with particular regard for constant comparison; noting similarities and differences; ordering the categories, that is enlarging them and combining those that allow it because of a similarity in meaning; creating new versions that 'go together in meaning'; devising miscellaneous category for data which does not fit any defined category (but yet appears potentially illuminating, though mentioned perhaps by only one or two interviewees).
- Attempting at each stage to assess data trustworthiness, looking for negative evidence and having particular regard for triangulation.

The results of all of this are presented in the coming pages and it is to these we now turn.

## CHAPTER 6

### Presentation and Analysis of Evidence

I submit as a fundamental principle that, above all else, evaluations must have utility, that is they must be demonstrably useful to some person, some group or some institution. No longer is it tenable, indeed if it ever was, that those who conduct evaluations may propose a disinterested search for truth as their *raison d'être*. Evaluators must go much further than that, and especially so today when a questioning and educated public increasingly calls for the rendering of account from all those paid from the public purse. Essentially, evaluation must pivot on the information needs of those who need to take particular decisions in order to improve the current situation. Earlier we cited Beeby's definition of evaluation as the collecting of evidence which ultimately leads to a judgement that aids the process of decision-making (see p.42). In other words, the central task for the evaluator is to determine what information is needed and, leading on from this, how it may be gathered so that appropriate decisions may be taken. Inspection is not a neutral act and hence the inspector's evaluation of a school is always rooted in particular values and purposes that may or may not be explicit. Commenting on his experience of evaluation in the American system nearly thirty years ago, Ernest House's (1973) remarks are apposite:

Contrary to common belief, evaluation is not the ultimate arbiter, delivered from our objectivity and accepted as the final judgement. Evaluation is always derived from biased origins. When someone wants to defend something or to attack something, he often evaluates it. Evaluation is a motivated behaviour. Likewise, the way in which the results of an evaluation are accepted depends on whether they help

or hinder the person receiving them. Evaluation is an integral part of the political processes of our society.

(Quoted in Lawton, 1980: 109)

One can substitute whole school inspection for evaluation and the same principles hold true. Unless one takes a very cynical view of the efficiency of the Department of Education and Science and specifically its overall control of operations, one may assume that whole school inspection is conducted for a purpose. But what is this purpose that underlies the 'motivated behaviour' of inspectors? One can posit three possible answers: judgement as mere validation, that is the rendering of an account in respect of school performance for the purposes of control i.e. accountability; judgement as a basis for the development of schools; or a combination of both. In simple terms, whole school inspection can be characterised as a process of *proving, improving*, or a combination of both and the particular interpretation favoured by the various key players will prove critical to the successful operation of the exercise. To quote McBeath (1999):

If the purpose of evaluation is not clear and honest in respect of who it is for and who will benefit, it will be attended by confusion and mistrust.

(MacBeath, 1999:5)

In practical terms, what this means for whole school inspection is that all those involved in the process must have a clear and shared understanding of the purposes of the exercise and, ideally, must have reached a consensus on how most usefully the task may be carried out. This implies, to follow Deming's and Senge's counsel, they must see how whole school inspection relates to themselves thereby achieving the necessary 'system view' (Hinkley and Seddon, 96: 74; Morrison, 1998: 93-94; Senge, 1990: 3-16,139). Otherwise the vital ownership of the inspection's findings will be greatly at risk and their successful implementation in doubt. The crucial importance of taking ownership of the change process pivots on a fundamental tenet held by school

improvement researchers that development and lasting change ultimately must come from within. This underlines the desirability of the key players involved in whole school inspection sharing common purpose, but how can this happen if perhaps the purpose has not been adequately clarified? Is the resolution of the dilemma to be found in documents emanating from the Department of Education and Science? To these we now turn.

### **Purpose from official documentation**

The amendment of Rule 161 in 1976 to delete Section 8 ended the practice of reporting briefly on schools and ushered in the era of whole school inspection (Circular11/76). Henceforth inspections would be undertaken on a four-year cycle instead of two and a Report would issue containing 'an assessment of the work of the school as a whole'. It was specified that the report would have regard for environmental factors affecting the schools effectiveness and would 'deal' with 'the organisation and atmosphere of the school' as well as 'the general development of pupils and their progress in the various areas of the curriculum' (Circular12/76, Section 4.1). But nowhere was the purpose of the operation spelt out and one is obliged to turn to the outline of inspectors' functions *in general* to infer what might be the policy that formed the impulse to institute the new arrangements. The document saw inspectors having two functions, as follows:

- (a) to provide the Minister with the information and advice he may require on matters pertaining to individual schools and on educational matters in general;
  
- (b) to co-operate with management authorities and teachers in the work of the schools, especially by stimulating interest in curriculum content and methodology and by assisting teachers in need of guidance.

(Circular 12/76, Section 1.1)

Six years were to elapse before inspection again featured in an official document for public consumption. Circular 31/82 repeated verbatim both what was expressed in Circular 12/76 in respect of the principal functions of inspectors and the focus of whole school reporting, and in addition spelt out that a responsibility of the District Inspector was 'the assessment of the work of the teachers'. Further, the circular also dealt with 'incidental visits' which in practice formed part of the general visitations of inspectors and were not necessarily part of the whole school inspection process. These random visitations of schools were to be viewed as opportunities to become 'well acquainted with the work of individual teachers and of the school as a whole'. Their purpose was to afford the teacher 'assistance and advice', and 'to encourage innovation and to suggest suitable remedies for defects he/she may observe in teaching methods' (Circular 31/82, 3.1).

When one links this developmental dimension with the notion of assessment of the work of teachers and that of the school as a whole, it seems clear that official policy in respect of inspection in all its manifestations could be construed (at least at the time) as an attempt to bridge the accountability-development divide. The relative importance of either end of the spectrum was not spelt out, however, and inevitably this endorsed the continuing freedom of inspectors to interpret the main thrust of their attentions in an idiosyncratic fashion. ('They operate separately as individualists,' reported education consultant Dr Clive Hopes to the Department of Education and Science in 1991 (Hopes, 1991: 49). It is likely that this fuelled the concerns, suspicions and anxieties of many teachers unsure of the main purpose of a whole school inspection.

In the following year a further circular aimed at outlining procedures that would govern the conduct of whole school inspection was issued. Relying on the same pattern of words used in Circular 12/76, Circular 12/83 stated that whole school inspection 'containing an assessment of the organization and the work of the school as a whole' would take place at regular intervals of four years. Once again the reader is left to infer the purpose of this intervention. This time,

however, some detail is given with regard to the focus of the inspection in that it was stipulated that it would not be necessary 'to assess all aspects of the curriculum in all classes'. In this it would contrast with General Inspection of individual teachers, for example those on probation whose work in every area of the curriculum is inspected. Nevertheless, going on state that 'a comprehensive assessment of other aspects will *also* be made', it seems the Department expected that the inspection would be wide-ranging. This statement gives some significance of the level of rigour that was to be applied but again it fails to confirm what was perceived to be the policy underpinning the 'comprehensive assessment'. Presumably the perception was of a process that attempts to bridge the spectrum stretching from judgement for development at one pole to judgement for accountability at the other, as implied in Circular 31/82 would continue. Unfortunately once more this has to be inferred and, moreover, inspectors were given no indication of the relative importance of either pole. Consequently they were free to interpret this in their own way as hitherto. Inevitably, and particularly so given the time-limited nature of the operation as we show presently, this has meant that some see whole school inspection *primarily* as a process aimed at securing school development, whereas others reckon that the maintenance of accountability is its main purpose and 'a good thing'. (I define accountability as 'the rendering of an account to others so that they may make a judgement of the worth, quality or adequacy' of the performance - as in Robinson, 1994: 70). Addressing the issue proved doubly problematic at interview stage in that inspectors and teacher interviewees used the term 'accountability' in an often vague and incoherent manner, a fact also attested to by other researchers (Ouston *et al*, 1998: 112), and hence it was necessary to follow their counsel by treating the concept 'with considerable caution'. But, in this it appears that Ireland at the time was no different than elsewhere:

There are now multiple purposes, contested concepts and implausible accountability policies in most education systems. In practical and theoretical terms, the area is in a mess'.

(Ouston *et al*, 1998:112))

Since 1983 no further public documents governing whole school inspection have issued. With the imminent introduction of 'whole school evaluation' as the new initiative is titled (see Chapter 1), it is likely that the Irish research community will develop a growing interest in the operations of inspectors in the coming years. Among the obstacles they will encounter will be that of gaining easy access to Department of Education and Science papers on inspection simply because there is no set of source documents on the working of the inspectorate readily available. This was a matter adverted to in 1991 by an external consultant who was engaged by the Department of Education and Science to review the role and function of the inspectorate (at primary and post-primary level).

There was a plethora of working papers, but no single file readily available about the current state of the structure of the Department or the purpose of the inspectorate. This array was a serious impediment to understanding the structure and objectives of the inspectorate. Work being undertaken seems to be mostly on a day to day basis with no time for reflection about objectives.

(Hopes, 1991: 37)

The situation has not changed significantly since then and hence the most promising course for the researcher is to marry the sources cited above with interview data drawn from those who experience whole school inspection at first hand both as inspectors and teachers. In the following paragraphs we consider the evidence of these key players.

### **The inspectors' perspective on Department policy**

An examination of the literature on inspection demonstrates that the process pivots on two sets of claims: the first are those that relate to accountability and its associated notion of control, and the second concerns the effect of inspection on school development (Wilcox and Gray 96: 4). Bearing in mind the

potentially negative effects of failure to make one's purposes clear when undertaking an evaluation - confusion and mistrust will follow, as suggested MacBeath above - I first of all determined to question each interviewee on the topic. Responses could be then compared in a process of triangulation and conceivably the findings and their implications might have a critical bearing on how one should interpret the different perspectives on whole school inspection. Accordingly, I began by asking each interviewee what in his/her opinion was the policy of the Department of Education and Science in conducting whole school inspection. Leading on from this, and especially so with respect to some teachers who betrayed an understandable level of hesitation, I re-worded the question and asked what was the primary purpose of the operation insofar as they saw it. This question was often further developed by a further probing that sought to elicit an opinion with regard to whose interests were being served by it, or who were the main audience. The critic might regard the differences as potentially not significant and rather subtle but, in addition to providing for the possibility of a more elaborated response, they facilitated the creation of a desired congenial atmosphere that stimulated easy conversation.

Six of the seven inspectors responded with a level of hesitation that betrayed a measure of uncertainty. It was as if a tension existed between the various answers, one that they had either never considered or, if they had, one they had failed to resolved.

Reflecting the absence of clarity in the official documentation, the Chief Inspector was very much to the point when responding:

*Your question is informative in that there isn't a clear policy articulated and it isn't on paper. So that leaves us in the situation of interpreting what the intention might have been...I suppose it's a broad based policy and its difficult to be specific in the sense that it isn't exclusively for the Department, it isn't exclusively for the teachers, it isn't exclusively for the school. I would believe it to be an attempt*

*in its time to provide a system of inspection and evaluation that provided the Department with an assurance that the system of education and teaching in primary schools was effective. It also of course had an objective of support element for teachers.*

Further, when pressed to state whether the Department of Education and Science would attach a primacy of purpose either to the securing of accountability over school development he proved non-committal because, simply, an official position had never been worked out:

*I don't think that clarity, that distinction, has been there. It would be unreasonable and unfair of people to do it post hoc so to speak, to ascribe that to it now.*

To him the Department of Education and Science had yet a distance to go in effecting an appropriate balance between *'the twin objectives of accountability and development and improvement'*. It was important that the *'marrying'* of the two would take place because the perspective of teachers was of one of accountability - seen to him as *'answering to somebody'* - and that was *'a perception that will not travel into the next millennium'*.

When the same question was put to the Deputy Chief Inspector (i.e. Chief Inspector of primary schools) he proved much less circumspect. To him it was clear that the *primary* purpose of whole school inspection was accountability (ultimately, of course, leading to school development).

*The State and the taxpayer and the public have a right to be told both individually about schools and collectively that their children are being looked after, that the educational welfare of their children is 'ok'. And the inspectorate is the important arm of the State, that is the watchdog, that there's a public interest in it, public accountability. And, of course,*

*the children of the country are important clients in this, that is we have to be assured that their educational welfare is being looked after. And there is the financial accountability of that too in that there are significant resources of the State being spent on this service and it's reasonable that schools should be reviewed periodically by an agent of the State and reported back on.*

He goes to assert that the developmental aspect of the work has been overstated - he calls it *'the holding hands kind of thing'* - and this has distracted the inspectorate from *'the cold evaluative function that accountability presupposes'*. When the new Primary School Curriculum of 1971 was initially introduced there were good reasons for this in that it had to be allowed *'gain a foothold in the system'*. It made sense at the time, therefore, that the goodwill of teachers towards the fundamental changes inherent in the introduction of a pupil centred curriculum should be cultivated by means of light touch rather than rigorous whole school inspection. But these conditions no longer prevailed and the main justification now for whole school inspection was system evaluation and the reporting of judgements to the central administration. Further, the notion of teachers needing inspectors to help them develop was no longer tenable. Inspectors simply do not have the time for this *'feely work'*, development should come from teachers themselves and, in fact, *'they had enough the resources within themselves to do the job'*.

Thus it can be seen that the two most influential inspectors in the country in the area of primary education differ in their perspective relating to the purposes of whole school inspection. The Chief Inspector finds it difficult to be specific but speculates that whole school inspection is designed for a constituency that includes *both* teachers and Department of Education and Science. He therefore sees the operation as designed to serve both the accountability and developmental function, and the *'clarity of distinction'* that would allow him ascribe a primacy of focus to either of the two quite simply *'has not been*

*there*. In contrast, the Deputy Chief Inspector harbours no such doubts: the *raison d'être* of whole school inspection is, and has to be, accountability.

The next tier of rank in the Department of Education and Science is that of Assistant Chief Inspector and two of the latter had a responsibility for whole school inspection during the school year 1998/1999 when I undertook the fieldwork. It seemed appropriate that I should speak with both in order to obtain a complete picture of management's perspective.

Both Assistant Chief Inspectors were at one: the primary purpose of whole school inspection, at the current time at any rate, was individual school development rather than accountability, that is *improving* rather than *proving*:

*The individual school is the chief purpose, maybe in fact the only purpose. The line followed by the Department of Education and Science officially now is in fact a line that the sole purpose is individual school development, with system development and accountability coming after that and in that order. But in the past the accountability thing predominated.*

(GH)

His colleague agrees, stating that whole school inspection *'is essentially for the school, for the school staff'*. Further, *'the Department of Education and Science has felt that consistently, but maybe that wasn't said'*.

A picture thus emerges of an absence of unanimity among senior management senior management in respect of what constitutes the primary purpose of whole school inspection. The Chief Inspector feels unable to attach primacy to either of the two poles, in contrast his deputy is sure that the accountability purpose is foremost and their two immediate subordinates are in no doubt that individual school development is the main purpose.

The clear lack of consensus exhibited here assumes a particular significance when its implications for inspector practice in the classrooms are considered. There is a large measure of agreement in the literature in support of the notion that procedures to secure accountability in schools must differ fundamentally from those that have as their primary focus school development, and especially so at individual school level (Hinkley And Seddon, 1996: 70-93; Stoll and Fink, 1996: 42-62). It is argued cogently that both objectives require a fundamentally different attitude and approach, and both lead to different reactions from teachers in the highly transactive operation that characterises whole school inspection. The implication for whole school inspection is that the lack of unanimity at the highest levels of the inspectorate's management must inevitably filter through to the inspectors in the field and impact on their general approach to the exercise. This in turn will affect how teachers view the operation and, as suggested earlier, may contribute to a lack of trust and a general negativity that militates against development that is either inspection led or inspection stimulated. But did the absence of clarity and apparent unanimity filter through to the three inspectors who conducted the whole school inspections? Their responses are now examined.

Inspector A conducted the whole school inspection in school G. He was in no doubt that his primary purpose was the judgement of performance in justification of the State's financial investment in the school. He wished he might have invested some time on activity directly related to the promotion of curricular development, as indeed he did in the past, but it was with no little regret that it was not possible for him to do in recent because of time pressures. In tones of resignation he neatly rationalised the situation for himself: we were all accountable if we drew a salary and perhaps feelings of regret are misplaced. We shall consider presently the extent to which this perspective, and that of his two colleagues, was transmitted to his teachers and also the effect this was to have on them and on their relationships with him. But before we do so it is appropriate that we should examine the responses of inspectors B and C.

