

Summary of results from Ireland

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Introduction

This technical report describes the results of the first year of data collection in Ireland, which is part of a comparative EU study in six countries to measure the impact of school inspections on teaching and learning in schools. A survey to principals in primary and secondary education was used to analyse if inspection resulted in positive changes in the quality and innovation capacity of the school, and whether the schools experienced unintended consequences of school inspections. Principals were also asked about potential intermediate processes that precede the research outcome variables: setting of expectations, acceptance and use of feedback, promoting self-evaluations, and actions of stakeholders. These mechanisms are expected to mediate responses of schools to school inspections.

Basic numbers and school characteristics of the respondents are given in the following tables.

How many years' experience do you have working as a principal (in this and in other schools)?			
	School Type		Total
	Secondary	Primary	
0-1 year	3 7.3%	4 3.3%	7 4.3%
1-2 years	9 22.0%	10 8.2%	19 11.7%
3-4 years	8 19.5%	15 12.3%	23 14.1%
5-6 years	6 14.6%	19 15.6%	25 15.3%
7+ years	15 36.6%	74 60.7%	89 54.6%
	41	122	163

How would you characterize the area in which your school is located?			
	School Type		Total
	Secondary	Primary	
Urban	24 60.0%	46 37.7%	70 43.2%
Suburban	9 22.5%	28 23.0%	37 22.8%
Suburban in a metropolitan area	7 17.5%	48 39.3%	55 34.0%
	40	122	162

How many people live in the city, town or area in which your school is located?			
	School Type		Total
	Secondary	Primary	
Fewer than 3,000	5 11.9%	55 45.5%	60 36.8%
3,001 to 15,000	6 14.3%	26 21.5%	32 19.6%
15,001 to 50,000	16 38.1%	20 16.5%	36 22.1%
50,001 to 100,000	4 9.5%	1 0.8%	5 3.1%
100,001 to 500,000	6 14.3%	3 2.5%	9 5.5%
Over 500,000	5 11.9%	16 13.2%	21 12.9%
	42	121	163

Responses of principals to school inspections

In the Irish context it is important to look at the results of this survey in the light of the existing research on school inspection in Ireland (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012). This indicates that while schools are well disposed toward inspection and have a high regard for the Inspectorate there was little evidence before now of any clear impact from inspection on promoting positive change in schools. Indeed the conclusion of recent research on inspection in Ireland was that key assumptions underpinning the inspection policy were over ambitious and difficult to implement in practice. Among these assumptions were that schools could drive major improvement without follow up assistance and that schools and in particular boards of management had the status, skills or resources to tackle serious shortcomings.

In particular, previous research demonstrated that a fundamental idea informing inspection policy in Ireland, namely, that schools could generate self-evaluative data which would enable judgements to be made on vital aspects of school performance, including student outcomes and individual teacher quality, was never realistic. This was because no clarity existed around requirements for the conduct and reporting of self-evaluation and no training or resources to undertake self-evaluation was provided. Similarly the research up to now also indicated that other key underpinning elements of inspection policy as a theory were in fact very under-developed in practice. These included consultation with key stakeholders, particularly parents and students, the role of the principal in assuring the quality of individual teacher performance and the capacity of schools to respond to inspection advice (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012).

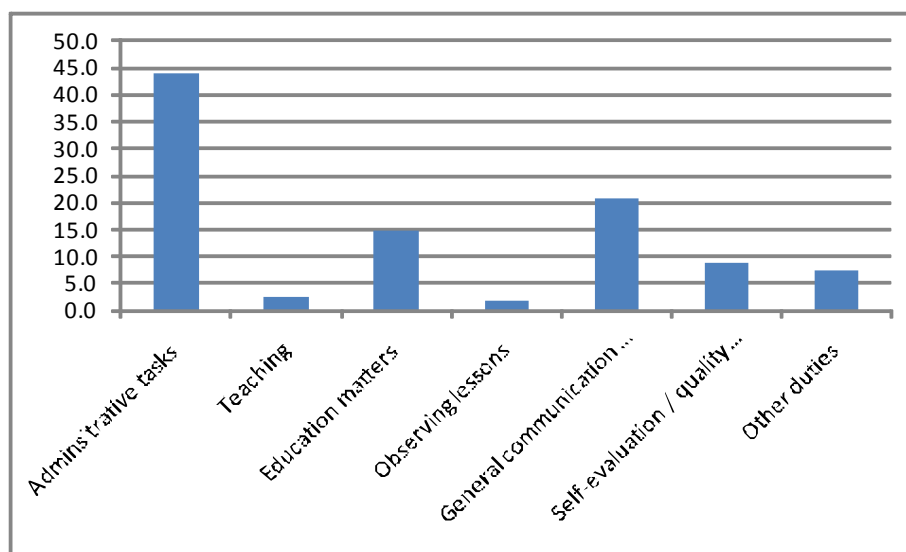
In consequence of these criticisms the Irish inspectorate has made some significant changes in recent years. These include a formal process of surveying parent opinion as part of inspection, a more structured approach to school self-evaluation and a more streamlined and targeted inspection regime. The research reported here is particularly timely, therefore, as it gives an up-to-the-minute picture of the way in which inspection and its related processes are, at least to an extent, beginning to become more embedded in schools. However the low response rates of principals (particularly in secondary education) require caution with regard to the conclusions.

Principals' Tasks and Roles

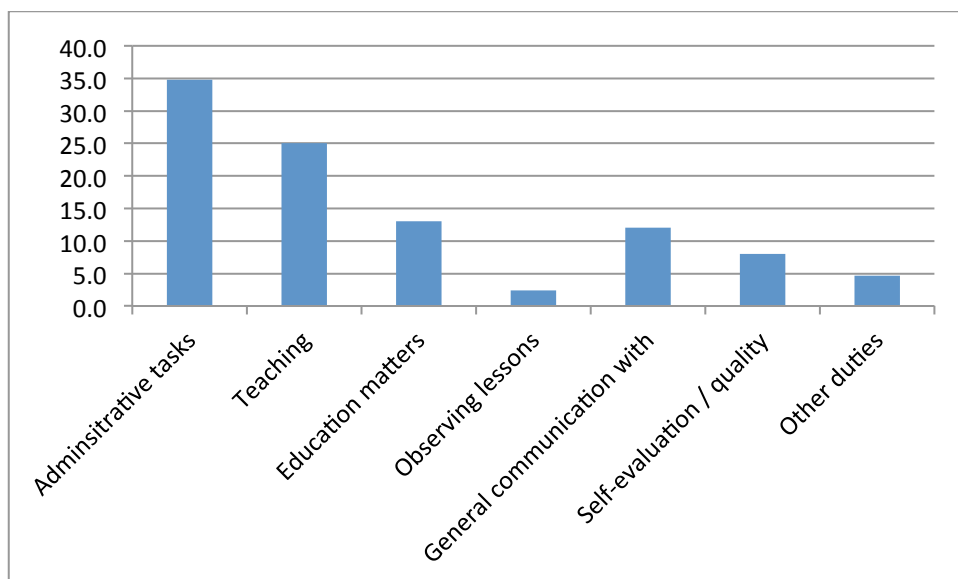
Breakdown of Principals Role (%) – Secondary and Primary Schools

