

Chief Inspector's Report

1999-2002

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

1. The main purpose of this report, the first I have published as Chief Inspector, is to promote improvement by informing government, the education, youth and training sectors, the business and commercial sectors, and the general public, about educational and other provision and standards in Northern Ireland. Based on inspection evidence from 1999-2002, the report identifies the significant strengths of education and training in Northern Ireland; it also specifies areas for improvement that need to be addressed if we are together to enhance provision and standards, and maximise Northern Ireland's economic and commercial competitiveness at national and international levels.

2. The period covered by the report has seen considerable governmental change in Northern Ireland, and continuing government initiatives in education and training that have built upon the educational reforms introduced since 1989. Prior to the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998, the Inspectorate provided inspection services and policy advice to the then Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI). The Inspectorate now serves the Departments of Education (DE), Employment and Learning (DEL), and Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL). The Inspectorate has been restructured to

reflect these changes, and to respond to the increasing demand for inspection services and advice from the three departments. During 2001, the Inspectorate, while remaining a unitary body, was reorganised into four divisions, each led by an Assistant Chief Inspector, supported by a middle management tier. Three of the Inspectorate divisions are now linked to these departments; the remaining division is charged with the tasks of improving inspection, policy and business planning, and strengthening and quantifying the link between inspection and improvement.

3. Since 1999, there has been a continuing increase in the demand for inspection services in Northern Ireland. I welcome this development, and view it as a reflection of the continuing confidence in the professional expertise and judgement of the Inspectorate. We now inspect and report upon a considerable range of educational and training services, including pre-school; primary and post-primary schools; special education; alternative educational provision; further education and training; teacher education; the youth sector; the curriculum and support services of the education and library boards (ELBs), and on a large number of other agencies.

4. The three years since 1999 have also witnessed the further development of inspection to reflect changing circumstances and to provide organisations with forms of inspection that are more fit for purpose. In addition, much greater use has been made of province-wide surveys into aspects of educational provision. Furthermore, to make inspection more transparent, we have involved Associate Assessors (drawn mainly from senior management in schools and colleges) and lay persons in the inspection process. The Inspectorate, however, was unable to carry out much of this work in the Catholic Maintained sector due to the industrial action undertaken by the membership of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation since May 2001.

5. In order to ensure public confidence in the objectivity of the evaluation of inspection, I have arranged for an evaluation of inspection to be carried out by an independent firm of consultants. I am pleased to record that, in their report in March 2003, the consultants confirmed the high level of satisfaction with current inspection arrangements, and the manner in which inspections are carried out. The report will be published shortly.

6. Several other developments have also taken place. In direct response to the 1999 report "School Inspection in Northern Ireland" by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and that of the subsequent Public Accounts

Committee, we have worked to make the Inspectorate more customer focused, to share our performance indicators more widely, foster self-evaluation in those organisations which we inspect, and strengthen the link between inspection and improvement. Building on work undertaken in 2001, when members of the Inspectorate evaluated the organisation against a range of criteria taken from the European Foundation (for) Quality Management Excellence Model, a three-year development plan for the Inspectorate was prepared to cover the period 2002-2005. To facilitate further organisational learning and growth, a staff development implementation strategy was prepared in June 2002 to enable inspectors to strengthen their professional effectiveness. A "Charter for Inspection" has been prepared, in line with our commitment to an improved customer focus, and sets out the Inspectorate's values and service standards. Increasingly, we have engaged stakeholders and customers when we review our work and plan new developments in inspection policy, practice and procedures. We have agreed a draft strategic framework with the Chief Executives of the five ELBs to guide future working relationships. In the interests of transparency and openness, the Inspectorate is preparing a "Common Framework for Inspection" to ensure that all organisations will be fully aware of the nature of the inspection process and how it can contribute to the process of improvement.

7. Since 1999, the education, youth and training sectors in Northern Ireland have met well the challenges and opportunities associated with change, and the anticipation of further educational reform. Developments since 1999 to which the education and training providers have responded effectively include a major expansion in pre-school provision; the increase in the use of classroom assistants, including those employed through the “Making a Good Start” initiative; the significant increase in attention to pastoral care and child protection; the impact of Curriculum 2000, and the major changes to GCE A level arrangements; the further development of alternative educational provision; the increased attention, within special education particularly, to inclusion, and issues such as dyslexia and autism. Furthermore, since incorporation in 1998, the further education sector has adapted well to controlling its staffing and budget; and there have been improvements in the arrangements for initial teacher education achieved through the sustained efforts of the universities and university colleges, and their partner schools. In addition, the period since 1999 has seen the continuing growth of the integrated and Irish-medium education sectors.

8. During and following the most difficult years of civil unrest, teachers and other educators have done much, through their efforts, professionalism, and commitment to ensure that the needs and expectations of the wider community, parents, and young people were met. Their work is the basis for

the positive picture set out in this report.