In contrast with his colleague, Inspector B (who inspected School C) saw affirmation - *'to affirm the school'* - as his primary purpose in conducting the whole school inspection. Interestingly, re-echoing the Chief Inspector's opinion, he declared that the teachers *'didn't see it that way'* and hence he found he had to tell them so after the inspection, at the post-inspection meeting! But still they were not convinced and he left under the strong impression that they saw the whole school inspection as an exercise in proving that they *'were earning their keep'*. No doubt *'there was an element of accountability'* in the operation, but this was secondary to his purpose of *'causing them to be aware, first and foremost, that they were doing a good job'*. When pressed to indicate how he would have reacted if the school had not appeared to deserve this level of affirmation, he declared that in such circumstances his usual practice is to highlight shortcomings in a subtle but effective manner. As a general rule he does so when engaging with the children whose limitations he brings deliberately to the fore, and also while reviewing performance with teachers at the end of his classroom visit. He then leaves it up to the teacher to read the signs by a process of inference and, appropriately, this ensures that self-esteem remains intact.

In broad terms Inspector C was in agreement with Inspector B in that he viewed whole school inspection as an exercise that had as its primary purpose the development of the school; and most certainly affirmation of good practice by him had a key role to play in this. While declaring that making schools accountable to the Department of Education and Science was his primary aim *'in theory'* - that was *'where the inspector's bread and butter come from'* - he maintained that his main role was to hold up a mirror to the school's face. This would give teachers *'a chance to see how they are doing, how they are doing it and how they compare with other schools which is the thing they are always anxious to know'*. To him the non-existence of a system of benchmarking in Ireland to aid him in his task was unproblematic - from his own experience he could tell how schools compared without the usual validity and reliability checks required by those professionally involved in research evaluation. [In contrast, in England Ofsted has had to devote considerable effort and time to

the provision of comparative data to aid school evaluation (Ofsted, 1998: 11-18). something it is unlikely to have embarked upon if the matter were so simple and uncontroversial]. Here we see a level of confidence that pivots more on authority based on experience than on competence and is characteristic of a attitude held by inspectorates traditionally (Gray and Wilcox, 1995: 180). Equally it is one that is ill-fitted to the requirements of the new millennium and the demands of an increasingly better educated and less compliant teaching body.

Inspector C went on to assert that he was sure the Department of Education and Science did not at all view whole school inspection as an exercise in accounting for monies invested in the school because, if it did, then as a matter of course it would show a more obvious level of interest in the ensuing School Report than it did. (He would have been doubly sure if he had heard the Deputy Chief Inspector tell me that *'the Department doesn't have any use for them at all'*!) As far as he knew, only an Assistant Chief Inspector would read his Report on School M and the latter had little knowledge of primary education. Perhaps a middle-ranking administrator in one of the main offices of the Department of Education and Science would also read the document but, as in the past, *'nothing would come of it'*. Further, when he called to mind that the Department had ignored his suggestion of some years before that a survey type instrument would be incorporated in whole school inspection arrangements, one that gave a picture of standards in a particular curricular area, then all doubt left him. The logical reaction for an inspector therefore was to treat whole school inspection rather as an instrument whose primary value was to be seen in its power to promote school development.

What is most striking in considering the responses of these seven inspectors who range in rank from the summit of the inspectoral hierarchy to the bottom is the lack of broad agreement relating to the purposes of whole school inspection, and particularly its primary purpose. The Chief Inspector finds it *'informative'* that I should raise the question of purpose, and while citing the lack of a clear

policy recorded on paper he *speculates* that whole school inspection was initially designed to embrace both school development and assurance of standards - even though, in his words '*the perspective of teachers is one of accountability and answerability*'. In contrast, the Deputy Chief Inspector is in no such doubt and in his view that whole school inspection primarily is geared towards the effecting of accountability. As for the Assistant Chief Inspectors, both see the operation as an exercise geared towards promoting individual school development. Two of the three inspectors who conducted the whole school inspections were of the same opinion whereas the third - with no little regret - cited accountability as his primary purpose.

In retrospect some of these inspectors might assert that the question took them unawares so that they may not have said what in fact they believed! But against this one may argue that by not providing them with the interview schedules and probes I may have secured a response that was less contrived, less politically correct and hence more likely to reflect reality. On balance I suspect that I chose the better option to the effect that the existence of a level of confusion among inspectors is exposed. If this is a true portrayal of the situation then even *before the whole school inspection begins conditions critical to the promotion of the cooperative and collaborative practices favoured by the school improvement movement, for example, will not have been established.* This is of no little significance but its importance is magnified if teachers simply do not believe that an important aim, if not the primary aim, of whole school inspection is to facilitate the school's development. Moreover, to the extent that ambiguity surrounds the perceived purposes of inspection a situation of confusion and mistrust that fuels teachers' suspicions will be severely threatened.

But, more to the immediate point, how did the teachers in the three schools perceive the whole school inspections? Did they see them primarily as accountability exercises, or did they incline towards a belief in an inherent overriding developmental power? Or, indeed, was there a level of ambiguity similar to that evidenced in the responses of inspectors with all its negative

implications for development? To the interviews with the teachers in the three schools we now turn in an effort to address these crucial questions.

### **The purpose of WSI: teachers' perceptions**

Nineteen teachers in all were asked what was the primary purpose of whole school inspection. A total of sixteen replied without hesitation: whole school inspection was undertaken by the State in order to make schools accountable; it was the rendering of an account to those who had invested heavily. One declared he found it impossible to ascribe a primacy to either development or accountability because he viewed them as being inextricably linked. The remaining two appeared to be experiencing some difficulty in formulating a response and it was obvious that that they had never reflected on the matter to any appreciable extent. (This in itself is perhaps of some significance as an indication of how little the whole school inspections had impacted on these teachers, but that is a separate issue to be pursued later.) Consequently I made a decision on the spot not to pursue the issue in accordance. The following excerpts, selected from what in some cases were lengthy responses, illustrate the position as perceived by the sixteen teachers who saw the whole school inspections primarily as a 'checking up' exercise (In Appendix 2 sample responses are presented in a more complete form.)

#### School G

*I think that it's the only way the Department has of making sure of standards. Because we are all human beings we can get into slipshod ways.*

(Headteacher)

*He came to make sure that standards are maintained. I felt that I was being checked up on.*

(NN)

*It's the only way the Department has of making sure of standards...and we need it just to keep ourselves on our toes.*

(HE)

*I feel it is a check-up on the school and a check-up on the teacher... Most positively I look on the inspection as a check up on me much more than development. It was something we got over with.*

(BS)

### School C

*From my point of view I have been wondering what is the point of it all. To poke out teachers who are not doing their job or schools not functioning well, I suppose – accountability ..there is no development for the school.*

(TG)

*I presume it's got something to do with this famous word 'accountability' – we all have to account, to justify ourselves.*

(OP)

*[I see it as] a representative of the Department coming in to see how are things going. He feeds information to them...in any job you must be accountable. That's part of life.*

(KG)

*He has to keep tabs on performance I presume.*

(Ka G)

*I suspect it is to see if we have all gotten lazy after a few years.[To see ] is the school being run properly.*

(HD)

*I suppose whole school inspection is for the Department really ... the main reason was accountability for the Department.*

(EB)

*I don't really know what it proves... Checking up on you. I think that's the main reason.*

(BX)

### School M

*Teachers still think of the inspector inspecting coming in to see what are you doing, why aren't you doing this.*

(Headteacher)

*Whole school inspection tells me as a teacher that I am answerable.*

(ST)

*I think it's to make sure that standards are maintained-that's the real reason. Yes, to check up.*

(MT)

*To me the whole school inspection was a bit of a nuisance. No, not doing me a favour. It's not in my interest that it should be done at all, not really. No.*

(LI)

### **Purpose: the general picture**

In summary, what then is perceived to be the purpose underlying the conduct of whole school inspection? One can say that two of the three inspectors who conducted the inspections saw the operation as an exercise that in broad

terms had as its primary objective the promotion of the schools' development. The two Assistant Chief Inspectors agreed. For his part, the Chief Inspector felt unable to ascribe primacy either to proving or improving, whereas Inspector G and the Deputy Chief Inspector saw the operation primarily as one that set out to seek proof of good value for public investment. Patently the inspectors are *not at one on the issue*. In contrast, the great majority of the teachers - sixteen of the nineteen interviewed - see the exercise primarily as surveillance and a rendering of account. Interestingly, and not without significance, no less than twelve of these declared without prompting that this was quite reasonable and acceptable to them - an opinion, incidentally, shared by their English colleagues (Ferguson *et al*, 2000: 149). (Unfortunately it did not occur to me at the time to pursue the issue with the other seven.) When reflecting on their attitude subsequently it appeared that this added weight to another emerging truth, namely that teachers in general were much more preoccupied with what was going to happen during whole school inspection - that is, what would the inspector's verdict be - than about the 'why', or purpose, of the exercise. In other words, the majority appeared to have been more concerned about the immediacy of the impending inspection than its wider rationale. This is understandable when one bears in mind the general perception held by the teachers that whole school inspection is primarily about accountability and, moreover, fair in principle.

*In effect all of this meant that the matter of whose interests primarily were being served by whole school inspection was closed as far as the teachers in general were concerned; to them there need be no confusion about the issue. But the inspectors presented a different picture, one characterised by ambiguity and a lack of unanimity. In these circumstances it is difficult to see how the circumstances favourable to the conduct of the negotiated, interactive relationship that is central to naturalistic inquiry could have prospered. Quite simply, no matter what the inspectors would have said in promoting the developmental purpose and, moreover, given the unfortunate history of relations between them and teachers as related in an earlier chapter, the necessary levels of trust inherent in quality evaluation would not have existed*

during the whole school inspections. No doubt this lack of trust would have had implications in emotional terms and to this issue we now direct our attention.

### **The emotional response**

There is a substantial body of literature emanating from the UK and abroad that attests to the notion that inspection causes considerable anxiety, indeed trauma, in teachers ( Brimblecombe *et al*, 1995: 53-60; Jeffrey and Woods, 1996: 325-343; Gardner and Gray, 1999: 7, 14; Ofstin, 1996: 11). In accordance with my strategy to introduce only a minimal level of structure into the interviews, and anticipating that an apparent interest in the topic on my part would invite an exaggerated response. at the outset I deliberately decided not to raise directly with teachers the important question of their emotional reaction. Further, as a general research principle I calculated that if a theme, any theme, were to be raised spontaneously during the research then this could be construed as a useful indicator of its perceived significance. It transpired in fact that a total of twelve teachers chose to speak at some length about their anxieties and the stress engendered by it (and most especially so in the lead up period). One teacher in school G displayed an almost heroic adherence to duty in the face of what was to her an intense level of pressure:

*I felt that I was being checked up on and it put terrible pressure on me at home as well. I was pregnant, I felt tired and so sick every day. But I said I have to go in and get the work done. If it hadn't been for the inspection I'd have definitely taken sick leave. I dragged myself in and as result I went home evening without an ounce of energy for my family. I was very anxious about the whole thing but I was sort of a resigned to getting it over and done with. The other members of the staff who are much more experienced than me and already had had numerous of these (whole school) inspections went into a total tizzy. And I said if they are getting so worked up maybe I'm not getting worked up*

*enough. We were just in a total state of panic which is silly in hindsight but it's in the nature of teachers to want to do well...and then going home that evening (on the satisfactory completion of the whole school inspection) I crashed my car and did £6 500 damage. And I really feel I was so tired and tensed after the week that I do think it was a contributory factor! I was glad it was over. Afterwards I met the other teachers at the swimming pool and I said 'Why did I get so uptight? I won't again.' They laughed and said, 'We say that every time but we do'.*

(NN)

One other teacher on the staff of School G was '*absolutely, terribly anxious*' during the lead run up to the whole school inspection, whereas the other two, the headteacher and the learning support teacher, declared they had felt no stress. This contrasts with the assertion of teacher NN above to the effect that '*the other members of the staff went into a total tizzy*'. Perhaps she exaggerated but, on the other hand, maybe it is nearer to the mark to suggest that the other two may have felt too embarrassed in admitting to their discomfort.

An examination of the transcripts of interviews in School C showed that all seven teachers raised the question of stress and saw the inspection as oppressive because of the anxiety levels generated; and two of these had been teaching for more than twenty years, so it could not be represented as a phenomenon confined to the less experienced. (Of the two in School G who declared they had been put under a high degree of stress, one had nearly thirty years experience and the other had been teaching in excess of ten years.) Only the learning support teacher stated clearly that she not feel under stress or anxiety in the lead up to the whole school inspection or during the process. In addition, the headteacher did not appear unduly concerned even though he declared that, in common with the rest of the staff, he '*was glad to have it over*'.

School M presented a rather different picture in that only three teachers commented on stress levels; presumably the other five did not see it as a factor

of significance. But, according to the headteacher, beginning from his announcement that whole school inspection was to take place some time during the year *'certainly there were some people who were under pressure'*.

One of those so affected, a teacher with over thirty years experience, spoke in vivid terms of the anxiety she felt at the prospect of the inspector's impending visit, notwithstanding the fact that some years before she had undergone whole school inspection with the same inspector. Her contribution is worthy of inclusion not only for its immediacy but also for its value in bearing witness to the illustrative power of qualitative research.

*I said, 'Girls, the inspector is going to be here tomorrow and I am going to be very, very nervous. And whatever you do, don't say when I'm trying to teach something, 'Miss, are you sick?'' Today I look sick, and I feel sick.*

*'Why, Miss? Aren't you a good teacher?' (Our kind of kids, all for the underdog, you see.) The fact he was going to be down there and possibly considering saying something bad of me, they didn't like it.*

*So 'Why, Miss? The cheek of him! You're a good teacher.'*

*'Whatever you do, don't ask me am I sick,' I said, 'I will look sick and I will feel sick.'*

*When he had gone they asked, 'Were you nervous, Miss?'*

*'Girls, I was terrified!' I said.*

*'You didn't look a bit terrified, Miss.'*

*But this one said, 'Miss, I knew you were (terrified) because your lips were shaking when you started the Buntús (i.e. Irish conversation lesson).*

*I will always remember that.*

(ST)

What emerges from the evidence is that whole school inspection tended to raise stress levels in approximately two-thirds of the teachers and their length of experience had no bearing on the intensity of feeling. (Further, three of those who did not advert to stress levels being raised were learning support teachers. Customarily, during inspection these are not subjected to the same level of rigour as their colleagues and hence are less likely to feel under pressure. Perhaps therefore these three should not be included in the calculation, so that in effect a higher proportion of teachers clearly experienced an increased level of anxiety.

But to what extent were the inspectors aware of and sensitive to the pressure they were instrumental in exerting? Inspector A opined it was likely that he caused some stress: *'In emotional terms I felt that the teachers felt that the sooner this is over the better'*. Inspector B declared *'There was not the slightest bit of tension in any shape or form'* because he *'packages it in such a way that it's not tension oriented, it's task oriented'*. The third inspector was of like mind: *'The teachers would regard me as a sort of friendly person who, if he were to find fault, would pass it on in a non-threatening way'*.

What emerges is a scenario characterised by a mismatch of perception between inspectors and teachers. The inspectors are unaware of the levels of anxiety generated and on further examination of the evidence it is clear that teachers do not tell them. Levels of trust in inspectors are low and the abiding impression is one of a power relationship, hierarchical in nature with the inspector as 'subject' and the teacher as 'object'. Within such a scenario the likelihood that teachers will take ownership of inspection's findings cannot be great. Further,

as a defence stratagem they will see advantage in adopting an attitude of mere 'strategic compliance' (Sandbrook, 1996: 24,86; Morrison, 1998: 150; Hinkley, 1996: 80) that is only temporary in nature but, happily for them, enough to win approval at the time.

The difficulty of identifying cause and effect will be considered presently but it is appropriate at this point to refer to the problematic nature of the concept. In simple terms, although a considerable proportion of the teachers experienced stress during the lead up to the whole school inspection and also during the operation (though to a lesser degree then), this does not necessarily mean that the inspection was the sole cause. We learn from statistical theory that correlation does not prove causation and it is likely that in the three schools other factors have contributed powerfully also. Included in this may have been the fundamental need felt by most teachers to perform satisfactorily, a phenomenon designated the professional model of accountability by Kogan (Halstead, 1994:146-165). As a teacher in School G said: '*It's in the nature of teachers to want to do well*' and another stated '*There is a natural feeling of wanting to do well no matter how well we know the inspector*'. 'Competence in teaching is at the heart of the professional self', declare Gray and Wilcox and being observed teaching is, therefore, a very significant experience for all teachers' (Gray and Wilcox, 1995b: 135). They might have added that this is compounded by the solitary nature of the profession that gives rise to intense feelings of vulnerability. Fullan is convincing when he criticises this isolationism for the manner it drives stress inwards to fester and accumulate while erecting a barricade against new ideas (Fullan, 1993: 34). Interestingly, no teacher in any of the three schools expressed a fear that s/he might be dismissed as a result of underperformance observed during whole school inspection. (In the Irish education system dismissal is the ultimate sanction but it is rarely applied and takes place solely after a lengthy process that may be activated only when the whole school inspection has been completed.) What in fact seemed to concern them more was the fear of the inspector's verdict *per se* which might in effect label them as pedagogical failures who only now have been found out after many years of diligent but seemingly ineffective teaching.