What percentage of you duties are concerned with the following	Secondary			Primary			Total		
	Mean	N	Std. Dev	Mean	N	Std. Dev	Mean	N	Std. Dev
Administrative tasks	44.1	53	15.07	34.8	127	19.44	37.6	180	18.71
Teaching	2.5	53	4.18	25.0	127	30.91	18.4	180	28.00
Education matters	14.8	53	7.41	13.0	127	7.45	13.6	180	7.46
Observing lessons	1.8	53	2.45	2.4	127	3.03	2.2	180	2.88
General communication with students	20.8	53	13.76	12.0	127	9.29	14.6	180	11.49
Self-evaluation / quality assurance of school	8.7	53	5.00	8.0	127	6.49	8.2	180	6.09
Other duties	7.3	53	8.92	4.7	127	6.16	5.5	180	7.16

Breakdown of Principals Role (%) – Secondary Schools



Breakdown of Principals Role (%) – Primary Schools



School Type	Secondary			Primary			Total		
	Mean	N	Std. Dev.	Mean	N	Std. Dev.	Mean	N	Std. Dev.
Capacity Building	4.24	52	0.49	4.30	124	0.46	4.28	176	0.47
School Effectiveness	4.24	53	0.45	4.34	126	0.49	4.31	179	0.48
Improvement Actions	3.42	31	0.36	3.49	66	0.32	3.47	97	0.34
Change in Capacity Building	3.59	47	0.53	3.54	119	0.57	3.55	166	0.55
Change in Participation in Decision Making	3.59	52	0.72	3.61	129	0.77	3.60	181	0.75
Change in Cooperation between teachers	3.33	47	0.58	3.47	120	0.61	3.43	167	0.60
Change in Transformational Leadership	3.85	52	0.57	3.57	126	0.61	3.66	178	0.61
Changes in School Effectiveness	3.38	47	0.35	3.39	93	0.29	3.39	140	0.31
Changes in Opportunities to Learn and Learning Time	3.30	50	0.33	3.24	98	0.24	3.26	148	0.27
Changes in Achievement Orientation	3.48	47	0.43	3.52	111	0.45	3.51	158	0.44
Changes in clear and structured teaching	3.51	52	0.48	3.48	124	0.53	3.49	176	0.51
Changes in safe and stimulating learning climate	3.76	52	0.68	3.56	126	0.60	3.62	178	0.63
Promoting/Improving Self-Evaluations	3.41	51	0.79	3.49	126	0.85	3.47	177	0.83
Setting Expectations	3.27	31	0.61	3.30	90	0.60	3.29	121	0.60
Accepting Feedback	3.53	31	0.49	3.61	91	0.75	3.59	122	0.69
Unintended responses	2.41	35	0.49	2.66	92	0.62	2.59	127	0.60
General Satisfaction with Inspection	4.01	34	0.51	3.85	92	0.93	3.90	126	0.84

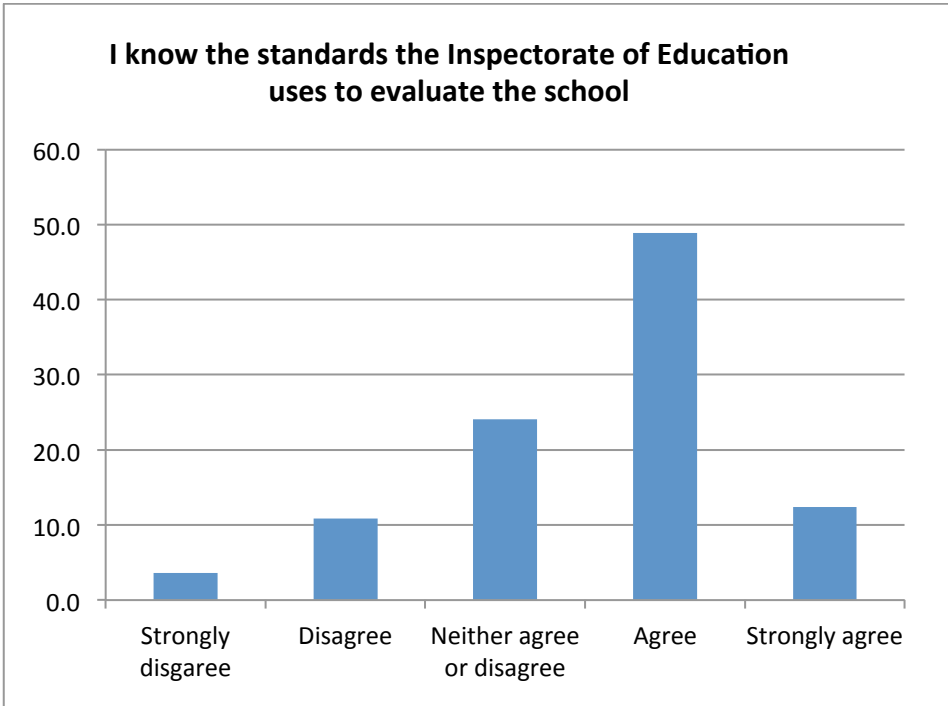
Results indicate that principals in both primary and secondary education generally continue to report relatively high satisfaction with school inspections and little unintended consequences at the school level. Principals also score highly the extent to which school inspections promote self-evaluation. This represents evidence of a significant change in schools as a result of inspection. Work undertaken by Brown (2010, p.44) indicated that there was little self evaluation actually taking place in practice. Surveying every second level Principal in the Republic of Ireland (n = 740) on their experience of school evaluation his work indicated just under one third (33.1%) claimed that their school engaged in any form of self-evaluation on a regular basis. The increased emphasis on self evaluation in the evolving inspection policy appears to be having an impact

Principals also report high levels of inspection impact on changes in the school’s capacity to improve, particularly in the transformational leadership of principals. Principals also indicate a positive perception of changes in the achievement orientation of the school. Principals perceive relatively little unintended consequences of school inspections at the school level.