9. In the pre-school sector, as a result of a major government initiative, there has been significant and rapid development which the Inspectorate has monitored. The outcomes of inspection in the pre-school sector indicate clearly that the quality of provision, and the standards achieved are, in the main, good or very good.

10. In the primary sector, inspection evidence points strongly to sound or better standards in teaching, learning and management; to a usually positive and effective ethos and learning environment in the schools, to good working relationships and, mostly, to good standards of behaviour. There is evidence too of steady improvement in literacy and numeracy, as measured by the outcomes of assessment at Key Stages (KS) 1 and 2.

11. Inspection evidence from post-primary schools is broadly similar, with much sound or better teaching and generally improving standards at KS3, and at GCSE. In addition, inspection evidence has highlighted the very promising development of vocational and work-related learning following the introduction of DE’s KS4 flexibility initiative in September 2000. There is also continuing evidence of improvement in attainment at the higher GCE A level grades.

12. It is important also to acknowledge the substantial progress made by many of the primary and post-primary schools participating in

the School Support Programme (SSP), introduced in 1998 and designed to bring about improvement in teaching, learning and standards in participating schools.

13. Special education continues to develop steadily and effectively, and standards are sound or better. Recently, particular attention has been directed by the Inspectorate, through publications and conferences, to important aspects of provision, such as autism and dyslexia. The Code of Practice for special educational needs, introduced in 1998, continues to have a positive impact. Attention, increasingly, is turning to the important issue of inclusion, that is, the provision of opportunities for young people with a statement of special educational needs to have access to mainstream education alongside their peers.

14. Alternative educational provision, designed to meet the needs of the rising number of young people who do not cope well with the demands of formal education, is experiencing a period of growth and development. Increasingly, attention and interest have been focused on the sector. The Inspectorate has carried out a survey of alternative educational provision, the findings of which were explored in a major conference, and government departments are becoming more involved with developments in the sector; there is also a growing confidence among providers.

15. Since 1999, the further education and training sectors have responded

positively and effectively to a wide range of opportunities and challenges. Since 1998, the further education sector has adapted well to the opportunities provided by incorporation, and has worked steadily in response to a range of other initiatives such as life-long learning, essential skills, Curriculum 2000, information communication and learning technology, software engineering, and the development of Centres of Excellence. Colleges are increasingly flexible in the provision they make for their students, and recognise the importance of responding to the needs of the workplace and industry. There is substantial evidence from inspection that the colleges have made significant progress in developing and implementing quality assurance and self-evaluation procedures. There is evidence also that the Inspectorate's document "Improving Quality:Raising Standards" has played a significant and helpful part in these developments. Inspection findings demonstrate that a majority of the teaching, learning and outcomes is of a satisfactory or better standard.

16. In the training sector also, the Inspectorate is responding to an increased demand for inspection services. The mainstays of provision in training remain Jobskills and New Deal. Inspection evidence points to many strengths within training, including the positive manner in which training organisations respond to new initiatives, the good quality of provision in most centres, and the good

progress made by the majority of trainees. As in further education, there is substantial evidence of the successful introduction of quality assurance and self-evaluation procedures.

17. In teacher education, much has been achieved since 1999. Building on the competence-based approach to initial teacher training, the period has seen the growing effectiveness and strength of the partnership arrangements between the teacher training institutions and the schools in which the student teachers are placed. Inspection evidence indicates that most of the student teachers have gained from these arrangements, and are developing their skills in the teaching of literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT), and their competences in classroom management. Introduced in 1999, the Professional Qualification for Headship in Northern Ireland (PQHNI) is progressing well and to a high standard. Monitoring by the Inspectorate indicates that the candidates are suitably qualified and sufficiently experienced; almost all are benefiting considerably from their involvement in the programme.

18. The Inspectorate is also responsible for monitoring, inspecting and reporting on the curriculum, advisory and support services (CASS) provided by the ELBs, and, in 2000, completed a three-year monitoring of the effectiveness of the service in a sample of schools throughout

Northern Ireland. The task of the support services is challenging and important as they respond to requests for support from schools, from individual teachers, and to a wide range of initiatives. The Inspectorate survey highlighted the generally good outcomes of this support, and the positive and beneficial effects it has had on teaching and learning in almost all of the schools visited as part of the survey. The ELBs are also making steady progress in implementing quality assurance and self-evaluation procedures.

19. Against a background of continuing civil disturbance and social deprivation in some areas, youth workers have faced increasing pressure and stress. Despite these challenges, evidence from inspection highlights a strong and largely positive picture with youth staff and volunteers committed to the task of providing a relevant and appropriate service to young people; in turn, the young people continue to gain from the courses and opportunities provided for them.