As indicated above, arguably this perception is rooted as much in the solitary and private nature of the teacher's life as in the effects of whole school inspection (see also Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992: 52-60; Nias, 1993: 141). The message then is one that emphasises the emergence of high levels of anxiety on the part of teachers brought on by whole school inspection, but not solely caused by it.

### **The pre-inspection meeting**

It is likely that when the conditions governing whole school inspection were issued by means of Circular in 1983 that the Department of Education included provision for a pre-inspection meeting in order to allay teacher concerns and anxieties about the impending inspection. The final section of the particular Circular gave an undertaking that, if required, 'the District inspector will arrange for discussion with the Principal and Staff to explain the objectives and procedures' (Circular 12/83: Section 8).

On the basis of informal conversation with colleagues over the years it appears that without exception they highlight the developmental nature of whole school inspection at these meetings and little or no emphasis is placed on the accountability aspect. Two of the four research papers in total dealing with whole school inspection in Ireland (see p.39) suggest that at these meetings the inspectors offered little more than a general verbal account of what could be expected, and that their overriding emphasis was placed on the allaying of anxieties (the other two papers do not deal with the topic). Consequently, teachers 'were left unclear as to the scope and function of the entire process' (Bennett and Kavanagh, 1996: 17), the operation lacked the 'focus' necessary for appreciable development and staff failed to take ownership of the process due to a lack of influence on the agenda (Sugrue, 1996). Patently, the promise inherent in the concept of a pre-inspection meeting was not realised in these two small case studies. But what of the study to hand? Would my interviewees have formed a different perception and, if so, why, and to what effect? Their responses might prove illuminating in the formation of an opinion on the nature and extent of the impact that whole school inspection was to have in the three

schools. Accordingly, I referred to the pre-inspection meeting with the three 'field' inspectors (those who had conducted the inspections) and all the teachers.

Inspector A firmly believed in the value of the meeting even though he already had convened a similar meeting for the same purpose six years previously and since then there had been no staff changes. To him, for the sake of good relations there was a great importance in clarifying what precisely whole school inspection entailed:

*I did so because I believe that it is one thing to give a message and another to be sure that the message is received in the manner in which it is intended.*

In addition he wished to demonstrate at the meeting that he would proceed 'in a spirit of partnership' and, hence, if they had concerns then he would address them willingly. Speaking on behalf of all her staff, the headteacher, found the (one-hour) meeting valuable:

*It's useful because he tells you what he is looking for and he sticks by that.*

In outlining his *modus operandi* Inspector B proceeded on the basis that he had undertaken whole school inspection here on no less than four occasions. Consequently he felt that a short meeting of no more than fifteen minutes at morning break was sufficient. But I learned at interview that he had not reckoned with the fact that four of the staff were new to the school and, hence, had little or no experience of whole inspection. Indeed one younger member queried during interview if perhaps a Report would issue after the inspection! In addition to highlighting the ignorance of some younger teachers, the question is interesting in that perhaps it provides inspectors with a salutary lesson which teaches that the exercise of inspection in fact may not be as central to the lives of many teachers as it is to theirs.

Inspector C had been assigned to School M for approximately twenty years and hence, he declared, teachers would have known his style of operation long before he started the inspection. Hence he deemed it unnecessary to convene a pre-inspection meeting and, given that only three teachers out of nine in the school admitted to a feeling of anxiety, it appears that his position is to some degree vindicated. However, by precluding the possibility of dialogue with teachers as a group Inspector M makes no contribution to the promotion of collaborative relationships and the establishment of a learning community so approved of in school improvement research. In this it is likely that he missed a valuable opportunity to enhance the potential of the school to be a learning organisation engaged in a constant process of development.

The evidence gleaned in respect of the two pre-inspection meetings, together with a consideration of Inspector C's stated position demonstrates that the three inspectors put a premium on the establishment and maintenance of good relations with teachers. Moreover, teachers appreciated this and particularly so in the case of schools A and B, because it gave them some insight into ' *what he was looking for*'. It appears that they listened courteously to what he had to say without interruption and in neither of the two meetings was it reported that they engaged him in debate. (In the case of School B where the meeting lasted for no more than fifteen minutes, at any rate there was scarcely enough time to do so). This in fact reflects the experiences of Sugrue, Bennett and Kavanagh in the studies cited above where teachers 'derived little other benefit' apart from the comfort of knowing that inspectors would attempt to ensure that the whole school inspection experience would not prove stressful for them. Furthermore, the evidence is significant in that it underlines the acceptance by teachers of a passive role in which, as suggested above, they are the object of the verb 'inspect' within the framework of a power relationship with the inspector as subject. As commented by a visiting delegation from the OECD in 1991, teachers hold inspectors 'in evident respect not too far removed from deference' (OECD, 1991: 43). In other words, inspection is accepted by teachers as an act *done to them*, rather than *with them* and the rendering of account rather than

school development is the central focus of the operation. It is argued by some writers that the uneven balance of power between inspectors and teachers means that the genuine sense of partnership pivotal to school development cannot flourish (Ferguson *et al.* 2000: 145) and clearly missing here is that dynamic, interactive professionalism which is prized by the school improvement movement (Fullan, 1991, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn: 353). Given all of this it then, it is unlikely that the pre-inspection meetings would have contributed in a significant way towards contributing to the effecting of worthwhile change in either of the two schools. But what is likely is that a promising opportunity to do so was squandered by all three inspectors.

### **The process of whole school inspection**

From the earliest stages in the planning of the research it had appeared to me that the process of whole school inspection - that is, how inspectors conducted the operation and how teachers reacted - would constitute the most vital element of the project. The practices which inspectors followed in the classrooms, the manner in which they related to teachers and children and their responses to them in turn - all would prove crucial in mirroring the perspectives of the various actors and potentially would assist in no small way in explaining the nature and levels of impact.

Working from that position and with the aim of securing the highest measure of comprehensiveness possible in the circumstances, I decided to invite all interviewees except the Chief Inspector to discourse on the theme. (A former second-level teacher and headteacher, unlike the other six inspectors, the Chief Inspector had no personal experience of whole school inspection on which to base a response and hence I discounted him.) At analysis stage it became clear that responses tended to centre on a number of recurring themes that underpinned their actions, and in the interests of clarity it seemed appropriate that these should dictate that the evidence on inspection process be presented under a number of corresponding headings, as follows.

*Perspectives on rigour and implications for credibility*

One theme above all others, that of credibility, was raised virtually by everybody. Ranging from the teacher with least experience to the summit of the inspectorate's hierarchy, each interviewee put a premium on a high standard of credibility attaching to every element of the whole school inspection process. That is, inspectors had to appear credible to teachers in a great many ways. For example, they had to offer teachers due respect and demonstrate a high level of conscientiousness in the discharge of their duties. They had to have a sound sense of fair play and a solid grasp of education theory. Crucially, they had to demonstrate a high level of expertise in the manner in which they engaged with the children and, further, they had to produce a credible School Report. It followed from all of this that a high standard of rigour needed to inform the work in all its manifestations.

The Deputy Chief Inspector was unhesitant in expressing his views. He was strongly of the opinion that whole school inspection lacked rigour and that it needed to become a far more searching operation. Identifying a strong interpersonal dimension in the process, he argued that to be both credible and acceptable to teachers it must be based on a thorough scrutiny from which an honest judgement might emerge. This meant that inspectors should not hesitate in expressing their opinion in a clear and firm manner but, of course, appropriate levels of sensitivity should not be ignored: '*Inspectors will have to say unpleasant things at times but they don't have to say those things unpleasantly*'. Furthermore, there were good reasons why inspectors should speak their minds:

*Teachers know darn well how good they are and how bad they are, and they won't be fooled by praising everything all the time. Nor will inspectors have any credibility if they do.*

Re-echoing this sentiment, the headteacher of School C, declared to me at a later stage:

*But you still have to be firm enough to tell people, 'Look, can you do something about these maths.'*

In common with their senior colleague, both Assistant Chief Inspectors saw the notion of an inspector's credibility as fundamentally important. One asserted that the quality of the inspector's interaction with the teachers and children, the seriousness with which s/he approaches the inspection, and the generally positive attitude to the contribution of the teacher, contribute to the establishment of a credibility that inevitably promotes a willingness to change and develop on the part of the school. He therefore endorsed the notion of the inspector adopting an active role in the classroom during the whole school inspection. While certainly not downplaying the need for observing the teacher-pupil interaction, he put forward the notion of inspector as a challenger of teacher and children rather than rigorous examiner. Following a deliberate plan to offer challenge rather than advice (*'I'm not sure that when advice is given to me that I feel like following it'*), he himself as District Inspector in the middle 1990's set out *'to get the emotional lather up'* by demonstrating to teachers the potential for development in each lesson. While interacting with different groups within the classroom, he himself used to engage in higher order questioning, rich discussion, examination of written work and scrutiny of test results. His purpose was to persuade teachers (whose dedication as a body he did not doubt) that the teaching and learning could be substantially developed by following a similar approach. Echoing the Vygotskian theory of zones of proximal development, he considered that teachers are located on a continuum of development and so it was important that he pitched the challenge at a particular level that introduced what he called *'minimal discrepancy'*.

*You just had to put it above them. You didn't demonstrate something that was out of their depth that they couldn't aspire to.*

In this he believed he was introducing '*discrepancy and challenge rather than advice*' and it was then up to the teachers to find '*their own best practice*' base. As is widely held in the literature (Institute of Education, 1995: 24-25; McNamara, 1994: 1; Fullan, 1998; Alexander, 1996: 27), he did not believe there was one best method: '*People will do things the way people do things and I leave it to themselves to develop their methods*'. To the extent that inspectors in general adopted a similar approach he was not sure. However, he suspected that in general they followed a policy of '*light touch*' inspection while at the same time operating on a continuum that broadly stretched from his own perspective of unthreatening challenge ('*minimal discrepancy or dissonance, leading to action*') to one that relied more on modelling good practice and less on transmission of '*advice*'. Both models were potentially rigorous in terms of providing a penetrating evaluation but in broad outline he placed a significantly greater value on an expository rather than a judgmental operation, and this was reflected in the manner he conducted whole school inspection. The position adopted by this Assistant Chief Inspector is of particular interest in that it can be shown to have its roots in the insights of cognitive psychology which demonstrate that learning is effectively facilitated through a series of processes such as modelling, coaching, scaffolding and encouragement of learners to reflect on their own problem-solving strategies (Hennessy, 1993:11-12). In the context of the whole school inspection, this inspector in effect commends the adoption of a kind of Vygotskian apprenticeship process. It has as its ultimate aim the giving of responsibility and control over his/her learning to the teacher and accompanying it the confidence to engage in critical analysis. In other words, the inspection takes place *with* teachers; it is not something that is *done to* them. Presently we shall see that the notion of modelling is common among all inspectors - though they do not call it that and, by their own admission, have little acquaintance with the relevant literature on the topic. The major significance it has for the study on hand is that it suggests that at least some inspectors take the view that to an undetermined degree, perhaps to a very considerable degree, it is important that they should adopt the role of teacher and advisor. This leads on to a question that is crucial to one's conceptualisation of inspection, namely can one, ought one, attempt to be both

inspector (that is in terms of compliance agent) and advisor? Is there a conflict here that requires an inspector be one or another, but not both? To this we shall return presently.

In common with his colleague, the other Assistant Chief Inspector felt that whole school inspection could be characterised as a *'light touch'* operation, and to the extent it was seen to be so its credibility was open to challenge. In his opinion inspectors had manoeuvred themselves into a position in which their inspecting *'most definitely lacked rigour'* and, regrettably, they *'had gone native'* in that like *'county counsellors'* (i.e. local public representatives) they were *'uncritically supporting the school'*.

In broad outline therefore we note that key members of top management strongly suspected, and with no little regret, that the process of inspecting during whole school inspection lacked rigour. To what extent this is borne out by the facts as understood by the three inspectors who conducted the whole school inspections and the teachers in the schools we now turn.

Responding to the invitation to speak about the inspecting process Inspector A identified the establishment and maintenance of good relationships as pivotal to successful inspection. Although *'a genuine respect'* dating back over more than a decade existed between him and all staff members, nevertheless the relationship *'went into a different gear'* during the two days of the inspection. Emphasising the collegial and collaborative spirit of the operation that obtained, he claimed that they entered into a pact to be open with each other.

*'If you have a problem, I want you to say it,' they said. And I said, 'Of course I'll say it, and I want you also to say it to me if you think there's a problem. So they knew I wasn't going to hit the roof and take personal exception to their reaction to certain things. I think because we knew each other so well there was an unwritten, unspoken thing that for the course of*

*these few days there wouldn't be as much social banter because we'd be talking about serious stuff.*

Within that scenario and from some vantage point within the classroom he observed the teacher-pupil interaction across the curriculum while at the same time scrutinizing written work and teachers' lesson notes. At intervals he invited the teacher to withdraw and he himself took over. Setting the children a variety of tasks he engaged them in probing discussion for the two-fold purpose of measuring attainment and modelling how another might attempt to extend the learning. Significantly, in keeping with the traditional stand of inspectors elsewhere (FitzGibbon, 1996) the problematic nature of standards was not obvious to him and hence of no concern. He carried the standards around in his head, as it were, he felt he could handle the multiplicity of variables that operate in each situation and he was confident in the validity of his judgements. And, with a naivete mixed perhaps with a little arrogance, he supported his position by reference to a benchmarking experience of twenty years inspecting comparable schools in the district.

In addition, though he was unfamiliar with naturalistic inquiry as a term, he went on to describe a situation that embodies many of the main elements of the naturalistic paradigm:

*We are all the time talking about serious stuff. There's a mutual respect and I see the relationship based on this. I'm probing, trying to be incisive and asking them the hard questions. And you wonder aloud with them - I think this is a crucial thing. That's a thing I put a lot of emphasis on, trying to engender the feeling that we are doing this together. I've a role to play in that and the teacher has a role to play in it. The roles won't always coincide, we won't always agree but we know we are both trying to do something together for the betterment of the school.*

Here then one sees acceptance of multiple constructed realities - the implied recognition that that the situation needs to be studied holistically with due regard to other's perspectives too - and with it the approval of what Lincoln and Guba call 'mutual simultaneous shaping' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 151; Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 97). This suggests that all elements in a situation are in mutual and continuous interaction, everything influences everything else in the here and now and hence one's understanding of cause consists of making a plausible imputation (of cause) in accordance with individual perspective. We will deal with the concept in greater detail presently when cause and effect will be addressed in treating of the impact of whole school inspection on the school. At this stage suffice it to say that though he had no familiarity with the term Inspector A followed a fundamental element of naturalistic inquiry. And so, in effect, though Inspector A later conceded that his judgement could be termed 'impressionistic', he could have gone on to argue that it was nonetheless valid and best understood in terms of the naturalistic rather than the positivist paradigm.

Further, we see in the actions of Inspector A the linking of his belief in the efficacy of demonstration to the notion of credibility:

*There's credibility there on the part of the inspector if he or she has performed well. Both sides became detached for both days. Credibility is vital - an inspector has to be able to roll up his sleeves and get stuck in, be able to respond to issues they raise. I'm not saying that the inspector should be able to respond to every question, or solve every problem, not at all, but that he or she should have a moral force that is based on sincerity. He has proven to them he has been doing his best and he is not asking them to do anything else they wouldn't do themselves-and so the issue of credibility is vital. There's a kind of moral thing there, a value thing, that you're a hard worker yourself and so when you're talking about hard work on their part you are not seen to be afraid of it yourself.*

In common with all his colleagues Inspector B raised the notion of credibility. Again attributing an importance to taking over the class and engaging with the children, something he did *'habitually'*, he suggested that the necessary competence he demonstrably had in doing so could be traced back to the fact he had been a primary teacher. Again, in common with colleagues cited above, his usual procedure was to observe the teacher engage with the children while he noted strengths and weaknesses. In due course he himself modelled good practice as he saw it and engaged the children in a process of questioning and general discussion. When reviewing the work with the teacher at the end of the visit he eschewed the giving of advice directly but relied instead on teachers drawing inferences from his approach. It usually transpired that teachers elected to follow his approach and they told him so, but when it was suggested that this might be no more than a manifestation of strategic compliance (Sandbrook, 1996: 24, 86; Morrison, 1998:150; Hinkley, 1996: 80), he conceded that perhaps this was true *'to some extent'*. In his opinion teachers would act in what one might term a constructivist fashion by applying the new insights to the situation on hand and making them their own. To him his mode of action was *'a subtle and effective way of getting your message across'* and in general outline accorded with the procedure of the more successful inspectors in Sandbrook's study (Sandbrook, 1996: 43,59). In the latter's opinion *'the secret seemed to lie in how successfully inspectors mingled in with the children. If they did this children were happy and the inspectors established credibility'* (Ibid. p.43).