The administrative burden on principals remains high and therefore the time given to aspects of instructional leadership including ‘ education matters’, ‘lesson observation’ and ‘ self evaluation and quality assurance’ which are closely related to responding to inspection and driving improvement is circumscribed. Nonetheless principals in both school types report a very positive relationship between inspection and key improvement strategies particularly capacity building and collaborative decision making.

The Impact of Inspection on Policies and Priorities

I know the standards the Inspectorate of Education uses to evaluate the school		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	5	3.6
Disagree	15	10.9
Neither agree or disagree	33	24.1
Agree	67	48.9
Strongly agree	17	12.4
Total	137	100.0



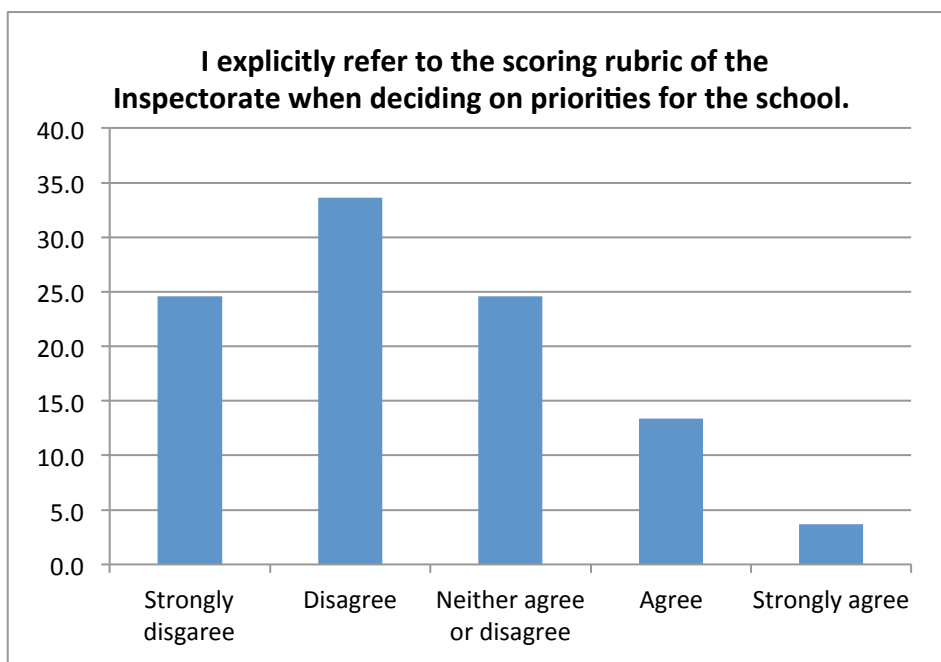
There are policies and practices in place for monitoring and reviewing the extent to which the school meets the scoring rubric of the Inspectorate.

	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	14	10.3
Disagree	29	21.3
Neither agree or disagree	48	35.3
Agree	27	19.9
Strongly agree	18	13.2
Total	136	100.0

Priorities for development of the school are aligned to the inspection judgements.

	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	11	8.1
Disagree	27	19.9
Neither agree or disagree	38	27.9
Agree	45	33.1
Strongly agree	15	11.0
Total	136	100.0

I explicitly refer to the scoring rubric of the Inspectorate when deciding on priorities for the school.		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	33	24.6
Disagree	45	33.6
Neither agree or disagree	33	24.6
Agree	18	13.4
Strongly agree	5	3.7
Total	134	100.0



I discourage teachers to experiment with new teaching methods that do not fit the scoring rubric of the Inspectorate		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	78	58.2
Disagree	37	27.6
Neither agree or disagree	12	9.0
Agree	5	3.7
Strongly agree	1	0.7
Total	134	100.0

School inspections have resulted in narrowing curriculum and instructional strategies in my school		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	63	47.4
Disagree	31	23.3
Neither agree or disagree	22	16.5
Agree	6	4.5
Strongly agree	11	8.3
Total	133	100.0

School inspections have resulted in refocusing curriculum and teaching and learning strategies in my school		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	23	17.2
Disagree	24	17.9
Neither agree or disagree	41	30.6
Agree	36	26.9
Strongly agree	10	7.5
Total	134	100.0

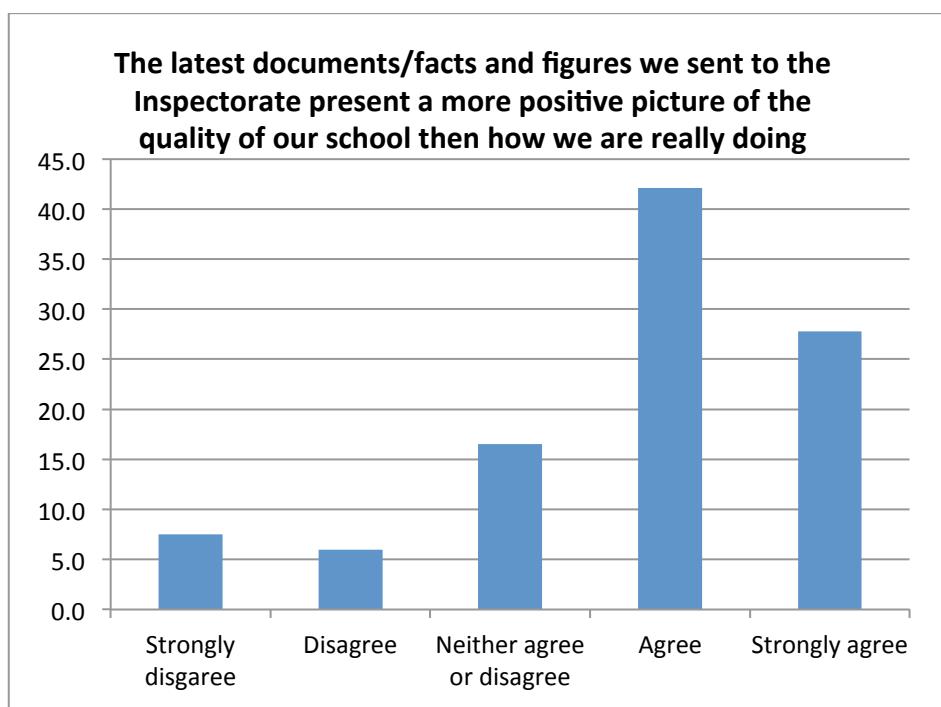
Responses to the above questions present a rather mixed picture. On the one hand a majority of school leaders, while claiming to be well aware of the inspection standards, do not seem overly concerned with putting systems in place to track the specific inspection objectives of the system and overwhelmingly report that they do not use inspection rubrics to set school priorities. Confusingly however principals also report that their priority setting is aligned to the outcomes and recommendations of inspection. This may well be because, on the one hand, inspection policy documents are, by and large, very short on specific objectives or desired outcomes, while on the other, research shows that verbal feedback (as opposed to written inspection reports) tend to provide clearer guidance to schools. In fact previous research indicates that the inspectorate has developed and is using tools and standards to