20. I welcome very much the strengths reflected in the reports from the education, youth and training sectors. It is also important, to bring about further improvement, that attention is directed to those issues where inspection evidence points to a need for such action. Some of these issues are specific to particular sectors; others apply across most, or all, of the education, youth and training sectors. Central among the

issues requiring attention are special educational needs, and essential skills for adults; inconsistencies in aspects of teaching and learning within and across organisations, particularly with regard to matching teaching and learning to the needs of the learners; and the need for senior management teams to develop more effective monitoring and evaluation arrangements based, for instance, on a better use of quantitative data.

21. Other important challenges include the need for: the further development of ICT in supporting teaching and learning; more effective response to the needs of those young people who do not cope well with the traditional education system; and further consideration of how best education can assist young people here to understand and adopt the principles of effective citizenship, and contribute to the development of a more cohesive and harmonious society in Northern Ireland.

22. I also look forward very much to the further development, across the education, youth and training sectors, of self-evaluation as a means to support further improvement. To encourage the further expansion of this work, and as part of its actions to improve transparency, the Inspectorate's "Together Towards Improvement" materials were piloted in some 27 schools from September 2002. This guidance focuses strongly on the promotion of self-evaluation and improvement, and the published materials are now

available to any school wishing to make voluntary use of them. The key characteristic of "Together Towards Improvement" is the linking of internal self-evaluation in schools with external inspection criteria and quality indicators.

23. I believe that the Inspectorate, over the years, has made a key contribution to the maintenance and the further development of strong and successful education, youth and training sectors in Northern Ireland. I believe too that it can contribute even more significantly. I am committed therefore to strengthening the development and influence of the Inspectorate through liaison with others involved in education and training so that inspection procedures are fit for purpose, reflect well changing circumstances and demands, and so that inspection consistently and effectively promotes improvement, in the interests of learners.

1. **THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

Strengths and Areas for Improvement by Sector

1.1 Pre-school Education

The main strengths in the Pre-School sector are:

- the quality of the ethos, including the caring atmosphere, the good relationships, and the promotion of appropriate behaviour;
- the relationships with the parents, and the efforts made to inform them about the work of the centres;
- the breadth of the play programme, with a satisfactory or good range of activities in most areas of the pre-school curriculum;
- the promotion of the children's language, and personal, social and emotional development.

The main areas for improvement are:

- the staff's planning and assessment arrangements;
- the children's early experiences of science and technology;
- the development of physical skills;
- the organisation of the sessions;

- the arrangements made for children with special educational needs; and
- some aspects of the teaching.

1.2 The Primary Sector

The main strengths in the primary sector are:

- the quality of ethos including the relationships between the teachers, children and parents, and the orderly, purposeful learning environment;
- the broad range of effective teaching approaches;
- the commitment of the teachers, and the sound quality of almost all of the teaching;
- the positive response of schools to the SSP to improve the quality and effectiveness of provision and standards;
- the positive response of the teachers to in-service training (INSET), and to CASS support in the implementation of curricular initiatives;

- the positive response of the teachers to computer training opportunities to enhance teaching and learning provided, for example, by the New Opportunities Fund (NOF);
- the developing culture of continuous improvement through school review, planning, target-setting and evaluation;
- the involvement of the parents in supporting the work of the schools and their children's learning;
- the development of school guidance on pastoral care, including child protection;
- the increased readiness of schools to carry out continuous monitoring and evaluation in preparation for follow-up inspections.

The main areas for improvement are:

- the consistency and effectiveness with which the range of abilities of all of the children are addressed;
- the quality of provision and outcomes for children with special educational needs;
- the range and frequency of opportunities for the children to learn and apply ICT skills;
- the need to ensure that the children's practical learning experiences, across the curriculum, provide them with opportunities to participate in activities to challenge and develop their thinking and communication skills;
- the need to improve further the monitoring and evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of the teaching and learning, and the standards which the children achieve; and
- the awareness and understanding of the strategies which enable staff to become self-sustaining in taking forward their own improvement.

1.3 The Post-Primary Sector

The main strengths in the post-primary sector are:

- the caring ethos and good relationships in most schools, and the hard-working teachers committed to meeting the needs of their pupils;
- the provision for pastoral care and, in general, the implementation of appropriate procedures for child protection;
- the good quality of most of the teaching;
- the general improvement in standards achieved by the pupils at the end of KS3 and in General Certification of Secondary Education (GCSE);
- the much greater ICT competence of teachers and the corresponding improvement in the use of ICT to support the pupils' learning;

- the response of the schools involved in the SSP through the development of effective action planning, and the clear evidence of improvement demonstrated in the quality of teaching, learning and standards;
- the increasing climate of self-evaluation in schools which has been promoted in a variety of ways including follow-up inspections, quality assurance inspections, and two-part focused inspections.