Inspector B, in common with his colleague, Inspector A, had no familiarity with the term naturalistic inquiry but, nonetheless, he adopted a mode of operation that embodied some aspects of the naturalistic perspective with a certain regard for principled negotiation and multiple constructed realities. Evidence presented in forthcoming pages under a variety of headings indicates that Inspector C acted no differently but at this point we note the existence of some further manifestations of a naturalistic approach.

### *Purposive sampling and progressive focusing*

Whereas sampling constitutes a key concept in education research, it has a different connotation in naturalistic research from that which falls within the positivist paradigm. In positivist research the sample is randomly drawn according to a statistical procedure that ensures a high degree of representativeness which leads to context and time-independent generalisations. In contrast, in naturalistic research random selection takes a secondary place to the description of the individual case which is described in the full richness of its unique and distinctive character. But, patently, selection has to take place and it is done by means of 'purposive sampling' which essentially has information rather than statistical representativeness as its central concern (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 102, 199-202). In this case the sampling is contingent (on what is uncovered), and sequential in that it proceeds by building on the developing scenario. There is a continuous ebb and flow of information and the sample is being constantly reconstructed by the investigator who is engaged in a systematic amendment of emerging hypotheses by means of Glaser and Straus's 'progressive focusing' (Nixon and Ruddock, 1994:114; Scott and Usher, 1996: 57; Hamilton and Delamont, 1979: 162). The manner of school selection for whole school inspection each year does not differ significantly from that adopted by the naturalist investigator in his/her choosing of site. (As a general rule the inspector takes schools on a cyclical basis, but s/he does have regard for local circumstances that may justify postponement.) To that extent the selection of schools for whole school inspection may be interpreted as a manifestation of purposive sampling. And, in respect of progressive focusing, Inspector B engaged in a set of procedures that closely resembled the concept:

*I always start at the bottom of the school and go up to Sixth Standard and then do the remedial teacher. And I do all subjects while I am there. I look for the extent to which my semi-picture from the past can be built upon. As I start at the bottom I am developing hunches as I go along. I develop an expectation when I see what is happening in the infant classes. If there is a very good foundation at Infant level, then*

*I have high expectations up along. But then if the expectations are frustrated then it helps me to pinpoint and to verify for myself that there is something missing. I go around classrooms and I take borings and I find out as much as I can. There is an element of tentative judgements and focusing as I go along. That's how it was in School C too.*

Nor was he alone in this. Inspector A showed that he too engaged in a process of progressive focusing:

*I would be very conscious of saying to myself, 'I've got a feeling here that this is a very good set-up. Now where's the evidence, or is there anything here that would contradict that feeling?'*

Inspector M, in common with his colleagues, declared a commitment to progressive focusing (*'I get hunches and I follow them up the school'*). In practice he ensured that he observed a number of formal lessons and *'about half ways through'* he too took over from the teacher and deliberately focused on a wider range of pupils:

*Teachers are invariably inclined to ask the children who are going to give the right answer. And it is one of the faults in any class that they don't distribute the questions sufficiently widely around. The brazen child and the forward child will get asked the questions but the quiet one sitting down who doesn't attempt to even put up her hand invariably never gets asked a question. So therefore I cannot know whether the child has really grasped she has been trying to teach. And that happened in School M and so I had to take over.*

When one reflects on the evidence presented up to this point it appears that a common procedural thread runs through the operations of all three inspectors in

the classrooms. In essence it is not unlike to Glaser and Strauss's 'grounded theory', another central component of the naturalistic paradigm (Hopkins and Bollington, 1989: 64; Scott and Usher, 1996: The Open University, 1996: 89, 111). The inspectors follow an empirico-inductive approach (McMillan and Schumacher, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn:8) and they base their judgements on a framework of knowledge gleaned from informal visits over the course of some years (e.g. 'I look for the extent to which my semi-picture from the past can be built upon' - Inspector B). Without exception they tend to intervene actively in the lesson while all the time championing a partnership approach. Evidence, analysis and interpretation all take place simultaneously *in situ* rather than as disparate acts only to be engaged in later. Then, as apparently interesting or indeed disquieting data emerge, inspectors pursue their hunches as provisional truths in a process of developing understanding. But what standards of rigour attach to the process? The level of rigour that is applied to any evaluation is crucial in that it underpins the credibility of the findings. Might one characterise the operation as 'light touch' as did key members of the inspectorate's senior management, as we have seen, or would it be more accurate to describe it as searching and rigorous? And indeed if the inspectors or teachers considered it 'light touch', in other words lacking in penetration and comprehensiveness, to what extent might that have affected the validity of the findings? Clearly it seemed of no little importance that I should devote some attention to the issue in the analysis of interview evidence.

### *Levels of rigour and validity*

In accordance with my deliberate policy of encouraging respondents to speak for themselves on themes they saw to be noteworthy and, secondly, to avoid the distorting effect of a response offered on impulse perhaps merely to please, I deliberately chose not to ask a direct question on perceived levels of rigour. I considered that the issue would emerge spontaneously if it were deemed significant and, if not, then the matter could be interpreted as of little consequence to the particular player and of relatively little value for the purposes illuminating the various perspectives. In effect this general methodological stance meant that not all teachers chose to deal with standards

of rigour applied by inspectors. However, I departed from my usual procedure to elicit teachers' views on the validity of the inspectors' judgements because of its obvious central importance and, hence, when the matter did not arise as a matter of course I chose to ask a direct question to elicit a view.

A simple analysis of all interviews shows that every teacher in School G declared that the whole school inspection had been conducted in a rigorous or a thorough fashion. For example:

*He (i.e. Inspector A) is very thorough, nothing slipshod, and he looks at every aspect of what you are supposed to be doing. It surprised me he was so thorough.*

DD

Colleagues in the other schools seemed to agree, for example:

*He (i.e. Inspector B) was very probing especially the history and geography. He was really out to get his answers and he was going to get them.*

HD

*He (i.e. Inspector C) came in and he sat at the back and he was very concerned with the interaction, looking carefully at what was happening.*

ST

In all, every teacher in School G gave witness to a high level of rigour. In School C four of the eight did so, two stated it was superficial and two did not address the issue. In school M, of the five teachers who commented directly on the level of rigour, all characterised it as 'light touch' but nonetheless effective for the purposes of accountability (because, as they saw it, the inspector had had long experience of the school and therefore did not need to be more rigorous).

I turned to the question of the validity of the inspectors' judgements with a greater sense of urgency. It appeared to me that the teachers' responses would be crucial in that to the extent they considered the inspectors had secured a valid picture of what was happening in the schools, then the issue of rigour would diminish significantly in importance. Further, to the extent that the key players accepted the validity of the findings, the scene would have been set for change and, as a corollary, if the findings were seen to be invalid then the likelihood of any useful impact would have been radically reduced.

Initially I invited each inspector to comment. Inspector A, for example, was in no doubt he had secured a solid basis on which he could make a valid judgement about the school. Proceeding on the basis that validity had to be grounded on as many sources of evidence as possible, at all stages he made himself alert to picking up both verbal and visual clues. In particular he was diligent in the compiling of copious notes somewhat in the manner of the qualitative researcher (as in Nias, 1991: 147-165, for example).

*The more sources of evidence you have the better... I take very careful notes in the school, and in the evening when I come home I develop them. In switching from one class from another I won't go into the second class until I have all my notes written up while they are still fresh in my mind. Why? It's not valid unless there's evidence.*

The other two inspectors adopted a similar approach and in broad outline they were equally confident that they came away from the schools with a valid picture of what was happening in their schools.

An analysis of the responses of all the teachers was especially interesting in that every teacher in School A (i.e. four) felt that the inspector had secured at least in broad outline a valid picture of the school in all its manifestations. The same opinion was expressed by all but one teacher in School C and one in School M.

These two out of twenty in total dissented on the basis that the time allocated by the inspector to work in the classroom was far too short to enable him capture the essence of what happens there. Interestingly, in dealing with the notion of validity Inspector A expressed no such reservation: he claimed that he '*would know in a few minutes but I wouldn't have the evidence*'. When one has regard to the assertion of the dissenting teacher in School M - for example, she said the inspector remained no more than fifteen-minutes in her classroom instead of the usual half-day - the strength of her case appears compelling no matter how perceptive and generally competent he is. However, that of the other is perhaps less so in that she declared she would not be satisfied unless Inspector C had spent an entire day with her.

The evidence presented so far shows that just over half those who addressed the issue were satisfied that the whole school inspections were conducted with a high level of rigour (i.e. it was eight against seven), whereas the great majority believed the inspectors had secured a valid picture of what was happening in the schools. On reflection the discrepancy is not altogether baffling and probably can be explained by reference to the fact that the inspectors based their judgements not only on the few days of the whole school inspection but also on the incidental visits paid as a matter of course down through the years. Given that the teachers in general appeared satisfied with regard to the validity of the inspectors' judgements, it seemed worthwhile to explore how they perceived the inspectors as individuals and educationists. To what extent did they respect them, and how might this have impacted so that as a consequence their judgements achieved a high level of acceptability? In response we can say, with *some* confidence, that respect and validity interacted in a reciprocal dynamic and, with full confidence, we can declare that teachers held the three inspectors in high regard.

#### *Teachers' perceptions of inspectors*

When considering the responses relating to validity, it became clear that to a significant degree teachers' perspectives were conditioned by their perceptions of the inspector as a person of competence and sensitivity. Again the concept of

credibility came to the fore as a vital ingredient in maintaining the standing of the inspector as a trustworthy evaluator. Further, to the extent that teachers had confidence in him the greater was their preparedness to accept his judgements. An examination of the evidence in pursuit of references to the inspectors as individuals and professionals yielded up a selection of data which suggested all three were held in considerable respect by teachers and that this perception was directly referenced to their personal qualities and professional competence. In all I found just one comment of a critical nature and it is significant that it came from a teacher of less than eight years experience who had known Inspector B, the individual in question, for less than half that time. She said:

*I'd prefer to deal with someone who was more direct, more discerning. He wasn't critical at all, which worries me, because there were things that merited criticism.*

(KG)

In remarking on his *modus operandi*, Inspector B gave some clues why he did not appear more direct to her:

*I would be under no illusions about my ability to change people and I'm not so sure that I should be trying to. As people get older, and with all the change around them, there's always the danger they'll become disillusioned and go off the path altogether. So I set about affirming them gently so that they may do different things differently and be happy about that.*

Here again we see an acknowledgement of the human dimension that permeated interviews with all three inspectors and one to which each returned systematically and highlighted as a guiding value in the successful conduct of whole school inspection.

In stark contrast with their critical colleague who apparently was not aware of his motivation and general perspective, all the other teachers in School C were highly laudatory when referring to the personal qualities and technique of the inspector in question, as evidenced in the following selection of comments:

*Inspector B is very much a diplomat and he would also sense the feeling of the teacher so that he wouldn't come out and be critical in that sense because that doesn't help anybody - it probably undermines people's confidence. His technique is grand.*

(Headteacher)

*Inspector B knows his stuff. I was all the time watching for that, and he was affirming.*

(KGp)

*I was very comfortable with B.*

(HD)

*Inspector B gets things out of children and makes them act themselves.*

(EB)

*Inspector B is very good with children, he is excellent. He can get down to their level and he understands them.*

(BX)

And teachers in the other two schools were no less satisfied and favourably disposed. The following excerpts are representative of the perspective held by the generality of teachers:

*Inspector A is very nice in a professional way and he knows his stuff. He's a very good listener, courteous and you can talk to him. He's very professional so you feel you can say*

*something to him and it will be taken in a professional way and he is a very thorough person he will not land you in it. I didn't even have to say to him that I wanted a certain something to be kept confidential. He does seem to be very good at picking up the feel of the place. I never had the feeling with him that he wanted to come in and find fault.*

(HE)

*A is a very thorough person. Not too soft, a very positive and constructive force. He is always helpful and very professional. He knows what he is supposed to be doing. I felt very comfortable and I think he is a man who takes his job very seriously and that comes through all the time. Very friendly towards the children and the body language would be very good so that immediately he enters the room the children would see him as a nice person. You would welcome that because it puts the children at ease because children freeze up when they are unsure. You feel that he is part of the team and he always gives that impression. I would regard him very highly as an inspector.*

(DD)

*Inspector C is open and honest and I love to see him come.*

(Headteacher)

*C has the right attitude, and attitude is very important in an inspector.*

(LI)

*C shows respect, he is not dictatorial and brings in new ideas. He is a man who understands the situation we are working in.*

(Infants teachers)

Further, in an effort to discern with some precision how the inspectors were viewed personally, I chose seven descriptors adapted from a questionnaire devised by researchers at Queen's University, Belfast (Gardner and Gray, 1998), and asked respondents on a random basis to respond with a simple 'yes' or 'no' to the dictated item. (This intervention was not made if by doing so it seemed that the flow of conversation would be unduly interrupted and hence the totals vary for each descriptor.) What is significant is that without exception the results were singularly positive, as seen in the following Table.

**Table 5** Inspector descriptors

<i>Empathetic</i>	10 teachers out of 10 responding say 'yes'.
<i>Approachable</i>	7/7 say yes
<i>Aloof</i>	5/5 say no
<i>Insightful</i>	7/7 say yes
<i>Competent</i>	7/7 say yes
<i>Attentive</i>	3/3 say yes

In broad outline, therefore, a picture emerges of a generality of teachers attesting to the validity of their inspector's judgement on the working of their schools. Moreover, they share a considerable level of trust in his judgements which, in part at least, is rooted in the recognition of commendable personal qualities coupled with high levels of proficiency. Here they re-echo Hopes' assertion that 'an inspector must have power of expertise' because no longer can s/he enjoy positional power (Hopes, 1991: 20).

But, given that each inspector has been attached to the school for more than ten years, perhaps the picture presented is in fact a distorted one and subject to challenge on the basis that a cosy bond has grown between all the main players

in that period? Ofsted is uncompromising when dealing with the issue within the context of teacher appraisal as an essential element of school evaluation, and it is likely that the same principle holds true for whole school inspection also:

Appraisal is worthless where, for example, it is superficial, tolerant of complacency or mediocre performance, or is based on an uncritical and cosy relationship between the appraiser and appraisee.

(Ofsted, 1998: 6-7)

Arising from this we may ask whether, or to what extent, might a desire to maintain a putative stress-free relationship exist, one in effect that militates against the production of sharp and penetrating judgements? The question was addressed by a number of respondents in the course of discussing the validity of the judgements formed and expressed by the inspectors.

#### *A cosy relationship?*

Remarking that '*a particular downside in the evaluative context*' had come to attend the fact that inspectors no longer transfer from district to district, the Deputy Chief Inspector questioned whether inspectors are '*useful any more as objective evaluators*'. He himself was non-committal in offering a personal response but his suggestion that '*the question has to be asked*' strongly hints of a suspicion that the obvious bond of friendship and respect between inspectors and teachers, especially in rural districts, poses a threat to the validity of the School Reports.

Inspector A did not agree, remarking that the teachers displayed an uncharacteristic defensiveness during whole school inspection and their responses bore this out. He observed that '*the whole relationship went into a different gear*' during whole school inspection. Inspectors and teachers believed '*it was different*' and consequently they '*stepped back from each other and looked seriously at the school*'. Interestingly, their responses to a probe

inviting them to talk about their relationship with the inspector during whole school inspection seemed to bear this out:

*We were in a total state of panic. It was the fact that he was coming in the capacity of inspector to do the whole school inspection that made the difference.*

(NN, School G)

*We got friendly with him but it was all very professional and it made no difference. He didn't hold back. I'd hate to think we had this friendship and he felt he couldn't say anything.*

(HE-School G)

*Things could become too cosy elsewhere and the inspector could become too shy to criticize us but not in Inspector A's case. He is very professional - the inspector has to be very professional and I don't think you could meet anybody in his district that would say he is not. Knowing him wouldn't make him too soft in assessing us.*

(Headteacher-School G)

Inspector C was adamant that by no means could the relationship be designated 'cosy'. Rather it was one that was built on respect and of such a quality that teachers would be unlikely to take offence if shortcomings were pointed out. (This re-echoes the Deputy Chief Inspector's sentiment cited earlier to the effect that unpleasant things can be said, but ought not to be said unpleasantly).