make judgements on schools but without making these standards explicit. This view is confirmed in a disturbing interview reported in Matthews (2010, p. 156) when an inspector respondent remarks that it is a pity that key information including the criteria for inspection judgements of school performance which have been developed by the inspectorate, are kept secret from the schools: ‘developments in relation to determining ratings for aspects of practice were not yet explicitly shared with schools’.

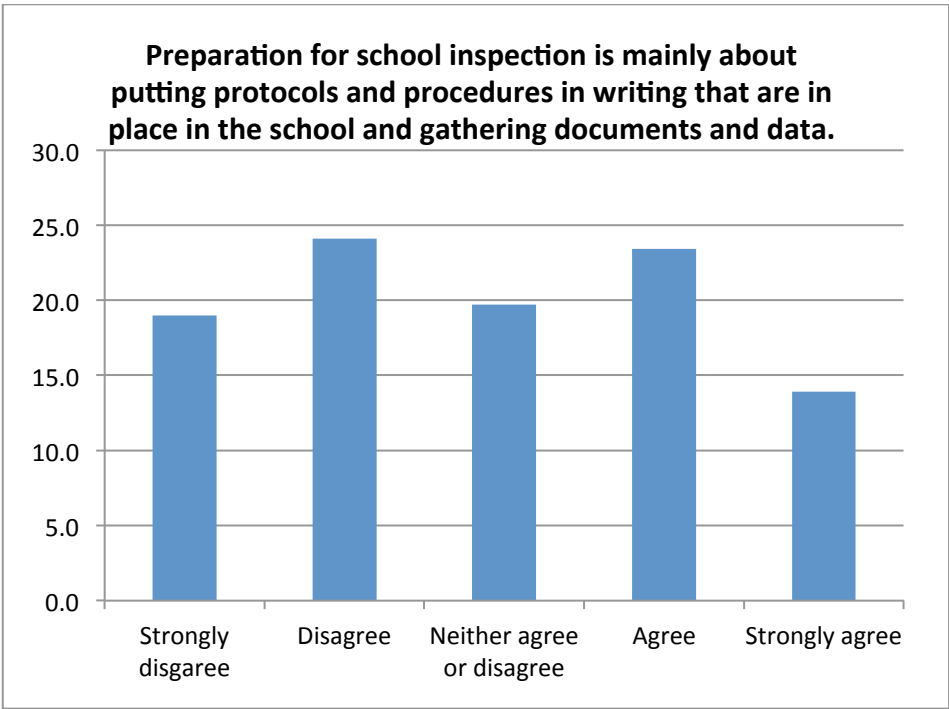
The rather ambivalent responses to these questions is further highlighted by the finding that less than half of respondents report that inspection is resulting in refocusing curriculum and teaching and learning strategies in their schools.

Preparing for Inspection

The latest documents/facts and figures we sent to the Inspectorate present a more positive picture of the quality of our school then how we are really doing		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	10	7.5
Disagree	8	6.0
Neither agree or disagree	22	16.5
Agree	56	42.1
Strongly agree	37	27.8
Total	133	100.0



Preparation for school inspection is mainly about putting protocols and procedures in writing that are in place in the school and gathering documents and data.		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	26	19.0
Disagree	33	24.1
Neither agree or disagree	27	19.7
Agree	32	23.4
Strongly agree	19	13.9
Total	137	100.0



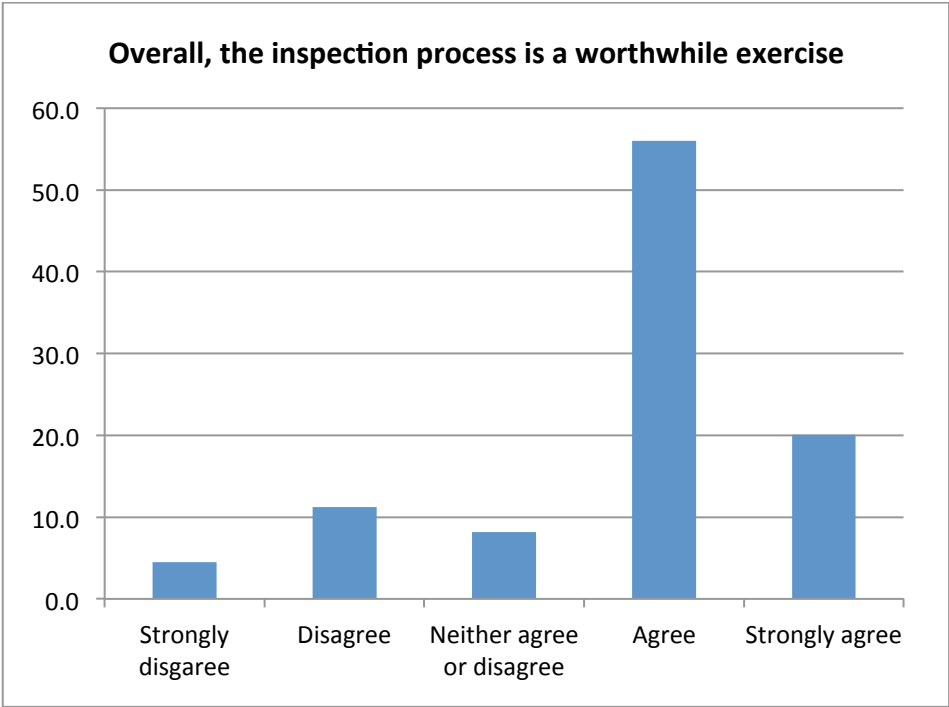
The responses to these questions tend to confirm previous research that shows that inspection in Ireland remains rather bureaucratic with an unhealthy emphasis on paperwork demonstrating compliance with regulations. In the course of a number of years of research in this area (McNamara and O’Hara 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009) it became clear that although endless meetings were held and a great deal of documentation was prepared for both subject and whole school evaluations, this consisted almost entirely of gathering and updating existing planning and policy documents (e.g., class plans, homework policies, school plans, discipline codes, admittance procedures). While some additional materials were produced, they were viewed as final products rather than as artefacts generated by an ongoing process. This seems to be still the case with the added concern that much of this documentation whether deliberately or otherwise tends to paint a misleading picture of how the school is actually performing.