The main areas for improvement are:

- the need to reduce further the one-fifth of lessons in which the quality of teaching has more weaknesses than strengths;
- the quality of provision and outcomes for pupils with special educational needs;
- the need, in all schools, to raise the performance at GCSE of low and under-attaining pupils, particularly that of boys;
- consistency in the development of ICT within and across subjects, and more appropriate progression in ICT skills for all of the pupils;
- the need to improve further the quality of management in schools, and at all levels, to provide more effective monitoring and evaluation of the quality of teaching and the standards achieved.

1.4 Improving Primary and Post-Primary Schools

Since 1998, the improvement of practice and standards, in those schools where such improvement is necessary, has been promoted through the SSP.

Between 1998 and 2002, 108 schools participated in the SSP; 68, or 63%, improved sufficiently to leave the programme. Evidence from inspection indicates improvement in almost all of the schools involved, with a majority developing a more critical and self-evaluative approach to their work.

For a small minority of schools in the SSP, progress proved to be particularly difficult. Consequently, in 1998-1999, DE identified five post-primary schools working in particularly challenging circumstances where, despite their commitment and often strenuous efforts since 1995, the improvements made were modest. The schools were designated as Group 1 schools and the particular measures to support them, within the SSP structure, the Group 1 initiative.

The five schools have benefited considerably from their involvement in the Group 1 initiative. There has been a steady improvement in the quality of teaching and standards, including outcomes in external examinations; the introduction of new curricular initiatives - for example, vocational and work-related learning in KS4; and a marked improvement in the teachers' morale, motivation and professional expertise.

While the Group 1 schools continue to face significant challenges, these improvements highlight the benefits of a well-funded, well-focused and well-supported improvement strategy, which includes inspection, and assists especially schools working in particularly disadvantaged and challenging circumstances.

For the primary and post-primary schools involved in the SSP, the most significant changes for the better have occurred where there has been a high quality of leadership and management, a clear focus on, and strategies to improve, the quality of teaching, learning, and the attainment of the pupils reflected in a soundly-based action plan. Increasingly, a majority of the schools are more rigorously self-evaluative in their approach to their work. Inspection evidence indicates that effective self-evaluation is crucial to the promotion of improvement and raising standards. Progress is much less evident where there is an absence of commitment to monitoring and evaluation at senior management level, or where there is a lack of awareness of those strategies which have the potential to effect improvement.

The schools, CASS, and CCMS have highlighted the importance of initial inspection as a critical element in helping the schools identify and prioritise their areas for improvement, and follow-up inspections as essential in helping to sustain improvement over time.

1.5 Special Education

The main strengths are:

- in the special school and unit sector, rising expectations by the teachers, consistently good provision, and evidence of improvements, including the development of ICT, the provision for children with autism, access to integration, and the increasing numbers of young people achieving accreditation;
- in mainstream schools and in colleges, the increasing priority afforded to special educational needs, and the growing efforts to ensure that effective assessment is closely associated with intervention;
- the implementation of arrangements in line with the requirements of the Code of Practice, and the manner in which schools and colleges are focusing more sharply and frequently on those pupils with special needs who make little or no progress.

The main areas for improvement are:

- the need to develop a province-wide strategic policy to influence and inform special and alternative education;
- the challenge of responding to the implications and complexities of inclusion in respect of the increasing number of children with special needs entering mainstream education;

- the variations in the nature and quality of provision in most mainstream schools and in colleges, and the need to raise standards of attainment among those who require special help;
- greater consistency across the ELBs in the placement and support of children with special educational needs in the pre-school and moderate learning difficulty sectors.

1.6 Alternative Education Provision (AEP)

The main strengths in alternative education are:

- the often innovative, challenging and interesting programmes;
- the quality of the young people's experiences, with those involved often progressing into employment, further education or Jobskills training;
- the effective leadership and management of the projects;
- the involvement of highly-committed staff;
- the priority given to personal and social development;
- the consistently high quality of the relationships;
- the acceptance of the young people, and the non-judgemental

manner in which they are treated by the adults;

- the understanding shown by the adults of the young people's problems and personal circumstances, and the sensitivity with which they are supported and encouraged;
- the informal approaches to learning adopted within the programmes;
- the good level of individual support for learning;
- the expectations of the staff that the young people are capable of educational success;
- the increasing self-confidence, feelings of self-worth, and levels of motivation evident among, and reported by, the young people.

The main areas for improvement are the need:

- to broaden the curriculum;
- for more access to ICT;
- for more support for young people with special needs;
- for a more explicit focus on cross-community issues;
- for improved monitoring and evaluation of provision and standards;
- for better accommodation and resources.

1.7 Post-16 and Further Education

a) 16-19: schools

The main strengths in the 16-19 sector (schools) are:

- sound teaching from committed and well-qualified teachers;
- well-motivated pupils;
- supportive teacher-pupil relationships;
- high standards, and the increasing numbers achieving three or more A level grades at A to C;
- the support structures and the pastoral care system;
- the potential of the modular accreditation system to create more flexibility in the pupils' programmes of learning.