The responses of teachers in School M with one exception bore this out. Typical of their responses were the following:

*I saw the whole school inspection as different. He was different then because he was on a different mission then.*

(ST)

*He's a nice man and he gets on well with us and he treats us in the proper manner. But that does not mean that we had a cosy relationship. We were not sitting back and needing to be kept on our toes as 'cosy' implies.*

(Infants teachers i.e. for 4-6 age group - School M)

In contrast with his two colleagues Inspector B suspected that his relationship had certainly become too cosy but, interestingly, his teachers, except for two, did not agree. In common with their colleagues in School M, and indeed in School G too, they asserted that a relationship best described as one based on respect rather than cosiness exists between them.

In summary therefore it appears that in the main all three inspectors are seen to combine high levels of skill in the examination of classes with a most creditable standard of courtesy and concern for teachers and children. Teachers almost unanimously respect them for it and in broad outline believe they succeed in gaining a valid impression of what has been happening in their classrooms. And, in common with two of the three 'field' inspectors, they will not accept that perceptions have been distorted by the existence of cosy bonds of friendship that have been nourished during incidental visits over the years. In general, a new leaf is turned over during whole school inspection and past friendships are put to one side as both teachers and inspectors re-orientate to a new position for the few days during which the inspection takes place. *Nonetheless, in an effort to gauge the strength of these feelings with a greater accuracy I decided to probe further by asking if a strange inspector, an outsider from another district, might have a role to play in providing a more credible and indeed more useful set of judgements.*

The question was put to each teacher, twenty in all, and only six opposed the notion of including an outside inspector as part of a team that would conduct the whole school inspection. The others were quite happy to see the introduction of a stranger inspector, and a team approach too, but only on the condition that the local inspector - with his ability to contextualise the operation

- formed part of that team. This is of particular interest in that it points to a high level of confidence on their part in the validity of their rejection of the notion that a cosy, distorting relationship exists between them and the local inspector. Most likely the involvement of an outside inspector would greatly reduce the possibility of distorted judgements rooted in cosy bonds of friendship prevailing, and yet the generality of teachers are unconcerned. Further, the evidence of the two Assistant Chief Inspectors and two of the three District Inspectors suggests that they too would endorse it. Echoing what he says is likely to be Department of Education and Science position in the coming years, one Assistant Chief Inspector argued:

*I would think it's too important to have the idea of the development of the school to be left to one individual and I'd like to think that balance would be brought into it.*

In fact only one inspector. Inspector C, opposed the notion declaring that this paradoxically might lead to a distortion of teacher performance:

*I think the teacher is going to perform an awful lot better and with less artificiality with someone she has come to know and trust.*

In summary, therefore, it appears that the introduction of an outside inspector working in tandem with his local colleague would appear to be acceptable to the majority of the key players. His/her presence, perhaps as a more critical 'critical friend', would be in line with one of the guiding principles of school evaluation internationally, that is that the review team should include personnel who have no prior knowledge of the institution (MacBeath, 1999:152). Most likely this would enhance confidence levels in the whole school inspection findings and hence add to its impact. We now turn to a consideration of the impact that whole school inspection has had on the three schools.

## **The impact of whole school inspection**

*'It may come as a surprise to learn that there has been little serious research into the effects of school inspection'.*

(Wilcox and Gray, 1996: 48)

When initially I read this statement by Gray and Wilcox in 1996 I was surprised. It seemed rather odd that British education researchers with the relatively generous resources available to them (compared to their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland) should not have produced a substantial literature on inspection by the closing years of the millennium. However, as I extended my background reading and undertook the preparation of the pilot research, it quickly began to dawn that I had chosen a topic of far greater complexity than had appeared at first sight and that this held the key to the paucity of research in Britain at the time. Moreover, no area seemed to share the high level of complexity involved in attempting to measure the impact of inspection.

When initially I engaged in formulating the research questions the task of assessing the impact of the inspections had seemed relatively unproblematic. I expected that inspectors would operate in a particular way and ultimately this would lead to the production of a School Report that would raise key issues and make recommendations for change. Following from this it seemed to me that the measurement of impact would be a relatively simple operation; in effect the main task would be the seeking of a match between what inspectors did and recommended and what in fact actually happened within the time scale of approximately of six to nine months. The key players would indicate where change had been effected and, arising from this, essentially my task would consist of verifying, recording and measuring the changes. I envisaged that an essential element of the task would consist of a confirmation and evaluation of document revision (e.g. the School Plan, lesson notes, procedures for recording progress etc), interviewing on a wide scale would also feature and ultimately I would be in a position to make a reasonable judgement on the level of impact achieved.

I had one major concern and that was the question of the amount of time it takes for change to manifest itself. I knew from the literature on the subject that the implementation of most innovations takes two or more years, and their 'institutionalisation' (or recognition as an ongoing feature of the school) in the school can take three to five years (Wilcox and Gray, 96; Stoll and Fink, 1996: 46). Indeed in their study of inspection in England, after nine months Gray and Wilcox found that of the twenty-four schools in their sample only 11% of the recommendations could be considered fully implemented, and nearly 40% were either unimplemented or implemented only to a 'limited' extent (Wilcox and Gray, 96: 87, 96). Accordingly, the concrete signs of impact might not be readily apparent at the end of the fieldwork six to nine months later, but I was cautiously optimistic that teachers, and inspectors too, would be in a position to identify at least some changes that had been introduced - or in train - in direct response to the whole school inspections. Further, armed with this data I hoped I would be in a position then to formulate some hypotheses on what might possibly transpire in the following months as a direct result of the inspections.

The experience of the follow-up interviews during September and October of 1999 was soon to disabuse me of the expectation that it would be relatively easy to find direct causal relationships between what had transpired during the whole school inspections and subsequent changes in attitude and action some months later. As each teacher interview came to an end it became increasingly clear that relatively simple causal relationships would scarcely emerge and that by no means could my judgements on impact be interpreted as constituting proof. The best I could offer would be a series of hypotheses grounded on evidence and inferences derived from the discussions with teachers. Only too clearly the tension between inspection as a positivist quasi -scientific exercise and inspection as a qualitative operation within the naturalistic paradigm became apparent.

Given that the study had as a central aim the examination of impact in terms of the perspectives of the key players involved, and having regard for its

naturalistic orientation too. it seemed clearly appropriate that teachers and inspectors should be asked directly what impact, if any, the whole school inspections had made. Responding to the question, all but one of the twenty teachers stated that the inspections had made either little or no impact, except in respect of the stress generated . (As shown above, p.109, no less than two-thirds of the teachers experienced a considerable increase in stress levels, and this was most particularly so in the period leading up to the inspections.)

In addition to the direct response *'It made no impact'* or *'It made no difference'* made by eight teachers across all three schools, others in all three schools again expressed themselves in a more blunt fashion:

*'It has made no difference except to alert the Board of Management to the need to repair the floor.'*

(Headteacher, School G)

*'I gained nothing from it.'*

(BS, School G)

*'Can't say there has been much change, if any. It's a good school and we're carrying on as we were.'*

(HD, School C)

*'It was a waste of time.'*

(BX, School C)

*'I hasn't made a huge difference to us.'*

(Headteacher, School C)

*'It was definitely superficial and we'll do nothing different as a result of the whole school inspection.'*

(Four Infants teachers- School M )

On the same theme of general impact the three inspectors who conducted the whole school inspections were asked to choose from four descriptors the one that best summed up their level of success. Discarding 'no impact', 'substantial impact', and 'very substantial impact', all were unanimous in their belief that 'little impact' constituted the best descriptor. Nevertheless, Inspector C felt he had made 'some' difference and that was in the area team building and the linked process of whole school planning.

In an effort to determine the extent to which these perspectives might be shared by the senior management of the inspectorate, if at all, I raised the question of impact directly with each one - the Chief Inspector, the Deputy Chief Inspector and the two Assistant Chief Inspector. While more measured and tentative in their responses, it was clear that in broad terms their views were substantially little different from those expressed by their colleagues or teachers. To them it was uncertain if whole school inspection as currently constituted was capable of making an impact of any significance. Quite simply a multiplicity of variables operated during the process and hence, as remarked by the Chief Inspector, *'It's difficult to say at the moment because in fact we don't measure it.'* His colleague next in line in the inspectoral hierarchy, the Deputy Chief Inspector, was in full agreement, stating *'It's difficult to say that whole school inspection effects any change in the school'*, and asserting that *'it would be unreasonable to ascribe a significant or direct contribution by whole school inspection to school change'*.

Colleagues in the next rung of the hierarchy ladder were less circumspect: *'I don't believe that they improve schools in the least,'* declared one Assistant Chief Inspector, while the other suspected that *'in a lot of cases'* whole school inspection *'has no impact except for the dedicated few who, for example, have an academic interest in school development.'*

The largely pessimistic picture of whole school inspection drawn by inspectors and teachers is of some significance in that almost all concerned stated that they

view themselves as actors in an exercise of little value. To the extent that this perception has some validity may be unclear, but any consideration of the reasons why so many of the main players looked at whole school inspection in such negative terms should include an examination of the three School Reports. In simple terms the central issue here is whether, or to what extent, could one reasonably view the Reports as documents that by their nature might have made an impact on the school.

### *The School Report*

When the whole school inspection has been completed the District Inspector produces a School Report of approximately 1 800 words which in due course is issued by the Department of Education and Science to the Chairperson of the school Board of Management and to the headteacher. (More than six months had elapsed since the post-inspection meeting before any of the three schools received its Report.) It is not a public document, it is often written in Irish which in fact is understood only by a minority of the general public and hence its contents remain private except to a small circle of people. Parents do not have sight of it, for example but, if the Board agrees, they may be apprised of its general thrust by the two parent representatives.

In other jurisdictions, for example in Scotland and England, these Reports tend to be comprehensive documents and in broad terms they express judgments on the effectiveness of the school in direct and unambiguous language. In Scotland there are six main sections ranging from an introduction through to sections on pupil performance, effectiveness of the school and its management, and on to two final sections entitled 'Key strengths' and 'Main points for action'. Within four months of publication of the Report the Board of Governors of the schools are required to provide parents and HMI a paper explaining how they are going to act on the main points for action. Guiding them in the process is a system of target setting devised by the HMI and linked to a sophisticated system of benchmarking that has as its primary objective the promotion of school self-evaluation leading to improvement (SOED, 1996; SOED, 1998a; SOED,

1998b). Further, a follow-up inspection follows one to two years later in which progress on the action plan is assessed.

It is likely that the Ofsted system exerts a greater pressure on schools in that an unsatisfactory rating can lead to school closure. Again there is considerable clarity in expression of judgements and the inspection report is expected to provide the school 'with a clear basis for action by identifying issues which are central to its improvement' (Office for Standards in Education, 1999: online). Accordingly, the Report includes sections entitled 'Main findings;' and 'Key issues for action' which are expected to be outlined in a clear and unambiguous fashion. It can thus be seen that in the UK schools are let in no doubt in respect of what is expected of them following an inspection and, with regard to English schools in particular, it becomes a matter of grave importance that the issues raised in the reports are addressed. No such urgency attends the School Report in Ireland as is witnessed, for example, by the delay in issuing Reports.

In common with their colleagues in the UK, Irish inspectors write their reports in accordance with a particular format designed to ensure a measure of consistency. But, within that format they enjoy a measure of flexibility and freedom that is in stark contrast with that enjoyed by their UK counterparts and in fact the main reporting requirement is that they select their section headings from an official list. After that they may adopt their own style and they may include or omit data in accordance with personal judgement. There are no firm guidelines and hence the essential thrust of Reports largely reflects the preferences of individual inspectors in terms of what they choose to address.

Each School Report was examined with a view to identifying statements that might give rise to an emotional response or generate a reaction of some kind in the reader. Specifically, expressions of criticism and exhortations to develop along particular lines were sought out. In broad terms the analysis showed that each inspector had produced a rather vague and anodyne Report that was strong in description and weak in judgement. Moreover, there was little to suggest that any of the three had resulted from a penetrating and rigorous analysis, a

circumstance that in effect seems to bear out the critical comments expressed by the inspectorate's top management. The following two excerpts exemplify their opinion of Reports which as a matter of course are presented to the Assistant Chief Inspectors for approval before issue to the schools:

*The School Reports are not managing to say effectively where there are problems in a whole school context and that immediately raises the issue of credibility...In terms of feeding into policy formulation and around issues of evaluation, and around systems of system analysis, the School Report has no contribution to make.*

(GOC, Assistant Chief Inspector)

*The actual Reports have varied from the sublime to the ridiculous. I have felt when reading some Reports that if I was to put in my son who was in secondary school at the time and tell him to pass through the school, in the course of two days he would have been able to tell me more about this school than was in the Reports. Absolutely superficial, impressionistic and lightweight stuff. Now there were others who wrote very extended Reports, but when you actually read through them you found what you were getting was a lot of information about trivial matters - non analytic and not rigorous.*

(GH, Assistant Chief Inspector)

The three inspectors for their part asserted that they do not shy from offering critical comment, but they tend to do so orally and with sensitivity so that the self-esteem of teachers is less likely to be impugned. (This re-echoes the Deputy Chief Inspector's comment cited earlier. 'They have to say unpleasant things at times in truth, but they don't have to say those things unpleasantly'). Hence, with reputations still intact and confidentiality assured, they believe that teachers are more likely to address perceived shortcomings and indeed do so

with greater success. To the effect that the Reports tended to affirm schools there seems little doubt - most teachers and all three Principals said so - and indeed if one were to identify one overriding effect that whole school inspection has had on the three schools then one would have to cite that of affirmation. It impacted decisively in all three schools and was perceived by every teacher as a most valuable and encouraging consequence of whole school inspection. But not every member of the top management of the inspectorate tended to agree with this interpretation and one in particular adverted to the possible negative effects that might accrue:

*Whole school inspection gives lightweight positive support. The affirmation could be doing something good but on the other hand it could also be destructive in that it could promote smugness. This could lead schools not wanting to change because the inspectorate had praised them and their practices. In fact one could argue that this might be more harmful than positive and supportive.*

(GH, Assistant Chief Inspector)

Inspection reports elsewhere are seen to have a value. Commenting on a report on a Surrey primary school in 1995 Dimmer and Metiuk suggest that it 'provided the school with a springboard from which to move forward' by confirming its sense of direction and focusing on specific avenues to improvement' (Dimmer and Metiuk, 1998: 55). But to what extent might the three Reports have a similar potential? Did they contain judgements pinpointing key issues for addressing with some urgency? In effect, given the manner in which they present to the reader, how likely was it that the Reports would have made a significant impact upon the schools? To this end each of the three documents was scrutinised and an attempt was made to identify the salient issues, criticisms and recommendations contained therein. These are outlined in the following paragraphs. (It should be understood that the Reports for schools G and C were written in Irish - which the teachers would understand - and what

is offered is a translation that perhaps fails to convey with precision the character and spirit of the inspectors' choice of words.)

### School G

- It is felt it would be a valuable exercise for the Board of Management to examine the heating situation and the functioning of the school's doors.
- It would be helpful if the school now composed a statement of its main aims and philosophy.
- It is felt that the school should think of setting on a solid basis its approach to the development of personal writing.

In addition, at the end of each Report there is, as standard, a section designated 'Post-inspection meeting with staff'. In this section, in respect of School G, the inspector states that '*a worthwhile discussion*' ('plé fiúntach' in Irish) took place and centred on four areas - the use of standardised tests in mathematics, the development of the School Plan to date, the teaching of poetry and drama and the school policy in respect of learning support. Usually the items specified in this section can be interpreted as those where weaknesses have been perceived, that is of course unless a clear statement signalling the opposite is given; in fact during interview Inspector A declared that these areas warranted attention in School G. Moreover, the phrase '*worthwhile discussion*' in School Reports can be viewed as a code or signalling device to denote shortcomings. The teachers will know what is meant (because it will have been spelt out during informal discussion in the classroom), but in point of fact the criticism will not have been expressed in harsh and critical terms to repose on the records for years to come. In other words, no one will be in a position to say *with certainty and without contradiction* that the inspector found a particular fault. Inspectors in general see a value in this ambiguity in that the school's reputation is maintained intact while at the same time it is alerted to the need for development in a particular area. In the case of the three research schools the inspectors claimed that the self-esteem of the teachers had been preserved as a consequence and hence it was likely that a more promising scenario for cooperation and development had been set.