The Quality of Inspection and the Impact of Inspection Findings

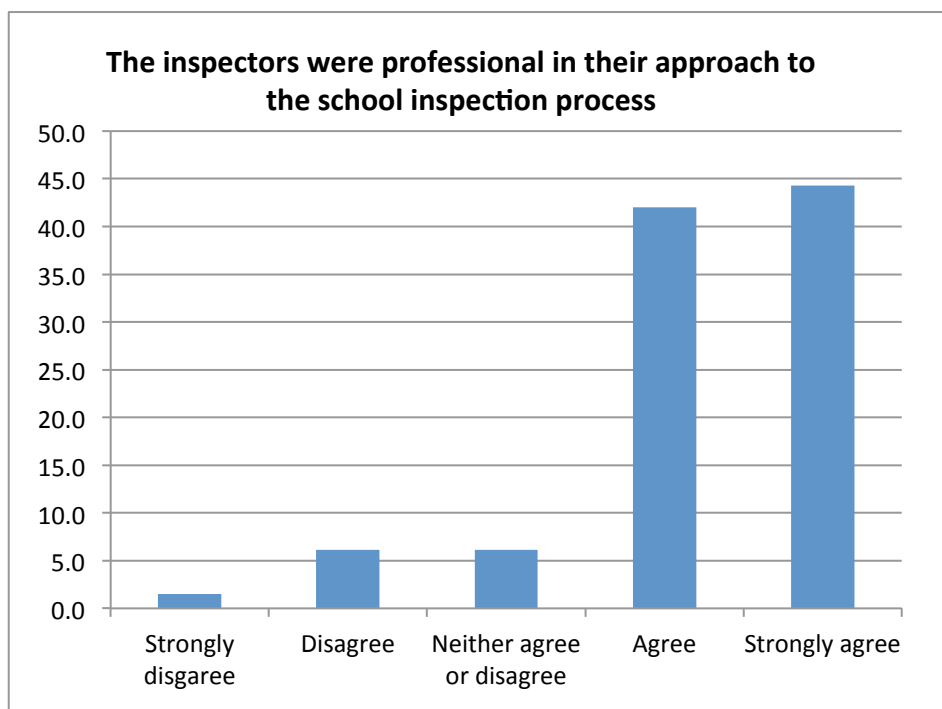
The inspection findings broadly matched the school’s initial expectations		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	5	3.8
Disagree	8	6.1
Neither agree or disagree	13	9.9
Agree	84	64.1
Strongly agree	21	16.0
Total	131	100.0

The preparation for the inspection visit led to changes in the teaching and learning and organization in/of the school		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	12	9.2
Disagree	22	16.8
Neither agree or disagree	45	34.4
Agree	42	32.1
Strongly agree	10	7.6
Total	131	100.0

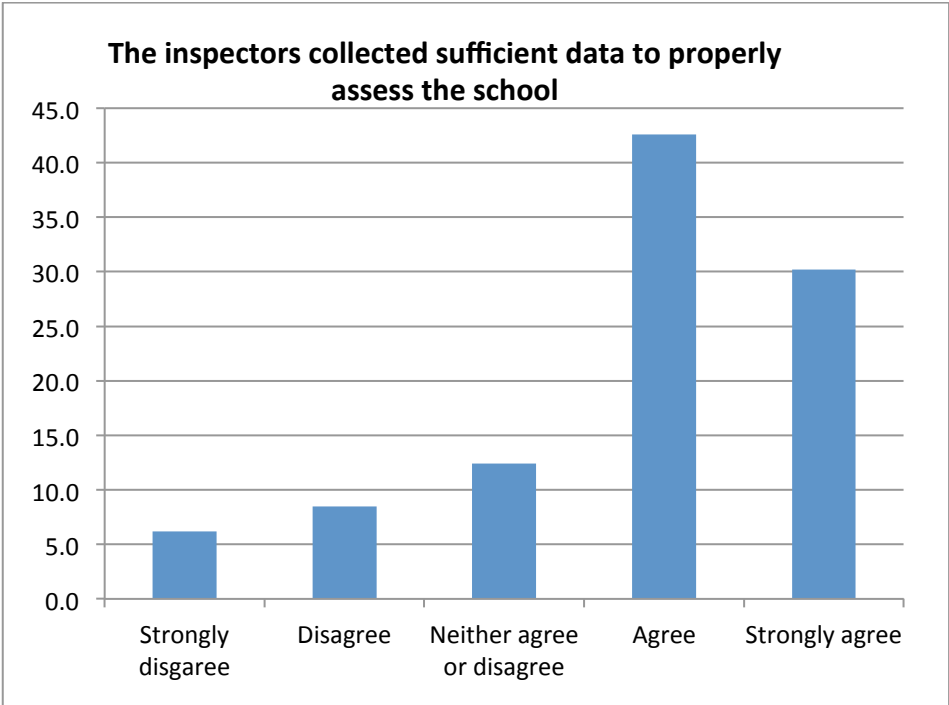
Overall, the inspection process is a worthwhile exercise		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	6	4.5
Disagree	15	11.2
Neither agree or disagree	11	8.2
Agree	75	56.0
Strongly agree	27	20.1
Total	134	100.0