The main areas for improvement are:

- the further development of the pupils' ability to research, evaluate and represent information for themselves;
- greater emphasis on the development of learning through discussion and debate;
- the need for a review of the key skills and the demands of Curriculum 2000;
- greater breadth in curriculum and, for some pupils, greater choice;

- better use of quantitative data to evaluate provision and for future planning;
- greater rationalisation of provision across the 16-19 sector in schools and further education.

b) The Further Education (FE) sector

The main strengths in further education are:

- the improvement in quality assurance procedures;
- the quality of the majority of the teaching;
- the increase in provision and enrolments in the six main vocational skill areas;
- the increase in provision for life-long learning and widening access;
- significant improvements in accommodation and resources, including ICT;
- and the potential of the Essential Skills Strategy, that is, adult literacy and numeracy.

The main areas for improvement are:

- the further development of quality assurance procedures and development planning at all levels;
- the further development of closer links with local industry and business;

- ensuring that learning programmes are suitably broad, and not unduly constrained by budget demands and by external assessment requirements;
- the embedding of the new technologies (particularly e-learning) within the curriculum;
- the learners' competences in the six key skills; and
- staff development in the pedagogical skills necessary to progress, in particular, the key and essential skills agenda, and e-learning.

1.8 The Training Sector

The main strengths in the training sector are:

- the ability of most training organisations to respond to, and implement, new training initiatives;
- the recognition by managers of the benefits of implementing rigorous self-evaluation procedures as part of their quality assurance arrangements;
- the good quality of provision in most training organisations, which meets the needs of the learners, the community and employers;
- the good opportunities provided for learners to engage in challenging vocational training activities;
- the good progress made by the majority of learners in their training,

and the achievement of appropriate standards of work.

The main areas for improvement are:

- the need for a minority of training organisations to provide training programmes that meet more effectively the individual needs and interests of learners;
- the significant weaknesses in the planning, development and assessment of key skills in the majority of training organisations;
- the lack of effective initial assessment of the essential skills needs of learners in a minority of training organisations;
- the varied retention and success rates within and across the training initiatives.

1.9 Teacher Education

The main strengths in teacher education are:

- the improvements in the arrangements for initial teacher education achieved through the sustained efforts of the universities and university colleges, and their partner schools;
- the good teaching competences of most of the newly qualified teachers;
- the beneficial effects of CASS support on teaching and learning in the vast majority of the schools;

- the development of procedures for self-evaluation in CASS;
- the success of the PQHNI in preparing graduates for headship, strengthening their leadership and management skills, and their understanding of current educational issues.

The main areas for improvement are:

- the need for more liaison between the universities and university colleges, and their partner schools to build more systematically on the experiences gained by the student teachers from each school placement, and to establish a clearer focus for the development of the student teachers at each stage of their school experience;
- more systematic provision by the schools of a range of opportunities for student teachers to develop their understanding of whole-school and cross-curricular matters;
- the further development by the ELBs of their procedures for monitoring and evaluating the quality and effectiveness of their support for schools.
- the high quality of relationships between the young people and the youth workers;
- the positive commitment by staff and volunteers to the three core principles of youth work: preparing young people for participation; promoting acceptance and understanding of others; and the development of appropriate values and beliefs;
- the good use made by youth leaders of DE's publication "Youth Work: A Model for Effective Practice";
- the improved links between formal and non-formal education;
- the increasing involvement of young people in the planning and delivery of youth work programmes;
- the significant contribution which youth work makes to developing leadership skills among young people;
- the commitment and interest of the majority of the leaders in helping young people to have confidence in themselves, and to respect others;

1.10 The Youth Service

The main strengths in the youth sector are:

- its strong and positive ethos;
- the good use made by centre staff of published guidelines on policies and procedures relevant to the care and well-being of children and young people;

- the excellent support provided by part-time youth workers and volunteers for the full-time youth workers, and their valuable contribution to the quality of the service;
- the good, and sometimes excellent, leadership provided by the majority of youth tutors in schools, and the quality of the provision made for the young people.

The main areas for improvement are:

- the development of a more systematic approach to monitoring and evaluating the quality of provision throughout the service;
- the better integration of disabled young people into youth work as receivers and providers;
- within cross-community work, a clearer focus on key objectives such as understanding conflict and cultural understanding;
- increasing the quality and range of staff development opportunities for leaders and volunteers;
- improving significantly the quality and availability of personal safety programmes and, in particular, providing well-planned and supportive programmes which cover effectively topics such as bullying, drug education, self-defence, personal safety, and the general skills for everyday life;
- improving the vetting procedures for all staff, paid or unpaid;
- the need to promote, in a significant minority of the centres, the more purposeful use of ICT;
- remedying deficiencies in accommodation and resources.