As Inspector C put it:

*I tend to be very guarded in any type of criticism I would make on paper because I am conscious that fifty-years down the line people would misinterpret this and feel that matters had been much worse. In a way you are interfering with teachers' reputations - you are damning them. Indeed your criticism may well be true but I think that the occasion to say it is to their face and not in writing.*

Clearly this adds up to a desire on the part of the inspector to be seen as the 'critical friend' who wishes to collaborate with schools in the promotion of high quality standards. But unfortunately this comes at the cost of a somewhat bland Report, lacking in insight, limited in specifics and in stark contrast with the UK model. The information needs of the external reader who has not formed part of the whole school inspection exercise hardly have been served, and rooted in the scenario are the criticisms of the inspectorate's top management. That is, although there is generous affirmation there is little analysis and the potential for generalisation to the national picture is very limited if not impossible.

The pattern was continued in School C, as we now see.

### School C

The School Report on school C contains no recommendation whatever. It is stated that at the post-inspection meeting three themes '*were discussed*':

- the teaching of French
- the curriculum, curricular change and development
- use of the library

No indication is given on what was said in relation to the three areas and only those who were present at the meeting would be in a position to understand the significance of the three discussion points. Perhaps the inspector had some

words of praise and criticism, perhaps he followed these up with some recommendations but an account of the judgements - if indeed there were any - will not be a part of the school's records. Granted the inspector will have offered the Chairperson of Board of Management an oral presentation of his findings couched in general terms, but only the school staff will have been party to the details.

### School M

In common with the other two, the School Report on School M is highly commendatory of the efforts of the staff. Extending over six pages, it contains only two recommendations, as follows:

- Incidents of vandalism would probably be eliminated if the surrounding fencing were raised
- The use of Irish as a general means of communication could be extended to all classes

A careful scrutiny of the Report produces statements that *may* imply some criticism, but the matter is by no means clear and equally these statements could be interpreted as no more than mere suggestions. Certainly, a sense of no great urgency is conveyed. As in the case of the other two Reports, unless the inspector told the teachers at the post-inspection meeting what he had in mind it is unlikely that only the most critical and discerning of readers would detect a reference to a shortcoming. The statements that may be interpreted as indicators of criticism are as follows:

- Individual pupil record files are kept *in some* classes. (As an inspector I interpret this as an exhortation to extend the practice of individual recording to a greater number of classes, but whether or not teachers will construe it as a call to do so cannot be certain. What is certain is that they had made no modifications to recording practices at the time of the final interviews in October 1999.)

- In PE *'the lack of large apparatus results in a somewhat restricted programme'*. (Here the fault may be ascribed to the perceived penny-pinching nature of Department of Education and Science for not approving adequate grant-aid rather than to the school which perhaps may have chosen inappropriately to spend its money elsewhere. Consequently there is little challenge for teachers to examine their own contribution to the restrictive nature of the work.)

Finally, as in the case of the other two schools, it is stated that certain themes *'were discussed'* - not however at the post-inspection meeting but separately with individuals or groups of teachers during the process of inspection. The inspector records that *'different aspects of the work of the school were discussed including remedial education, physical education and assessment'*. Here again is the ambiguity that in effect invites the reader to second-guess what he has in mind. Can this comment be construed as a covert criticism of remedial education arrangements and the other areas by virtue of the fact that he felt it necessary to discuss the matters, or in fact is it merely a note to the effect that some ideas were exchanged? We do not know, nor indeed did it emerge at interview that the teachers themselves actually knew. However, what we do know from the inspectors' evidence is that in broad outline their overall assessment of the school was mediated by a feeling for teachers' sensitivities. This meant they declined to report many of the weaknesses encountered or chose to resort to a level of ambiguity because, as stated above, they surmised that a higher level of clarity - the stark truth as they saw it - would not have helped the school. This is of some significance in that it serves to underscore the qualitative nature of whole school inspection and shows that inspectors were concerned not only with the schools' performance but also with their developmental potential. Moreover, a similar finding was made by Sandbrook who reported that English inspectors in the early 1990's *'did not report everything they might have done'* and that they *'matched what was reported with what the school might have been able to bear'* (Sandbrook, 1996: 130).

The strong element of ambiguity that pervades each Report can be seen to have a number of effects, some potentially valuable but others far less so. A deliberate attempt to promote 'collaborative and professional relationships' with key players, and indeed between them, is fundamental to current change theory (Gray et al, 1997: 24; Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992: 60-77) but the twin interventions of pressure and support central to the process also must be in equilibrium with each other (Fullan, 1991: 91). Support without pressure leads to waste and, equally, pressure without support leads to stress (Lonsdale and Parsons, 1998: 111). A loss of credibility on the part of the change agents follows if an appropriate balance is not maintained and inevitably this leads to disillusionment and ultimately, at best, limited action within the organisation. To the extent that the inspectors in their reporting attempt to affirm teachers and promote good relations with them while at the same time sheltering and perpetuating poor teaching, they run the risk of doing so at a cost. In their desire to promote an atmosphere conducive to development, one that would prevail when they revisit as part of their normal routine, they run the risk of devaluing the whole school inspection process. It may not be wide of the mark to suggest that this may go a considerable way in explaining why the first response of teachers to the question of impact was that the inspections ranged from a mild '*can't say there has been much change*' to a startling '*it was waste of time*'.

The initial response of teachers appeared surprising in its negativity - it may be recalled that no less than nineteen out of twenty declared that the inspections had made little or no impact, except to generate stress - and for me this virtual unanimity generated some unease. How valid was this judgement on the inspections? The hesitation displayed by some teachers in responding to some questions during interview demonstrated that whole school inspection occupied a place far from central to their thoughts, notwithstanding how important it might seem to inspectors. This in itself gives some indication of the impact that whole school inspection makes in the long run but, more particularly, here it cast doubt on the validity of the initial global response. Perhaps one ought to ascribe it a status no higher than that of the hastily composed, knee-jerk contribution of one who has reflected only very little but yet who feels s/he has

to make some utterance? It was impossible to say with any measure of confidence and consequently I resolved to probe further in each case in an effort to confirm or indeed disconfirm the initial responses.

### *Initial responses probed*

Each interview was scrutinised carefully in an effort to identify any evidence that might contradict respondents' initial negative response. The task in fact did not prove difficult and considerable data emerged to suggest that though teachers stated that the whole school inspection had had little or no effect, to a considerable extent this was an exaggeration.

In fact, no less than thirteen of the twenty respondents across the three schools mentioned in the course of interview that whole school inspection had had a direct impact in the area of whole school and individual planning. In two of the schools the School Plan had consisted of a collection of disparate and largely unedited documents that were not readily accessible to teachers. In the weeks leading up to the inspections these had been assembled, re-assessed, redrafted and bound together into a single more easily read volume. In the third school, School G, a similar review exercise had taken place but to a somewhat lesser degree.

The thirteen also stated that in the lead up to the inspections they had reviewed their written schemes of work and, arising from this, they had produced a set of documents more comprehensive and useful than before. This was particularly true in the case of long-term planning but it also pertained to short-term preparation, albeit to a lesser degree. Also, they had undertaken an examination of record-keeping procedures which had led to a more comprehensive listing of topics covered and a more systematic specification of pupils' strengths and weaknesses. In stark contrast, however, the other seven teachers stated that they had felt no need to review written preparation on the basis that they were satisfied their current practice was adequate. Significantly, when the thirteen were asked nine months or so later if the practice of producing a more comprehensive written preparation had continued, the general response was in

the negative; the same rigour no longer obtained. But all were firm in the belief that the exercise in developing the School Plan had been valuable in terms of clarifying the school's system of beliefs and values, and in specifying aims and objectives. Moreover, they claimed that this continued to exert a definite but almost imperceptible influence on the daily operations of the schools. In summary, therefore, it appears that the whole school inspections had had a positive impact on over half the respondents in the general areas of planning while, with regard to the short term written preparation efforts, it seems that the same enthusiasm had not endured nine months later. But, importantly, the thirteen did see a valuable residual value in the review of the School Plan which the impending whole school inspection had obliged them address.

Notwithstanding the initial assertions that the whole school inspection had made little or no impact, it emerged that there were other areas also in which the inspections had had an impact. But, in contrast with planning, there was no particular pattern and examples in general were of a random nature. For example, two teachers, one in School G and the other in School C, stated that the inspector had offered useful detailed advice in the area of Mathematics and on the basis of this they had succeeded in raising standards in their classes. One of these (NN) added that she found the opportunity afforded by the whole school inspection to access '*another perspective*' had proven most valuable. Thanks to Inspector A's deft handling of the lesson and his general analysis of the work, she was now experiencing a greater level of success in the delivery of the class programme. Yet, paradoxically, this same teacher initially stated that whole school inspection had made no impact! This clearly justified the decision to probe further in order to determine the depth of beliefs (and, on another theme, it also underlined the value of a qualitative orientation in the area of school evaluation). In addition to this three other teachers, one from each of the schools, commended the whole school inspection for its success in generating discussion and debate in the light again of '*another perspective*' or '*a different viewpoint*'. The inspections had made them reflect on what they were about, but whether the conceptual insights arising from this would lead to future action

they did not say. Perhaps it will, but the time span of the research does not allow one make a definitive judgement on the matter.

Other areas mentioned *by at least one teacher* on which the whole school inspection had impacted for the better, and continued to do so, were the following:

- Development of oral language in Irish and English - School G
- Development of oral Irish - School C
- Promotion of library and voluntary reading - School G
- Development of Nature Study - School C
- Improved procedures in learning support - School C
- Teaching approaches - all three schools

In parallel with the scrutiny of interview scripts for evidence relating to the impact of the inspections, I endeavoured to search for clues that might help identify some reasons why the situation was perceived to be as stated. The task did not prove difficult, and no less than seventeen teachers highlighted one particular inhibiting factor, namely the duration of the inspection. Quite simply, the general perception among teachers was that inspectors did not spend long enough in the schools to make a difference in terms of promoting development. Significantly, as shown above, the teachers in general believed that the inspectors were most competent and credible and that they had secured the necessary evidence to enable them make trustworthy judgements on the schools. But in their opinion a far more important task than the making of judgements was that of facilitating school and personal development, and on the basis of this criterion they expressed considerable regret that inspectors had not spent enough time in the schools to make an adequate impact.

The inspectors for their part shared this opinion. The words of Inspector A encapsulate all that was felt by the whole three:

*We're all on a treadmill at speed and so I'm not at ease while inspecting. We haven't enough time and I see this as a dreadful reflection on us as an organisation that we don't value reflection and time for reflection. And, also, we haven't the time to follow up on evaluations and help people digest what we have said to them, and this is a great weakness.*

In re-echoing the comments of Inspector A, his two colleagues focused on the time implications of servicing the Minister's office in relation to matters of a trivial nature and also on a variety of unnecessary fact-finding tasks set them by the Department of Education and Science (see pp. 30-31 for examples). In their opinion this means they are continually diverted from what they see is the core work of inspecting schools. To Inspector C speech-writing for the Minister and the gathering of statistics (by inspectors) is 'a gross waste of time' and he asks 'What benefit is that for the children of the nation?' He is in no doubt that a clear conceptualisation of the role of the inspector is required and, in common with his colleagues, he speaks with spirit and no little impatience:

*What we are missing at the moment is clarity on what we are about. And the new Education Act is not specific enough to help. I'd love to see in a page at the back of the Act 'The inspectorate is not set up to do the following...writing speeches for Ministers' and other silly excuses that have little to do with education.*

The third inspector was equally critical of the situation in which he found himself in terms of the time available for whole school inspection. In his estimation, the growing number of duties of a non-inspectoral nature was leading to failure on his part to bring an adequate level of rigour to bear in judging the success of the schools. Moreover, and with no little regret on his part, it was setting undue limits to the contribution which he desired to make in the area of school development. In all, during the 1998-1999 school year Inspector B devoted thirty-eight days to whole school inspection, whereas

Inspector C spent forty-one days on this work (Inspector A had been ill and hence his total of nineteen days is artificially low). As a percentage of the number of days in which the schools were required to be open i.e. 183 days, this translates to twenty-one and twenty-two percent respectively which clearly represents a rather modest amount of time if whole school inspection is to be viewed as an operation considered to be of some importance by the Department of Education and Science. On a national basis the position had been better in the 1992-1995 period for example when there more inspectors, and on average they spent of thirty-percent of their time on whole school inspection at this time (calculated from Department of Education and Science Annual Reports on the Inspectorate and Psychological Service, 1992-1996 \*). But this alters the position only slightly and it appears that too little time is devoted to the operation if the intention is that it should make an impact of some significance. (Figures have not been published for the following years - it seems they were not compiled which in itself is indicative of a lack of urgency attaching to the official perspective on whole school inspection - but from informal conversations with colleagues it is likely that the twenty-percent figure is nearer the mark today.) We learn from the compendious literature on change that *effective change agents tend to become absorbed in a problem and devote time to its analysis, thereby avoiding the pitfalls attendant upon the advancing of superficial 'solutions'* (Morrison, 1998: 221). Hence this leads to the inescapable conclusion that unless a greater proportion of the inspector's time is devoted to whole school inspection (or whole school evaluation, to use its proposed new designation) then inevitably the impact will be modest. And, in fact, this also was the opinion of the three inspectors, as cited earlier p.139. But, given that time constraints affect the potential of whole school inspection to make an impact on the schools, it is likely that this factor offers no more than a partial explanation for the high a proportion of the teachers' negative responses. In a study of inspection in two English schools in the mid 1990's

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\* These were little more than statistical bulletins published as an initiative by the inspectorate for some years in the first half of the 1990's and should not be confused with the Annual Report discussed earlier.

Cromey-Hawke found a strong tendency among teachers to deny that their Ofsted inspections had had any worthwhile effect (Cromey-Hawke, 1998: 136-137). He interpreted this as 'instinctive rejection, rather than simple forgetfulness' and suggested that it was based on a defensiveness borne out of a desire not to concede a measure of value to a practice that seemed to challenge their professionalism 'and self-actualisation'. But, nevertheless, he declared that increasingly the potential for improvement through inspection is being recognised by schools, and teachers are beginning to engage with the principles of evaluation underlying the operation. Conceivably, the instinctive denial came into play also in the Irish situation and here too it has cloaked a growing acceptance of systematic evaluation inspired by inspection.

We now have examined the evidence drawn from the interviews. We have considered the perceived aims of whole school inspection, we have investigated the processes in which the key players engaged and conceivably the accompanying analysis has served to cast some light on the complex issue of impact. We now turn to the final task of attempting to summarise what we have learned, and in parallel with this we address the four research questions cited in the Introduction. To the extent we are successful we will have facilitated the Department of Education and Science in its planning endeavours and by the same token we will have provided the impetus for others in the research community to direct their attentions to a new field of endeavour.

## CHAPTER 7

### **Summary and Conclusions**

In the previous pages an attempt has been made to sketch the history of whole school inspection from its inception in its present form in 1976 right up to the present day when a new model is at the final stages of preparation. It has been shown that throughout the nineteenth-century, and for somewhat more than the first half of the twentieth, the primary focus of the inspector's attention centred on the work of individual teachers in the classroom. Relations between inspectors and teachers were often strained, and particularly so because of the merit marking arrangement that in its final manifestation was not brought to an end until 1958 (p.18). The introduction of *The Primary School Curriculum* with its pupil-centred orientation heralded a new and enlightened era in the schools and inevitably inspection was brought into alignment with new perspectives on learning and teaching. The Piagetian viewpoint that saw the teacher as enabler rather than instructor achieved an unchallenged dominance and in the changing circumstances it became inevitable and indeed desirable that inspectors would widen their field of view and take in the whole school as an individual unit as the focus of their attention. As the relevant Circular that issued in whole school inspection stated, the ensuing School Report would embody 'an assessment of the work of the school as a whole' (Circular 12/76).