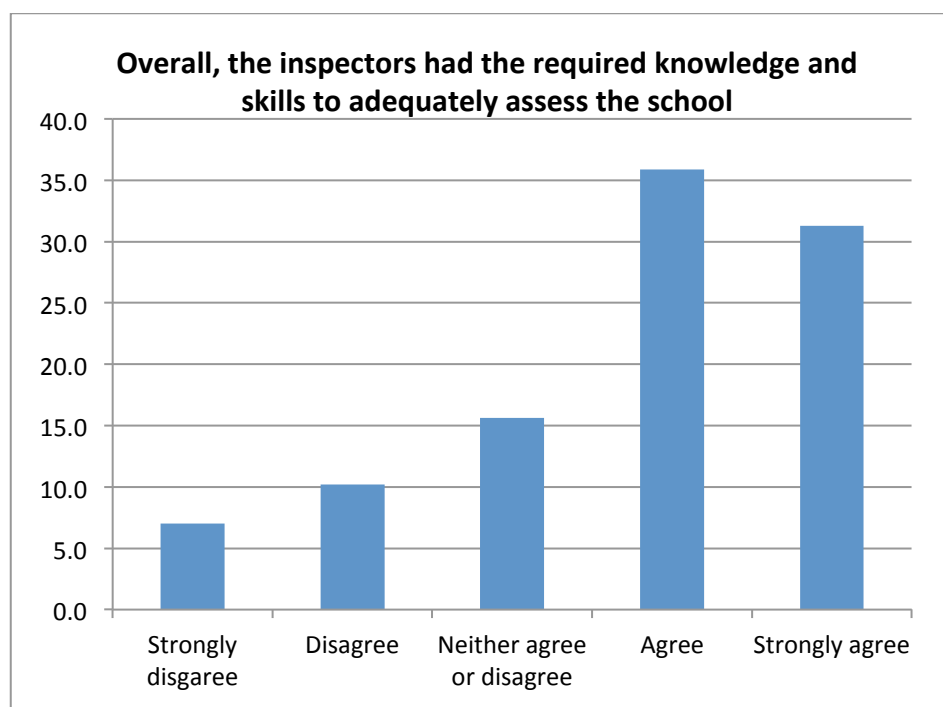
The inspectors were professional in their approach to the school inspection process		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	2	1.5
Disagree	8	6.1
Neither agree or disagree	8	6.1
Agree	55	42.0
Strongly agree	58	44.3
Total	131	100.0



The inspectors collected sufficient data to properly assess the school		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	8	6.2
Disagree	11	8.5
Neither agree or disagree	16	12.4
Agree	55	42.6
Strongly agree	39	30.2
Total	129	100.0



Overall, the inspectors had the required knowledge and skills to adequately assess the school		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	9	7.0
Disagree	13	10.2
Neither agree or disagree	20	15.6
Agree	46	35.9
Strongly agree	40	31.3
Total	128	100.0



There were disagreements between the school and the school inspector/inspection team at the oral feedback stage		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	40	30.8
Disagree	40	30.8
Neither agree or disagree	16	12.3
Agree	21	16.2
Strongly agree	13	10.0
Total	130	100.0

It is interesting to note that, for the most part, responses to this series of questions are positive. Principals on the whole seem to be quite happy with how the inspections are conducted in schools and with the quality of the inspectors undertaking the visits. This is significant in the context of a traditional educational landscape which tended to view external oversight as something of an imposition (McNamara & O'Hara, 2008).

It also seems to confirm that the general principles laid down in the The Professional Code of Practice on Evaluating and Reporting for the Inspectorate (Department of Education and Science, 2002) are being followed. Among these general principles is commitment to: fostering mutual respect and trust as a foundation for the development of a positive professional relationship between inspectors and the school community; partnership and collaboration through the participation of the school community in the evaluation process; and engaging in dialogue with school staffs and the education partners.

Of particular significance are the principles guiding the behavior of inspectors during evaluations. Here, reporting inspectors are committed to: making every effort to foster positive relationships with all members of the school community; ensuring that teachers receive a fair and accurate evaluation of their work and are made aware of the basis on which judgments are made; and that the positive relationships between teachers and pupils are preserved.

The findings would seem to indicate that, for the most part, the inspectors have succeeded in this area at least.

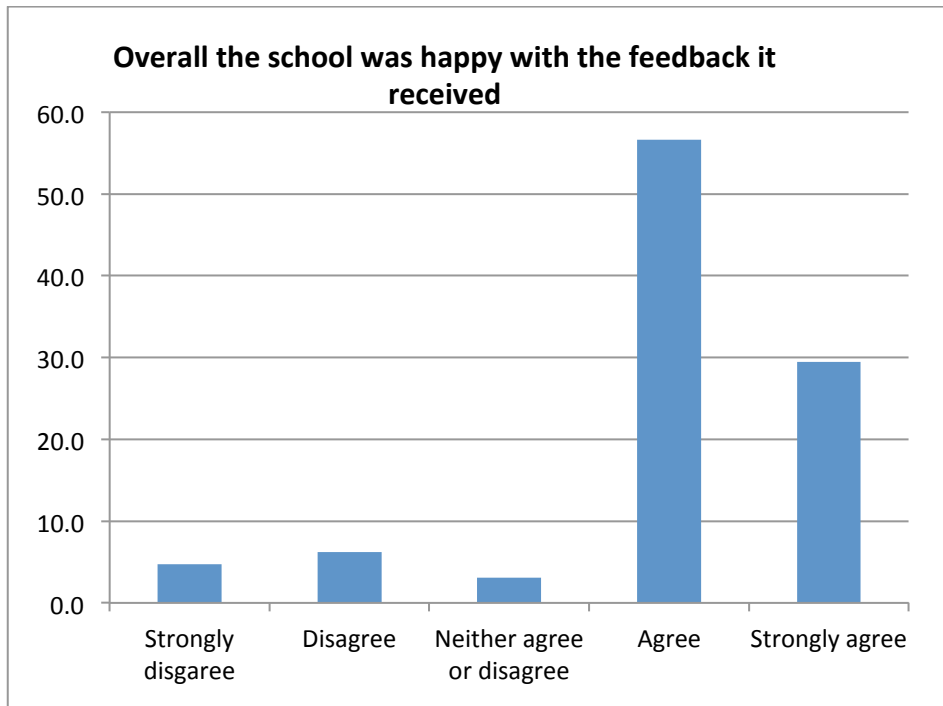
Two other areas are worth noting. One of the consistent themes that has arisen in research on the Irish inspection system conducted with Principals has been the perception that the inspectors have insufficient knowledge of key elements of the workings of a school – and particularly insufficient knowledge of the management challenges involved in running a school (McNamara and O' Hara, 2012). This survey would suggest that there is a move away from this perception and more general acceptance that inspectors are qualified to carry out the task assigned to them in a comprehensive and professional way.

Linked to this issue is the question of the availability of data upon which to make judgements about school quality. Consistently over the past decade research with school leaders has suggested that there is little confidence in the quality of the data used in the course of the evaluation process (McNamara and O’Hara, 2012). This survey would suggest that there is a very significant change from this position with an increasing perception that inspectors are gathering data in sufficient quantities and of sufficient quality to allow them comment on schools in a manner that is both relevant and rooted in available data.