2. THE INSPECTORATE AND THE PROMOTION OF IMPROVEMENT

At a time when the improvement of education, youth and training provision and standards is a government priority, attention has focused on the means by which such improvement might be realised. Inspection is but one of a range of strategies through which improved standards can be achieved, but, of itself, cannot guarantee that an institution or organisation will be able, post-inspection, to bring about the necessary improvement; this progress will depend upon the extent to which the schools, colleges, training organisations, individual teachers, tutors and others, including support agencies, address effectively the areas for improvement set out in the inspection report. Furthermore, and in addition to the use of a wider range of forms of inspection, the Inspectorate has sought to be increasingly influential in promoting improvement through the provision of policy advice to government departments and to others; the publication and dissemination of reports and surveys, and their discussion with other professionals; involvement with curricular and other initiatives; contribution to educational conferences; the dissemination of inspection criteria and performance indicators; and links with many agencies involved with education and training in Northern Ireland.

During the 1990s, the Inspectorate reconsidered the efficiency and effectiveness of its inspection procedures. As a result, from a position in the early 1990s where a general inspection was the most common form of inspection, its use has been reduced significantly in favour of a wider range of other methods of inspection.

These other inspection types have been employed to provide the Inspectorate with a more flexible range of procedures better to meet changing circumstances, different institutional requirements and stages of development, to involve organisations more fully in the process of inspection, and to enable evidence-based policy advice on cross-cutting issues. Furthermore, the Inspectorate has joined with other Inspectorates in certain inspections.

In highlighting and reinforcing the link between inspection and improvement, the Inspectorate has given increased attention to following up inspections, to assess and affirm progress, and to help to bring about improvement. In November 2000, to reflect the importance of follow-up inspection, and to assist schools respond to inspection findings, the Inspectorate and the Chief Executives of the ELBs agreed to develop closer and more strategic working relationships amongst the Inspectorate, schools, and CASS in the post-inspection phase.

The Inspectorate's capacity to offer advice and guidance to all three government departments, by drawing on the breadth and depth of its professional and specialist expertise, and direct evidence from inspection, is strengthened considerably through its status as a unitary Inspectorate. Over the period of this report the Inspectorate has provided policy advice and guidance on a very wide range of issues to DE, DEL and DCAL, and to other individuals and bodies.

The Inspectorate has made use of focus groups to involve others in helping to shape Inspectorate working policies and practice, and to promote organisational and other improvement within the Inspectorate, and in the system generally.

The Inspectorate recognises the need to disseminate its findings fully and thoroughly to ensure that the main messages are recognised and acted upon, especially those which highlight the strengths (whether system-wide or specific to a phase or subject) and identify where improvement is required. To facilitate this process, increased emphasis is being given to the use of major conferences supported subsequently by group meetings with key stakeholders, or workshops or seminars for dissemination purposes. To disseminate better the outcomes of inspection activity, and to encourage improvement, the Inspectorate, with the support of CASS officers, has prepared Digital Versatile Discs (DVDs) for use in the pre-school, primary, post-primary, special education, youth work and vocational

education and training sectors. These are intended to help teachers, youth workers and others observe and reflect on good practice in classrooms and other settings.

Increased attention has also been given by the Inspectorate to developing further working contacts with a wide range of educational interests in Northern Ireland and, on occasions beyond it, in order to work with others to support improvements. The Inspectorate's involvement, for example, in curricular and other initiatives has provided additional opportunities for inspectors to contribute to promoting improvement across a wide range of issues and audiences.

While the Inspectorate aims to encourage the highest possible standards of education and training through its programme of inspection, it also plays a significant part in assisting those involved in education and training to evaluate and improve provision by publishing clear indicators of what constitutes good quality of provision and standards; much of this guidance is aimed at encouraging teachers, tutors, youth workers and others to take forward their own form of self-evaluation and raise their own standards. Between 1998 and 2002, these indicators have been set out in a wide range of publications including: "Evaluating Pre-School Education"; "Evaluating Subjects"; "Improving Subjects"; "Improving Quality: Raising Standards"; "Youth Work: A Model For Effective Practice"; "Quality Assurance in the Youth Sector" and, in 2003, within "Together Towards Improvement".

3. KEY RECURRING THEMES AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Introduction

The education, youth and training sectors in Northern Ireland are, in many ways, performing well and the quality of teaching, lecturing, training, and the levels of attainment reached by children, pupils, students and trainees are mostly of a satisfactory or better standard. There remains room for improvement, or for further improvement, in the key areas which follow. Most of these are not of recent origin and all are particularly resistant to improvement. Nevertheless, were they to be addressed more successfully than to date, the prospect is greater of even higher standards of provision and outcomes in education and training in Northern Ireland.