With the discontinuance of the Annual Report in 1962 the last semblance of an effort to deploy the inspectorate as a provider of commentary and analysis on the system nationally finally had come to an end, and with it the Department of Education deprived itself of an important potential source of information in the formulation of national education policy. As seen in the interviews with members of senior management, the inspectorate in its reporting fails to offer a

perspective on the system nationally, this now is greatly regretted and consequently the matter is to be addressed as a developing part of the new *Whole School Evaluation* arrangements. Insofar as the Department of Education and Science seems to have a policy on the matter, it appears that it sees the inspector as a monitor, advisor and supporter of schools who reports to the Minister; and that s/he does so primarily by means of whole school inspection reports (Circulars 12/76; 31/82). But official policy is characterised by a lack of detail, and from the official documentation and interviews it is not possible to arbitrate on what is seen to be the relative importance of each function. What is clear, however, is that in keeping with the international perspective there is a growing trend within the country to view the education system as part of the economy. Evaluation is becoming an educational policy issue and its importance is seen not only in its monitoring capacity but also in its power to guide educational policy. In parallel with this there is a growing preference for a more widespread democratisation in Irish society, and in recent times this has reflected itself in a push towards decentralisation. (For example, the last Government favoured the establishment of a kind of local education authority called the 'Regional Board'.) The growing devolution of power from central administrations internationally has resulted in increasing levels of autonomy being granted to schools at primary and post-primary level in Ireland and arising from this it is expected they will assume a greater level of responsibility for their management. The emerging consensus as determined both from the public utterances of the senior inspectorate and from the interview evidence can be summed up as a desire to help individual schools to help themselves maintain what they have achieved and develop further; and, increasingly, whole school inspection/evaluation is being seen to have a major role to play in this. But, clearly, the process will be a gradual one and it was within this context of mounting change that the research was sited.

The decision to focus part of the study on the question of policy proved most illuminating in that it served to highlight the existence of a high level of ambiguity among all the key players who were interviewed. The initial response of all inspectors virtually was one of hesitation as they appeared to

engage in a somewhat tortuous process of reflection in attempting to define priorities. The simple answer of course was to declare that whole school inspection had the dual function of evaluation for accountability and evaluation for the sake of promoting school development. It can be said that this was seen by all as the pivotal principle of the operation. But when pressed further to suggest which of the two concepts had primacy, inspectors reflected a lack of consensus that, as in the case of the Chief Inspector for example, was mixed with uncertainty. The Deputy Chief Inspector was in no doubt - to him whole school inspection primarily was an exercise in securing a rendering of account - and two of his three District Inspector colleagues who conducted the inspection in the schools agreed (but with some regret). In contrast, the two Assistant Chief Inspectors viewed the operation as one that has as its primary objective the promotion of individual school development, and indeed the third District Inspector was of the same opinion. But the responses of the teachers were characterised by no such ambiguity: all but three saw it as an exercise in securing accountability. Interestingly, two-thirds of them accepted this as acceptable and reasonable and it was clear that their main concern was the verdict of the inspector on their performance in the classroom rather any deliberations on the purpose of whole school inspection. MacBeath has argued that a failure to clarify the purpose of evaluation leads to mistrust and confusion (see p.89) and though the evidence from the three schools suggests that a sense of confusion hardly obtained, missing in large measure from the inspections was the high level of trust necessary for the conduct of quality evaluation (that is, that which has a strong possibility of enabling development). A consequence of this can be seen in the reported increase in stress levels experienced by two-thirds of the teachers, especially in the lead up to the inspections, and with it the clear reluctance to take the necessary ownership of the operation.

In contrast with their colleagues in Northern Ireland, Britain and other EU countries, the three District Inspectors assumed a dynamic role in the classroom. In addition to observing the teacher in action they themselves adopted a policy of active engagement with the children. This was expected (and appreciated too) by the teachers, it added to their credibility and was

undertaken both to secure a deeper understanding of the children's grasp of work supposedly completed and to establish a rapport or empathy with the anxious teacher. In this manner inspectors felt that they gained a more penetrating insight into what truly had been mastered than that which could have been secured from mere observation of what might have been a deliberate obfuscation on the part of the teacher. Of course this would not be sufficient on which to base a final judgement but they argued convincingly that it would go some further distance in facilitating their arrival at trustworthy judgements than perhaps if they had remained sitting at the back of the room. Moreover, the practice facilitated them in the employment of a type of purposive sampling and progressive focusing that forms an integral part of the naturalistic paradigm. Indeed as the interviewing proceeded it became increasingly clear that naturalistic inquiry would constitute a valuable conceptual framework for understanding the process of whole school inspection. By no means can it be argued that there is a direct correspondence between both processes - for example, whole school inspection lacks the comprehensiveness of naturalistic inquiry - but nevertheless it can be seen as located in the tradition of qualitative field research. Hence, when an interested public inevitably come to direct attention to *Whole School Evaluation*, the new model of whole school inspection, it will be possible to cite naturalistic inquiry and the naturalistic paradigm as its methodological basis. Moreover, it will be the naturalistic rather than the positivist paradigm that will hold the greatest promise in defending whole school inspection/evaluation and in developing the key methodological processes that are inherent in the operation.

Perhaps the most startling finding emerging from the study was that no less than nineteen teachers *initially* stated that the three whole school inspections had made little or no positive impact. There had been a negative impact in that high levels of stress and anxiety were generated but most teachers stated that this had not affected their classroom performance. Consequently, in broad outline at least it was felt that the three inspectors had secured a valid picture of what was happening in the schools and the teachers in general felt affirmed. This, they said, was due in large part to the positive working relationships that

obtained during the inspection. High standards of professionalism characterised by honest oral exchange and appropriate levels of sensitivity on the part of inspectors had pervaded the exercise and old friendships had not been allowed to generate an unhealthy cosiness that sought consensus at the expense of rigour. The School Reports only recently had been received and had yet to be considered in detail. Nevertheless, first impressions were good and it was felt that the inspectors had confirmed current practice and produced a description of the school that at least in its essential aspects was true. Most certainly no teacher expressed concern at the dearth of recommendations - and understandably so given that the inspection primarily was seen as an exercise in making them accountable to the Department and ultimately the taxpayer - and it did not appear that what the keen and perceptive external reader might construe as criticism had come to be seen as such by teachers. Perhaps all of this might be interpreted as endorsing the deliberate policy of inspectors not to spell out unambiguously *in the Report* how they felt (they would have done so orally, as discussed earlier p.147), but equally it might be characterised as a costly failure to provide the Department of Education and Science with information useful for planning and policy formulation; and by the same token it might be seen to do little to advance the thinking of teachers.

The initial assertion by most teachers that the whole school inspections had made very little impact in terms of developing the school, and its subsequent contradiction by some of them, can be interpreted in a number of ways all of which pivot on the notion that because of the tentative nature and status of knowledge their judgement in fact may be wide of the mark. It has been cogently argued by Stenhouse, Hammersley, Eisner and others that all knowledge is a construction, a human product, and one's perceptions are not necessarily synonymous with what is true (see pp. 45, 71). Hence, in simple terms the teachers may have been wrong and may in fact have rationalised the situation in an unconscious effort to avoid conceding value to a threatening practice. Further, an inappropriate conceptualisation of whole school inspection embodied in an unreasonable expectation of what was possible in the circumstances may have added to their dissatisfaction. To quote Ferguson in his

recent publication, they were 'not dealing with perfect processes but with imperfect judgements made by fallible human beings working under pressure in often difficult circumstances' (Ferguson, 2000:144). Significantly, as the interviews proceeded it became apparent that some teachers did in fact believe that the whole school inspection led to some improvements in the area of school planning and to certain developments in pedagogy, oracy and numeracy. Equally, four of them attributed value to the opportunity provided by whole school inspection to exchange ideas with another professional with 'another perspective' whom they had come to respect over time. These 'other professionals', the three inspectors, would agree with this but, as we have seen, they were far from fulsome in describing the level of impact that this other perspective had made.

What therefore can one say about the three whole school inspections? The safe and certain answer is that they have had *some* impact on the operations of the schools. But if one asks to what extent have they had this impact, then a difficulty arises: it is impossible to say with any certainty. We learn from school effectiveness research that schools may change (for the better or worse) over time - it has been found that performance can fluctuate over a two or three year period ( Reynolds, 1995: 63) - but to establish a direct causal link between the manifestation of change and a particular cause is highly problematic. This serves to explain in some degree why in the opinion of many commentators we tend to value what we can measure rather than measure what we value (Hargreaves, 1997: 106; McGilchrist, 1997: 30).

But is it reasonable to expect that whole school inspection can ever make an impact in a direct sense? What has been the experience elsewhere? A study of inspections in twelve primary schools in England in the early 1990's concluded that inspection cannot be shown to make an impact in any direct sense:

*So the notion of inspection having an impact in any measurable, mechanical sense, has proved to be wide of the mark. As Henkel (1991) has suggested, it is inappropriate to*

*depict inspection as somehow driving the school. In so far as any institution can drive another, it is more likely that the school will drive itself. In reality, the effects of any inspection are likely to be more percolative and interactive. As a result they are unlikely to be simple to observe or attribute.*

(Sandbrook, 1996: 2)

The argument pivots on the notion that the nature and pace of change are such that it is perhaps impossible to disentangle the particular influence of an inspection from other possible catalysts such as the progressive implementation of a new curriculum, in-career development, parental initiatives, for example. Significantly, a revised and challenging curriculum has been introduced into the primary system in Ireland within the last year and in conjunction with it a comprehensive and systematic programme of in-career development has been instituted. This complicates the identification of causal relationships in that it introduces a further set of variables that most likely influence the behaviour of teachers. Accordingly, efforts to disentangle from each other the several factors that influence change in schools are liable to be fraught with difficulty and, conceivably, impossible to achieve to any credible extent. Given this scenario my lack of success in establishing a definite causal link between the inspections and subsequent change is less surprising and, though many of the main players may not think so, it is conceivable that the inspectors did make a more useful contribution to the development of the school than was believed and expressed.

The complex issue of cause and effect is frequently addressed by researchers and, notwithstanding their belief in the plausibility of their own findings, they do not hesitate to comment on the limits of most social science research designs in tracing causal patterns (Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1994: 169). In the field of school effectiveness research, for example, although sweeping claims have been made for the importance of the findings based on sophisticated statistical techniques, there has been robust debate, and it still continues, in respect of the size and significance of school effects (Scheerens, 1992: 71-76; Brown *et al*,

1996: 73). A general problem experienced is the limited extent to which they can explain relationships between educational outcomes and the variables, and also the direction of causality in circumstances where correlations have been identified (Brown *et al*: 74). David Hargreaves argues that 'no school or teacher culture can be shown to have a *direct* impact on student learning and achievement, and claims to that end are vacuous' (Hargreaves, 1995: 43). Similarly, in criticising efforts to overcome researcher bias by the adoption of a mechanistic world view John Elliott argues that the nature and complexity of worthwhile learning is such that the predetermining of precise learning outcomes cannot be compatible with respect for the learner (Elliott, 1996: 9). The message for us is that learners construct personal meanings and their capacity for doing so affects the manner and extent to which interventions make an impact upon them. Applying this to whole school inspection one can suggest that inevitably the process will impact on individuals in different ways and this will result in a diversity of perceptions in respect of the effectiveness of the operation. Hence, some teachers will be more critical than others or conversely more approving, and the extent to which this happens will be as much a function of the individual's world view as of the operations of the whole school inspection. In other words, the perceived impact or indeed the lack of it, will largely depend on the imaginative and interpretative power of individual teachers, and the validity of their perceptions on impact - whether of a positive or negative nature - needs to be viewed as a personal construction, no more or no less.

The initial response of teachers to the effect that the inspections had made little or no impact and its later contradiction as interviews proceeded, may be significant in validating Sandbrook's interpretation of inspection as a process that is percolative in achieving its effect. The quick, peremptory and negative judgement was soon replaced by a certain retreat from that position as teachers were led to reflect more carefully on the possible impact of the inspections. Examples of *some* change attributable to the inspections then followed as teachers began to identify areas where the process of inspection had seemed to have had some effect, albeit not to a dramatic extent. In other words change

seemed to have percolated through and to an extent that had not been immediately apparent to sceptical respondees.

Given, as argued above, that the naturalistic paradigm provides a valuable conceptual framework for understanding the process of whole school inspection, it is significant that proponents of naturalistic inquiry contest the viability of causality as a useful concept in explaining change. In their judgement the concept should be replaced by the notion of 'multiple simultaneous shapings', one that has due regard for the complexity of the interaction in social situations (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 151; Guba and Lincoln (1989: 97). To them "the hope that 'clean' causal statements might be developed about human behaviour seems to be largely vain" because of the *multiplicity of variables that impinge and interact in the human situation* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 143). That is not to say they believe that an attempt to determine root causes cannot be useful; in fact they do concede it can help to simplify situations and thereby lead to better understanding on occasion (Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 107). But - to apply their theory to whole school inspection - since the inspector and teacher should be viewed as elements that are in mutual and continuous interaction, in their estimation it would be mistaken to attempt to attribute cause with any certainty to the particular behaviour(s) of either one or the other. In other words, in the complex social situation that characterises whole school inspection it is best to substitute the concept of causality with that of constant mutual shaping and reconstruction (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 157; Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 106). Hence, it will prove far more profitable for the evaluator to seek an ever-increasing understanding of the situation in terms of negotiated outcomes that eschews notions of causality.

This position in fact is mirrored in the literature on systems and organisational thinking. Referring to the interactions of a multiplicity of variables that exist in organisations, Senge concludes: 'No one could possibly come to figure out all of these' (Senge 1990: 281). Suggesting that the most critical decisions made in organisations have consequences over years or even decades, he argues that actual linkages between cause and effect disappear and become impossible to

trace. He encapsulates what he sees as 'the core learning dilemma' confronting organisations in a terse sentence:

We learn best from experience but we never directly experience the consequences of many of our more important decisions.

(Senge, 1990: 23)

The message is that the school may never *directly* experience the consequences of whole school inspection, and particularly so if it is true its effects are percolative. But, crucially, that is not to say that the whole school inspection has not had an impact - only that it cannot be easily measured - and, as the naturalistic inquirer reminds us, the fact that it cannot be measured does not mean that it cannot exist (Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 104).

What in effect all of this adds up to is that instead of searching for linear cause-effect chains, *as a general rule* it is likely to be more productive to seek out and celebrate interrelationships within which the main players shape each other in a dynamic, overlapping fashion. (The caveat of 'general rule' is proposed in order to provide for those relatively rare situations when the criterion of reasonableness - 'indubitable after scrutiny in the light of reason' (Phillips, 1993: 59) - clearly supports the existence of direct linkage.) But even if we recognise a greater value in searching for and identifying the existence of this mutual shaping during whole school inspection, does this mean that there is little we can say with authority about the impact of whole school inspection? No, we can usefully consider the conditions that promote change and to the extent to which these are seen to exist we may make a judgement *on the likelihood* of the inspection making an impact of a developmental nature over time.

The issue of cause and effect is tightly bound up with notions relating to change and how it may be effected. It is unfortunate, however, that though there is a compendious and burgeoning literature on the subject of change in education

and school improvement, relatively little attention has been devoted to the role that inspection might play in facilitating the process (Wilcox and Gray, 1996: 97). Probably the most comprehensive discussion of change to date has been produced by Michael Fullan and his colleague, Andy Hargreaves (Fullan, 1991; Fullan, 1992; Fullan and Hargreaves, 1992) and any analysis of the topic has to have particular regard for the messages relayed by them and research colleagues in the area of school improvement.

From the core of key messages emerging from this area of research the following eight are interrelated and have a particular relevance in establishing a framework against which one may judge the potential of whole school inspections as a catalyst for change. These are as follows:

- Change takes time, and 'institutionalisation', or permanent rooting, taking up to five years after initial adoption (McGilchrist, 1997: 9-10); Wilcox and Gray, 1996: 99; Stoll and Fink, 1996: 46).
- Change is a complex and difficult task, it can be 'messy' and the end result may turn out quite differently to what was envisaged (Fullan, 1991: 350; Morrison, 1998: 16; Everard and Morris, 1996, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn: 217-218).
- Teachers need to be the primary agents of change - it cannot be mandated or forced - and the issue of teacher ownership is crucial (Fullan, 1993: 22-24; Carter, 1998: 3; McGilchrist, 1997:9,15-17; Stoll and Thomson, 1996: 23; Freire, 1973:13). 'Educational change depends on what teachers do and think. It's as simple and as complex as that,' states Fullan (1991: 117).
- Change needs to be well led and managed within the context of the school becoming a learning organisation (Cockett, 1998: 55-57; Dimmer 1998: 53; MacBeath, 1998: 146; Gray, 1999: 146). Conflict can be expected (Stoll and Fink, 1996: 45).

- Development is evolutionary - it is an event, not a process (Reynolds *et al*, 1996:65; Fullan, 1996: 1 [online]) - and hence there is little value in attempting to lay down precise plans. The task is to get started and introduce amendments as one proceeds.
- There will be more than one version of what the change should be and certainly there can be no blueprints (Fullan, 1996: 1 [online]). Invoking a fundamental principle of naturalistic inquiry Stoll and Fink add that (1996-167: 45) 'a main purpose of the process is for all involved [ is ] to exchange realities and continue to develop ideas'.
- A judicious mix of pressure and support is needed (Fullan, 1991:91; Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1991: 106; Hopkins et al, 1994: 80-83).
- The main objective should be the changing of school culture so that whole school development will take place rather than a series of isolated innovations (Fullan, 1991: 67; Hinkley, 1996: 70). It appears to me that central to this would be the establishment of an evaluation culture in the school and community.