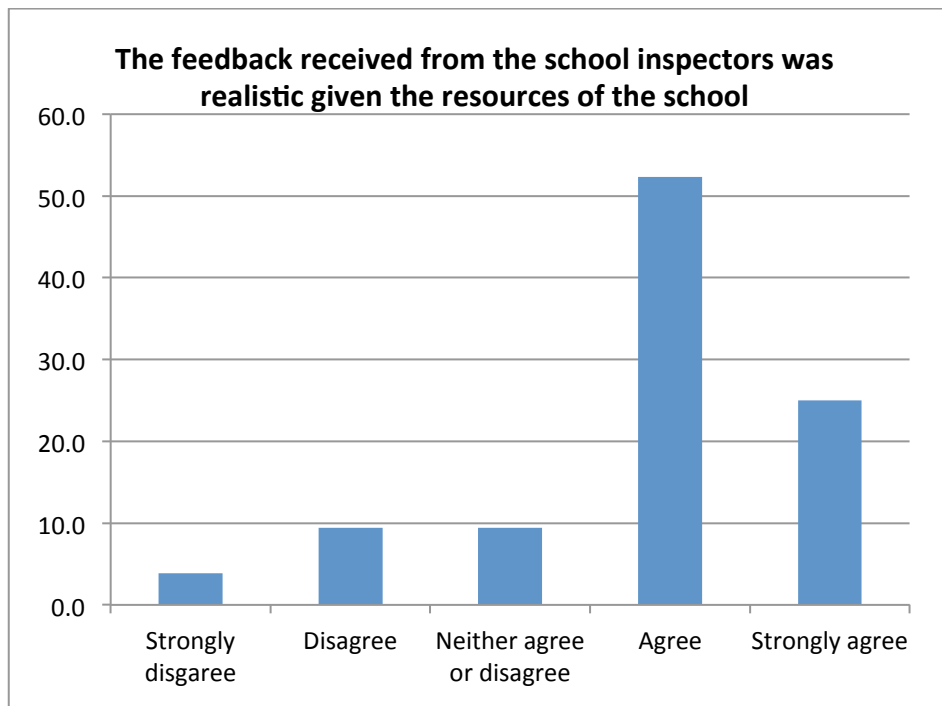
The Quality and Relevance of Inspection Feedback

Written inspection reports are helpful in identifying areas for improvement in the school		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	6	4.6
Disagree	6	4.6
Neither agree or disagree	10	7.6
Agree	88	67.2
Strongly agree	21	16.0
Total	131	100.0

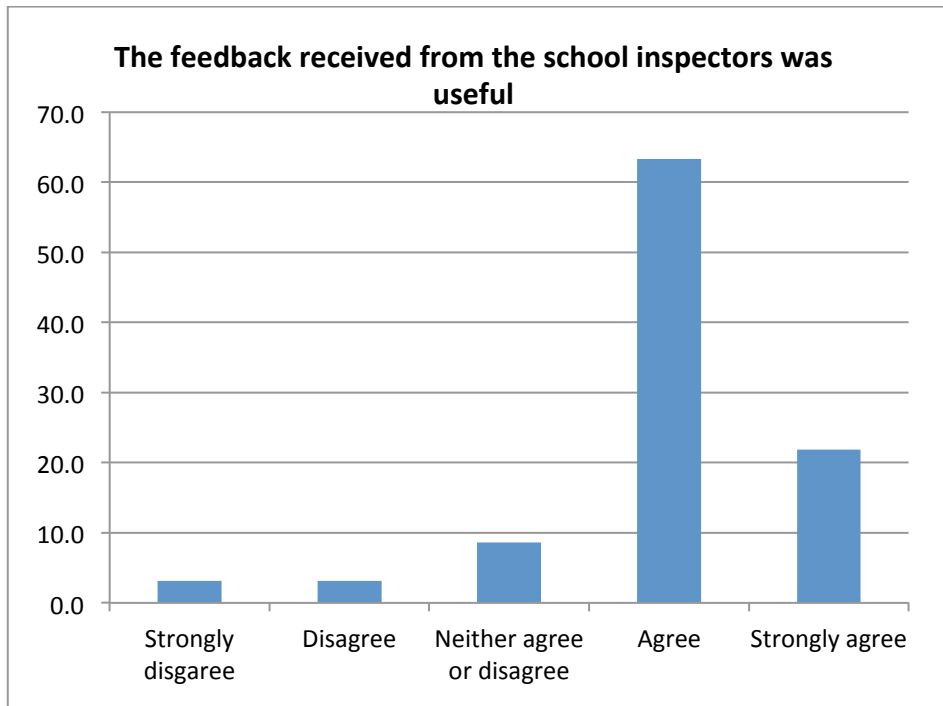
Overall the school was happy with the feedback it received		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	6	4.7
Disagree	8	6.2
Neither agree or disagree	4	3.1
Agree	73	56.6
Strongly agree	38	29.5
Total	129	100.0



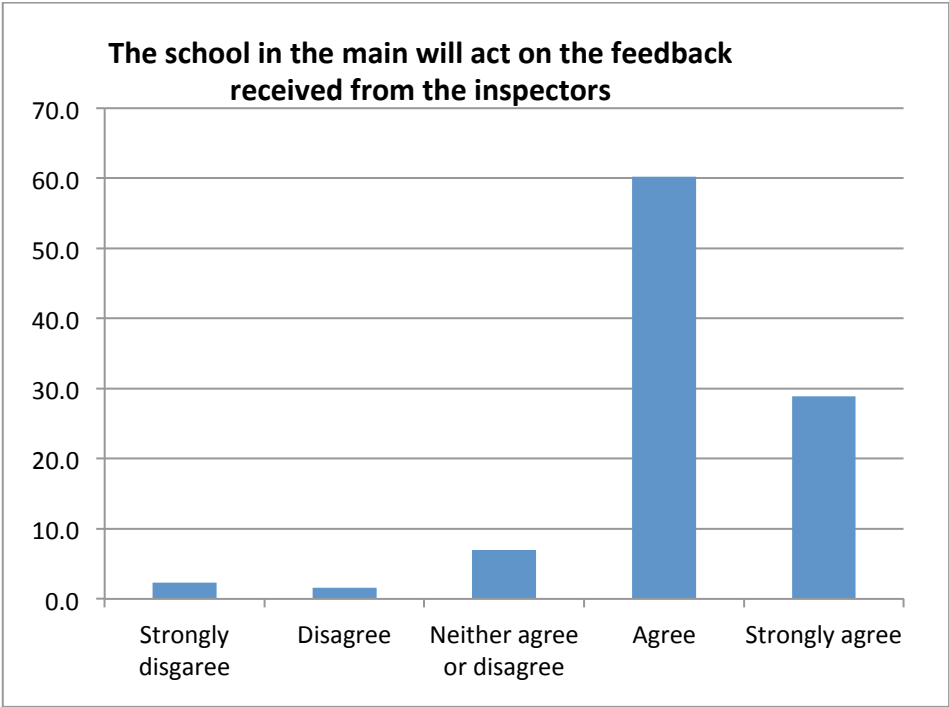
The feedback received from the school inspectors was realistic given the resources of the school		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	5	3.9
Disagree	12	9.4
Neither agree or disagree	12	9.4
Agree	67	52.3
Strongly agree	32	25.0
Total	128	100.0