Special Educational Needs and Adult Essential Skills

Concerns have been expressed by the Inspectorate, by others, and notably by the Education Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly, about the large number of young people and adults in Northern Ireland who do not possess the literacy and numeracy competences required in a modern society. The need to improve special educational provision, and outcomes, is a matter not only for schools working in especially disadvantaged circumstances, though it is often at its most challenging in such situations,

but also for all pre-school centres, schools, further and higher education colleges, and training organisations. The Essential Skills Strategy, launched by DEL in April 2002, represents a significant step towards addressing the literacy and numeracy needs of adults; it also has the potential to bring about a co-ordinated inter-agency and inter-departmental approach to deal with the issue of poor standards in literacy and numeracy.

In 1995 some 20% of adults were identified as having significant weaknesses in essential skills. In further education and training, evidence from inspection indicates that there is room for improvement in relation to essential skills, particularly with regard to the match between individual need and type of support, monitoring of progress and subsequent remediation.

Key Skills

Key skills, particularly the development of communication and numeracy skills across the ability range, present teachers and tutors with challenges broadly similar to those in special educational needs. The promotion and integration of communication and numeracy through and into mainstream teaching, subject teaching, or vocational programmes, is

a priority in education and training, yet for many teachers and tutors the successful planning and delivery of key skills are challenging and problematic aspects of their work.

Aspects of teaching, learning and planning

While the overall quality of teaching and learning remains high, inspection continues to highlight variations in standards across the pre-school, primary and post-primary, further education and training sectors, and within individual schools, colleges and training organisations. Prominent among the issues highlighted as requiring improvement are the need to: cater better for individual difference; increase the level of challenge in the teaching; reduce routine and mundane tasks; and improve key aspects of assessment. These issues highlight the need for improvements in planning and practice.

Assessment and marking for improvement

Inspection often highlights strengths in assessment arrangements in schools and colleges; in the main, assessment policies are relevant and appropriate, and deal clearly and effectively with the range, purpose and frequency of assessment, and with aspects of marking. Across the education system, assessment and marking policies need to take much greater account of the extent to which young people's knowledge and

understanding show evidence of the work and efforts of their teachers; where this is not the case, the weaknesses in the young people's work should be identified, addressed and followed-up in a systematic and effective manner. Marking for improvement remains underdeveloped across the system, yet is central to the raising of institutional and individual standards of teaching and learning.

Information and communication technology

In 1997, a comprehensive "Strategy for Education Technology in Northern Ireland" was launched to equip young people with the ICT competence they need for the emerging knowledge-based society, and to ensure that teachers undertake professional development in the use of ICT to support and enhance teaching and learning. Similarly, in 1999, a three-year strategy was launched to develop ICT in further education and to ensure that the students acquired the skills and competences to meet the careers and lifestyle demands of an increasingly technological society. Significant funding has been made available. Much has been achieved and there has been real progress in the development of ICT in schools and colleges. Despite this, much remains to be done to secure the use of ICT in classroom practice in primary and post-primary schools to raise the standards of the pupils' work and in colleges, and to improve the quality of the students' learning experiences, including e-learning and on-line

learning. In the youth sector, evidence from inspection highlights the need for more purposeful work in the development of ICT.

Monitoring and evaluation

Despite increased attention in recent years, the monitoring and evaluation of teaching, learning and standards require further substantial improvement. This key area is central to effective management, to improving teaching and learning, and to the raising of standards.

Across the education, training and youth sectors generally, two areas require particular attention and improvement:

- there is an urgent need for a more systematic approach to the analysis and evaluation of performance data, particularly attendance and retention rates; literacy, numeracy and special education needs outcomes; external and internal examination and assessment results; and bench-marking data;
- and more effective use needs to be made of performance and other data to determine the extent to which institutional targets have been met, to ascertain the match between the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning and the outcomes achieved, and to inform subsequent teaching and learning.

The behaviourally difficult, the hard to help, and gender issues

Inspection in the primary and post-primary sectors indicates that most learners are co-operative and most classes are conducted in an atmosphere conducive to progress. However, there is a growing minority of pupils who, by the end of KS3, and in KS4, show varying degrees of disaffection with school-based education whose literacy and numeracy skills are limited, and who have experienced little educational success. Within this group, a small number of very disaffected pupils, often male, attend infrequently, cause considerable and, at times, serious behavioural problems; their poor behaviour often results in suspension or expulsion.

The statistics show that, generally, girls outperform boys, notably at GCSE and at GCE A level. By the end of KS2, there is a widening gender gap in attainment in English and mathematics, particularly in English. This continues into KS3, where, for example, in the non-selective post-primary sector, twice as many girls as boys achieve level 6 or above in English. This gender difference is also evident in male and female attainment in GCSE at grades A* to C and at GCE A level. Furthermore, the proportion of boys leaving school without GCSE qualifications is approximately double that of girls; in June 2001, for example, one in every thirteen boys left school with no GCSE qualifications.