In summary, the essential message is that the promotion of change is a far more complex operation than appears at first sight, Government policy cannot mandate with any degree of success what happens in schools and if the change is to be sustained then its critical site has to be the classroom and the teacher (Morrison, 1998: 15). The crucial feature running through the literature is that change involves people and is focused on people. It is a dynamic process, it concerns people more than content and essentially it comes from practical experience allied to reflection on learning (Schon, 1983). Just as there is no 'magic bullet' that defines the best way to teach a particular topic in all situations, similarly there is no simple formula that provides the definitive answer to the challenge of change and the promotion of school development.

But the extensive school improvement literature of recent times has provided us with a theory of *changing* (how to go about change) that offers considerable promise in guiding us along the way. In Fullan's words 'It is a theory of probing and understanding the meaning of multiple dilemmas...[and] unanswerable questions' (Fullan, 1989: 204) and it can be usefully deployed in the provision of advice to the Department of Education and Science on how whole school inspection might be managed. It tells us that most improvement strategies fail because of their tendency to focus on individual changes and individual teachers rather than on seeing how these changes can fit in with and influence the school's organisation and culture in general (Gray et al. 1999:25). Thus, it can offer a valuable conceptual framework for understanding what inspectors can achieve, how they might achieve it and, perhaps more importantly, what it is they cannot achieve. To the extent that it is successful it will have addressed the fourth research question.

What then are the lessons for the Department of Education and Science planners arising from the research study? Essentially there is just one which in turn forms the bedrock of many others. Primarily the study offers a conceptual framework for understanding whole school inspection. It submits that it is an exercise that is set within the naturalistic paradigm rather than the positivist. It suggests that in practice this is reflected in an interactive orientation involving levels of negotiation between professionals, and its impact is best seen as percolative rather than measurable in a finely calibrated sense. It also shows that whole school inspection certainly has its limitations and many are due to the time-limited nature of the operation that precludes an in-depth engagement with issues. *But there is more to it than that and one must also have regard for the consequences of what might arguably be construed as unwise and over zealous attempts to maintain good relations. These are reflected in the production of bland School Reports in which the judgements contained therein tend to be rather superficial (though not necessarily unsafe) and which fail to identify clearly and assertively the schools' strengths and weaknesses and where development or improvement should be made. All of this of course is done in the interests of partnership, a concept that is fundamental to*

development, but arguably it comes at a cost. In effect it can lead to a level of complacency that condones a perpetuation of bad practices and clearly it makes little contribution to the task of assembling useful information on the working of the system nationally. From this another lesson emerges, one that alerts the Department of Education and Science to the desirability of examining reporting procedures and of piloting new and more incisive models that seek both to avoid ambiguity and to supply information that is capable of being aggregated to provide a national picture of the education system. For inspectors this in itself would have a particular advantage in that it would go some distance in proving that public monies voted for school evaluation were being well spent in this era of accountability, and in this way the continuance of the institution of inspection, no longer existing in some countries as we have seen, would be vindicated.

The conceptual framework which the study provides has at its core a lesson of paramount importance for planners and inspectors. The crucial message contained therein is that in the current circumstances whole school inspection is best seen as an exercise that has as its *raison d'être* the helping of schools to help themselves. It can do so by a promotion of critical and systematic self reflection that is based on assessment evidence that in the words of Coleman and Larocque can be used 'instrumentally for direct action and conceptually for insight' (Sandbrook, 1996: 99). The implications of this are wide ranging, but there is one important truth for inspectors. That is, they must come to a clear understanding of what they are about, both what they can do and what they cannot do in the circumstances that obtain. In practical terms they must be alert to the fact that their contribution cannot be as wide ranging as perhaps the three inspectors in the study would have liked. The nature of change and changing does not allow this and even if they had an adequate amount of time available to them their status as inspectors - persons who pass judgement thereby generating anxiety - most likely would tell against them by precluding the emergence of the requisite levels of openness. This forms part of another argument, and it is plausible, to the effect that one cannot usefully be both advisor (in a detailed sense) and assessor all at the one time without

compromising one's integrity as an objective evaluator (Wilcox, 1993: 90; FitzGibbon, 1996; Solomons, 1997: 76; Ferguson, 2000: 94).

Given then that whole school inspection is best conceptualised as a particular operation that seeks to help schools to help themselves, what is the lesson in this for the Department of Education and Science? Quite simply, it should promote an ongoing system of school self-review in accordance with the recent international trend. Interview evidence showed that not one of the three schools stated it engaged in self-evaluation in other than a most cursory manner, and most certainly its potential nationally has not been explored except to a very limited extent and then only on a random basis. The vital ownership of the change arrangements pivots on the involvement of all team members, and the installation of a process of continuous and systematic self-evaluation holds much promise in the promoting of this necessary sense of partnership that seeks to turn the school into what is Senge's learning organisation. But that in itself would not be enough if the findings were to secure an adequate level of credibility among a general public that seeks proof of value for investment. The credibility and ultimate success of any self-evaluation process requires it is moderated and checked by an independent entity and it is here that whole school inspection can be of unique and valuable service. By scrutinising the procedures adopted and the evidence provided rather than devoting most of their efforts to the securing of evidence from scratch as we saw happened in the three schools, the inspectorate can offer a more effective service both to the schools and public. On the one hand they can satisfy demands for accountability and on the other they can help increase the school's capacity to help itself by the provision of clear and unambiguous strategic advice (that studiously avoids the time-consuming implications of excessive detail). This could be delivered both orally and in written form and might be based on careful analysis informed by experience. To some degree also a contribution from an inspector from another area might be incorporated in the exercise in order to secure an added semblance of objectivity. But of course this would not be enough and the desire to generate a capacity for sustainable self-renewal would have to be grounded in a programme of in-career teacher development,

one that is largely but not exclusively based on insights from school effectiveness and school improvement research. Linked to this would be a databank of comparative information for schools to guide them in their review and planning deliberations at all times. This would have the added advantage of complementing the often tacit and subjective judgements of inspectors available to them most usually only during the whole school inspection period, and then only in a hurried fashion because of time constraints. Herein then lies at least two other lessons for the Department of Education and Science. First, might it not undertake a comprehensive study on the possibility of introducing a system of benchmarking so that that in due course the schools themselves might be enabled compare themselves with similar institutions? (It was reported at the Athens Conference in 1997 that research of a substantial nature in this area already has been undertaken in Austria and Italy and schools there can draw upon banks of comparative data to guide their planning.) Second, would it not consider the feasibility of reducing the wide range of duties assigned to inspectors that most appropriately ought to be undertaken by administrators and which means that whole school inspection takes place under conditions of frustrating time constraint? The study suggests that an initiative of this kind could enable inspectors focus more fully on core duties such as school development and the provision of useful information and analysis on the functioning of the system.

There is much more that could be said about whole school inspection as evidenced in the three schools but word limits preclude a further development of the discussion. The study has been personally rewarding and particularly so for its success in enabling me to arrive at a vision of whole school inspection as a credible evaluation practices set within the naturalistic paradigm and which can be developed to help schools help themselves by becoming life-long learning organisations. As recorded in the study, research on inspection is extremely scanty in Ireland and perhaps this work will encourage others to follow and develop what I have done. A number of topics worthy of research immediately come to mind. Might someone replicate what I have done but take as his/her focus a wider number of schools? It would be interesting to see to

what extent might my experiences might be replicated and my interpretations shared. Further, the study should be undertaken by researchers who have easy access to all the key players, a factor that added to the uniqueness and value of my study. Another topic, perhaps at the instigation of the Department of Education and Science, might examine how the School Report might be developed and in particular how most usefully the document might be written so that its finding would be amenable to aggregation. This would then allow for the securing of the system view that is fundamental to good planning on a national scale and which cannot be obtained from the School Reports as constituted at present. Administrations throughout the EU are grappling with this task (Pepin, 1999: 13). Another research topic might centre on the consistency of inspectors' judgements when the new system of whole school evaluation has been instituted. This study has shown that to a large degree the inspectors' judgements of the three schools had been impressionistic in nature and had lacked a *systematic* framework and methodology for guiding their judgements. The Department of Education and Science in the process of addressing this issue at present and evaluation and towards that end evaluation criteria are being devised. Research on this topic already has been undertaken by Ofsted and this might serve as a useful basis for the project (see Matthews *et al.* 1998).

With the advent of whole school evaluation it is likely that in the near future the work of inspectors in schools will become the subject of a much greater scrutiny by researchers in Ireland than heretofore. Perhaps it may not be too much to hope that this study will serve as a useful starting point for many in planning their programmes of research. From the start they will see that the work is modest in extent and devoid of evidence that *proves* the validity of any particular interpretation. To have claimed otherwise would have been arrogant, and particularly so as the study, in common with whole school inspection, was located within the naturalistic paradigm. After all, only three schools were examined and a total of twenty-five persons interviewed. Essentially what the study attempts to do is invite readers to speculate on the degree to which this scenario based on a mere three schools is representative of other schools with

which they are familiar, or indeed a generality of schools. To the extent that my work is seen to be applicable to other situations, to the extent that it helps to generate new understandings and to enthuse, it may be of some value.

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## Appendix 1

### Interview schedules

#### A. *Inspectors*

1. What is the policy of the Department of Education and Science in respect of whole school inspection?

Probes:

*What is the primary purpose of whole school inspection?*

*Primarily, whose interests are being served in carrying it out?*

*Has accountability a primacy over development? Can you have both at same time?*

*During whole school inspection can the inspector be both advisor and agent of accountability?*

2. In broad terms, how should inspectors conduct whole school inspection?

Probes:

*How best might they do it? i.e. What are the best procedures?*

*What did you do?*

3. What impact does whole school inspection have?

Probes:

*Can whole school inspection as constituted at present effect change?*

*Can it help to develop schools?*

*If, so, to what extent, and in what way?*

*How rigorous and penetrating an operation is it?*

*In the final analysis, what use has whole school inspection to the Department of Education and Science and/or to schools?*

*How familiar are you with the literature on school effectiveness and improvement (including change) literature, or indeed with research literature in general?*

4. What is your opinion of the School Report?

Probes:

*Is it of use to the Department of Education and Science, to schools? What are its strengths/weaknesses?*

5. The future of whole school inspection.

Probes:

*Should whole school inspection continue as a feature in Irish primary education?*

*What are its strengths and weaknesses?*

*What changes would you like to see?*

**Note:** Inspectors who undertook the whole school inspections were subjected to a more detailed probing in respect of approach and procedures in the classrooms.

**B. Teachers**

1. What is the policy of the Department of Education and Science in respect of whole school inspection as far as, as a teacher, you see it?

Probes:

*What is the primary purpose of whole school inspection?*

*Primarily, whose interests are being served in carrying it out?*

*Did accountability seem to have a primacy over development when whole school inspection took place in your school recently? Can you have both at same time?*

*During whole school inspection can the inspector be both advisor and agent of accountability?*

2. How were you informed that whole school inspection was to take place?

Probes:

*How did you and colleagues react?*

*Describe pre-inspection meeting with inspector and the reactions of you and your colleagues.*

3. What preparations for whole school inspection were made in the school?

Probes:

*Give specific examples.*

*Describe mood of school during the lead-up period.*

4. Describe procedures adopted by the inspector in your classroom.

Probes:

*His demeanour and guiding purpose.*

*Give specific examples in support of your perspective.*

*Your reaction, and that of the children.*

*Feedback offered by inspector.*

*A cosy relationship perhaps?*

5. Describe post-inspection meeting.

Probes:

*Attitude and demeanour of inspector?*

*Quality of discussion.*

*Participation rates.*

*Value of meeting-give examples.*

*How valid was a picture of the school did the inspector appear to draw?*

6. What is your opinion of the School Report?

Probes:

*Is it of use to you and, if so, in what way?*

*Could it be of value to the Department of Education and Science and, if so, in what way?*

*What are its strengths/weaknesses?*

7. The future of whole school inspection.

Probes:

*Should whole school inspection continue as a feature in Irish primary education?*

*What are its strengths and weaknesses?*

*What changes would you like to see?*

## Appendix 2

### **The purpose of WSI: sample of teachers' perceptions**

#### School G

*I think that it's the only way the Department has of making sure of standards. Because we are all human beings we can get into slipshod ways. We need it just to keep ourselves on our toes. It's like a spring clean. It's good for teachers still to know that they're answerable, for accountability, and so I wouldn't get rid of whole school inspection if I had a choice.*

(Headteacher)

*He came to make sure that standards are maintained. I felt that I was being checked up on.*

(NN)

*I may be old fashioned but you have to maintain standards. We are very isolated here and it's necessary. It's the only way the Department has of making sure of standards. Because we are all human beings and we can all go into slipshod ways and we need it just to keep ourselves on our toes.*

(HE)

*I feel it is a check-up on the school and a check-up on the teacher from the Department of Education point of view, keeping their finger on the pulse, to see what's happening in the schools, is the school functioning properly. You need to be told where you need to pull up your socks. If teachers are left to their own devices you can't suppose that everything is going on fine...someone taking stock. I think that is important, I do. So it's inspection and not for anything else though it should be. Most positively I look on the inspection as a check up on me much more than development. It was something we got over with. I also see the need for it.*

(AR)

### **School C**

*I imagine it is being done because the Dept of Education wishes it to be done. I really don't know what the Dept of Education's intention is. I still see it as a process of accountability.*

(Headteacher)

*From my point of view I have been wondering what is the point of it all. To poke out teachers who are not doing their job or schools not functioning well I suppose – accountability and that should be reported back to the Department. It has no developmental purpose. There is no development for the school.*

(TG)

*I presume it's got something to do with this famous word 'accountability' – we all have to account, to justify ourselves. We discussed it among ourselves and people have been asking why have we to do it when not so in secondary schools. Its about school should have certain standards in every class, that there should be a standard that the school is attaining, whether it is a or a maximum but they come along to see are we progressing.*

(OP)

*It's good to have a representative of the Department coming in to see how are things going. He feeds information to them. But you must have some kind of standard. He is a kind of conduit. I've no objections to being accountable. In any job you must be accountable. That's part of life.*

(KG)

*He has to keep tabs on performance I presume. If a school isn't performing it isn't going to develop. It's not his job to make it a better school- it's our job to make it a better school. His job was just checking up on standards.*

(KaG)

*I suspect it is to see if we have all gotten lazy after a few years. Is the school being run properly? It's reasonable. There is accountability in every job and I don't object to it, I have no problem.*

(HD)

*I suppose whole school inspection is for the Department really .. the main reason was accountability for the Department.*

(EB)

*I don't really know what it proves... Checking up on you. I think that's the main reason.*

(BX)

**School M**

*Accountability first and development second. Teachers still think of the inspector inspecting coming in to see what are you doing, what are you doing, why aren't you doing this?*

(Headteacher)

*Whole school inspection tells me as a teacher that I am answerable. If I'm not motivated enough to know that I have the children in my care, that I am answerable to them, to the parents, to society, if there .. if I am swinging the lead, if my attitude is wrong, it is another sort of safeguard. Yes, I see it primarily as accountability and I don't resent it.*

(ST)

*No, it's not done for us. I think it's to make sure that standards are maintained-that's the real reason. Yes, to check up.*

(MT)

*To me the whole school inspection was a bit of a nuisance. No, not doing me a favour. It's not in my interest that it should be done at all, not really. No.*

(LI)

## **Appendix 3**

### **Themes emerging from interview data**

1. Purpose of whole school inspection/policy considerations
2. Preparation for whole school inspection
3. Pre-inspection meeting
4. Perceptions (by the main actors) of inspectors, teachers and School Report
5. Credibility of inspector
6. Cosy relationships
7. Trust
8. Inspector's engagement with children and teacher in classroom
9. Weak teachers
10. Time considerations
11. Stress
12. Validity of Inspector's findings
13. Impact of whole school inspection
14. Power and authority

15. Post-inspection meeting
16. The School Report
17. Advice and tips from inspector
18. Value of whole school inspection
19. Good practice
20. Considerations for future
21. Criticisms
22. Parents
23. Use of outside inspector
24. School self-evaluation
25. Benchmarking
26. Consistency between inspectors
27. Conceptualising inspection/ naturalistic inquiry
28. In-career development