The feedback received from the school inspectors was useful		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	4	3.1
Disagree	4	3.1
Neither agree or disagree	11	8.6
Agree	81	63.3
Strongly agree	28	21.9
Total	128	100.0



The school in the main will act on the feedback received from the inspectors		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	3	2.3
Disagree	2	1.6
Neither agree or disagree	9	7.0
Agree	77	60.2
Strongly agree	37	28.9
Total	128	100.0



The school's Boards of Management / Boards of Governors is very aware of the contents of the school inspection report		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	1	0.8
Disagree	5	3.8
Neither agree or disagree	1	0.8
Agree	56	42.7
Strongly agree	68	51.9
Total	131	100.0

The Parents' Representatives of the school are sensitive to the contents of the school inspection report		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	2	1.5
Disagree	9	6.9
Neither agree or disagree	16	12.2
Agree	61	46.6
Strongly agree	43	32.8
Total	131	100.0

The Student Representatives of the school are sensitive to the contents of the school inspection report		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	12	10.0
Disagree	17	14.2
Neither agree or disagree	50	41.7
Agree	24	20.0
Strongly agree	17	14.2
Total	120	100.0

The feedback provided to the school during the last inspection visit was insightful		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	5	3.8
Disagree	9	6.8
Neither agree or disagree	17	12.9
Agree	72	54.5
Strongly agree	29	22.0
Total	132	100.0

There was some contradiction between the verbal communication of the inspectors and the final report		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	24	18.0
Disagree	64	48.1
Neither agree or disagree	20	15.0
Agree	15	11.3
Strongly agree	10	7.5
Total	133	100.0

The responses to this set of questions demonstrate a general satisfaction among school leaders regarding the accuracy and usability of the inspection findings. At the same time there is some equivocation when it comes to assessing the impact of the inspection findings on all stakeholders in the school.

School leaders have clearly indicated that they are satisfied that the feedback received from the school is reasonable and realistic. This latter point is important in the context of a general economic environment that has seen the resources available to make major changes to school structures diminish significantly in recent years. It is also significant given the responses to the initial roll out of the Whole School Evaluation system in the early 2000's. At that stage many principals felt that the recommendations were unrealistic and unlikely to be implemented (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012). This perception has obviously changed in the interim.

The issue of the involvement of other stakeholders in the inspection process is an interesting one. The responses to this survey would indicate that parent and management representatives were aware of and 'sensitive' to the findings of the report. This is significant given the increased importance that stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process has been given in the latest iteration of the school inspection system in Ireland (McNamara and O'Hara, 2012). Despite this success in involving parents and school managers there has been less perceptible impact on the student body. This is in keeping with the experience of a number of different systems (Dillon, 2012) but is in itself a challenge to the inspectorate in Ireland.

Inspection and Improvement

The Inspectorate identified additional strengths that the school had not identified		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	14	10.5
Disagree	38	28.6
Neither agree or disagree	37	27.8
Agree	38	28.6
Strongly agree	6	4.5
Total	133	100.0

The Inspectorate identified additional weaknesses that the school had not identified		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	8	6.0
Disagree	38	28.6
Neither agree or disagree	40	30.1
Agree	38	28.6
Strongly agree	9	6.8
Total	133	100.0

I feel pressure to improve the teaching in my school as a result of the last inspection visit		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	13	9.8
Disagree	45	34.1
Neither agree or disagree	38	28.8
Agree	28	21.2
Strongly agree	8	6.1
Total	132	100.0

I feel pressure to do well on the inspection standards		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	5	3.8
Disagree	26	19.7
Neither agree or disagree	27	20.5
Agree	51	38.6
Strongly agree	23	17.4
Total	132	100.0

Recommendations made during the last inspection visit require extra resources that we do not have at the moment		
	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	9	6.9
Disagree	47	35.9
Neither agree or disagree	30	22.9
Agree	27	20.6
Strongly agree	18	13.7
Total	131	100.0

There is an interesting range of responses contained in this section. We can see that school leaders are fairly evenly split when asked to assess the ability of the inspection process to uncover new information about their schools. This in itself is a curious finding that perhaps points to the very diverse range of schools surveyed – although it needs to be acknowledged that this did not emerge to such an extent in earlier sections of the survey.

Responses examining the impact of the inspection process on teaching suggest that for a majority there was little perceived incentive – or need – to change as a result of the visit of the inspection team. This is perhaps counterintuitive given the range of responses highlighted in previous sections but may point to a general sense among schools of the high quality of their teaching. This is arguably confirmed by the generally positive school evaluation reports published in recent years (McNamara and O’Hara, 2012.)

The overall importance of inspection standards is confirmed by this survey. They are seen as a mechanism that encourages compliance and are considered important enough for them to exert pressure on the majority of principals surveyed.

Conclusion

The most recent previous research on the inspection system in Ireland concluded that the capacity to generate useful self – evaluative data in schools was seen as being at the heart of the model of school evaluation proposed. It was further suggested that while the rhetoric of

self-evaluative capacity building was key to the emerging system the lack of a meaningful structural response within schools meant that this remained largely aspirational. This current research contains indications that there is significant change in the way inspection is perceived and responded to by schools. In summary this research provides some evidence that principals overall are satisfied with school inspections generally and use inspection standards and feedback to a significant extent in their daily work to improve the school's functioning. Principals also indicate that inspection standards guide their daily work, that they accept inspection feedback and also feel that school inspections promote self-evaluation and improvement actions in the school. Finally principals indicate that school inspections promote higher levels of innovation capacity in the school. Overall it would seem reasonable to argue on the basis of this research that inspection in Ireland is very gradually achieving increasing influence on the policies and practices of schools.

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