Increasingly, CASS officers and schools are working together to address the complex issue of differences in gender attainment patterns. Different techniques to motivate boys, and to reflect their disposition to learn in particular ways, are being developed. In addition, alternative curricular arrangements featuring vocational, work-related and practical elements are being introduced to re-motivate learners, particularly boys. Much remains to be done, but the KS4 flexibility initiative introduced in 2000 to increase provision for vocational and work-related learning for 14 to 16 year old pupils through a partnership with a further education college and/or a training organisation is providing good evidence of progress. Significantly, in the schools surveyed by the Inspectorate, three-quarters of the pupils involved were boys. Inspection shows clearly that the pupils involved are more motivated; show improved behaviour and self-esteem; participate in worthwhile work placements; gain appropriate accreditation; and that a greater number than previously transfer to further education and training courses, or to employment. It will be important that this work is developed further.

In addition to responding to the challenges posed in KS3 and KS4 by disaffected and demotivated pupils, schools are also having to address the problem of pupils with poor patterns of attendance. Despite the considerable efforts and inventiveness of management and teachers, this

presents a continuing and significant challenge, particularly for schools working in difficult circumstances. Resolving it will require attention to a range of factors, and a school-based, multi-agency initiative, adopting and adapting successful features from alternative educational provision, and/or drawing upon the success of those schools currently involved in developing vocational and work-related learning, may offer a way forward.

Further progress on the issues explored above will require a high quality of teaching and a relevant curriculum which offers the pupils a prospect of success, well-motivated teachers, and the highest possible calibre of school management, leadership and external support.

Life in a divided society

During the years that Northern Ireland has been subject to civil unrest, community tensions and political uncertainty, the education system has given young people the opportunity to experience, within settled and familiar routines, a respite from the turbulence, violence, and uncertainty which so often has affected adversely the society in which they and their families live.

In 1999, the Inspectorate surveyed provision for Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) in post-primary schools and found considerable commitment and many positive features in the work in schools. Good

practice, though, tended to be isolated rather than part of a whole-school approach. In only a minority of the schools were pupils confident in discussing conflict and division in the community; most of the teachers were uncomfortable in dealing with these issues. In only a significant minority of the schools too, had the pupils an understanding of differing community identity and traditions. In a majority of the schools, there was insufficient professional development for teachers, notably in addressing controversial issues in the classroom. Furthermore, the pupils were largely unaware of the contribution of other ethnic groups, outside of the Protestant and Catholic traditions, to life in Northern Ireland. In the Youth service too, inspection has highlighted the need for a greater cross-community emphasis, and the need for attention to be given to the key objectives of understanding conflict and cultural understanding.

Since the 1999 survey, ongoing political and other tensions within the community, and outbreaks of violence in some interface areas, continue to draw attention to the need for schools to consider the contribution they might make to assist young people understand better the nature of Northern Ireland's divided society. The growing interest in Citizenship Education also provides schools with a challenge and opportunity to engage in this important debate.

Teachers have been understandably cautious about exploring with pupils sensitive and controversial issues reflective of life in a divided society. The extent to which education, on its own, can remedy, or help remedy, major community divisions is limited, and teachers are rightly concerned to avoid the charge of social engineering. Nevertheless, there is much to be gained by schools assisting young people to acquire a fuller understanding of the values, history, traditions and culture of the Northern Ireland community, and to assist young people to cope better with life in that society.

CONCLUSION

Much of worth has been, and is being achieved, across the education, youth and training sectors in Northern Ireland. High standards characterise much of the quality of learning and outcomes and, in the main, the public perception of education in Northern Ireland is, rightly, positive and supportive.

More remains to be done, particularly regarding those recurring themes and areas for improvement identified in this report, to build on what has been achieved, and to ensure that the quality of education and training, and the outcomes achieved by children, students, trainees and young people, are of the highest possible standard, and so equip them fully to meet the requirements of life, society and employment in the 21st century. In so doing it will be important also that education and training continue to give attention to educational outcomes that go beyond the realisation of academic achievement, important though that is. The processes of education, and the development of the individual as a whole, are vitally important aspects of education and training that deserve, and require, continuing and enhanced attention.

For the Inspectorate too, there is the continuing challenge of ensuring that inspection is fit for purpose; that it adapts better to the particular circumstances and stages of development of individual schools, colleges, training organisations and other bodies; that it continues to promote self-evaluation leading to self-improvement; that it encourages and develops improvement in teaching, learning and standards; that there is a better dissemination of Inspectorate performance indicators, criteria, and findings; and that evidence from inspection continues to guide the policies of the three government departments for which, currently, the Inspectorate provides inspection services.

In a wider and more challenging context, all of us involved in education and training should also seek to develop further the contribution we make to promoting a more inclusive and more cohesive society in Northern Ireland, and to help young people to develop an increased capacity to meet better the demands and opportunities which they face. To do less would be a disservice to Northern Ireland's greatest asset: its young people.

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