EQI

Centre for Evaluation,
Quality & Inspection

@EQI_DCU

Educational Studies Association of Ireland Conference (ESAI) 2015

Title: Together Towards Improvement: The case of Polycentric Evaluation in Northern Ireland

Date: Thursday 9th - Saturday 11th April 2015

Introduction – Why Polycentric Evaluation?

•**Core Theory of Polycentric evaluation:** When schools reach a certain evaluation threshold, they can only further improvement not merely through a combination of **school self-evaluation** and **pressure from external inspection** but rather, through **collaboration between clusters of schools, communities and the inspectorate.**

•**Northern Ireland:** Looking forward, schools in Northern Ireland now appear to be in the process of asking the question: "How do we as practitioner researchers improve the quality of education not only in our schools but also in our communities?"'.(Brown, 2011)

•**Along with other countries:** This requires research into polycentric network evaluations (Although there is a plethora of research on evaluation and inspection, this is not the case with polycentric networks)

Introduction - Stages involved in the project

(September 2014 – September 2017)

STAGE 1

Mapping **(DCU, IOE, University of Twente, University of Sofia, and education partners – Inspectorates of Education and Networked schools)** 3-4 existing examples of polycentric networked school evaluation systems and 2 examples of 'centralized inspections'

STAGE 2

Literature review and ex ante evaluation

STAGE 3

Scoping good examples across Europe (survey and document analysis of SICI profiles)

STAGE 4

Studying impact of 4/5 examples of polycentric/networked versus centralized inspections. Dissemination: narratives, interactive map on website, MOOC

EQI

Background
Why study Networks from an evaluation perspective

- In the public and non-profit sector, collaboration is no longer simply an option; **it has become the new orthodoxy'. (Feyes and Devos, 2014, p.1)**

- Evaluation and network governance are both among the top 10 trendy concepts in public policy'(p.29) Hertting and Verdung (2012)

- In comparison to single unit inspections, there is **very little, if any research relating to the impact or for that matter, potential impact of evaluation on networks of schools.**

- Research on the effects of school inspection have primarily focussed on evaluation of individual schools. **(Brown, et al, 2014, Brown, 2013; Dedering and Muller, 2013; Ehren et al, 2013, McNamara and O'Hara, 2012, 2013)**

EQI

Background – Why the lack of research in the field?

In reality

•**Difficult to isolate** 'the causal effect of network structure' (Siciliano, 2012. p.2) in comparison to single unit inspections.

•**Reluctance among many who study networks to discuss formal mechanisms of control.** A common assumption is that, since networks are collaborative arrangements, governance, which implies hierarchy and control, is inappropriate.. (Provan and Kenis 2008, p.230).

•**There are no studies of the failure rate of networks, either in education or in any other sector** (de Lima, 2010, p.17); and yet, there is constant drive to establish school to school networking becoming an integral part of educational practice.

There is nothing inherently **positive** or **negative** about a network: it can be **flexible** and **organic**, or **rigid** and **bureaucratic**; it can be **liberating** and **empowering**, or **stifling** and **inhibiting**; it can be democratic, but it may also be dominated by particular interests. (de Lima, 2010)

EQI

Towards Polycentric Inspection – Classification of Networks

Serendipitous networks

Interactions among group members (that is, **'networks evolve haphazardly from the interactions of individual actors,** without guidance from any central network agent **(de Lima, 2010, p. 11).**

Goal directed networks

All relations between network members **are structured in order to achieve network-level goals;** an administrative entity plans and coordinates the activities of the network as a whole **(de Lima, 2010, p. 11).**

Polycentric inspection networks

You're really asking schools don't forget here to move from a culture of competition to a culture of cooperation. My own view of it is that you don't move from competition to cooperation. **You have to evolve a new construct (Inspector participant in Brown, 2013, p.124)**

EQI

Towards Polycentric Inspection – Working construct

Poly-centric inspection is implemented by stakeholders outside of the day to day operations of the network and involves some or all of the following activities:

- **Coordinating visits** to all schools and stakeholders in the network;

- **Examining the quality of collaboration** between schools and stakeholders in the network;

- Taking into account the perspective on school quality from the schools and the various stakeholders in the network;

- **Quality assuring the networks collaborative self-evaluation** of recommendations from previous poly-centric inspections;

- **Providing feedback to stakeholders** on elements of best practice in other schools and networks;

- Facilitating collective agreement for a **shared agenda for change within the network.**

Towards Polycentric Inspection – The case of West Belfast

Data collection and analysis

•**Document Analysis:** Full area and youth inspections since 2005; West-Belfast Partnership Board's response to the area inspection.

•**Parametric / non Parametric Analysis:** data relating to terminal examination results, Free Schools Meals entitlement, the number of individuals claiming benefits and also, the destination of students following GCE and A Level education.

•**Interviews and focus groups:** lead inspector who carried out the Area inspection; the education manager for the West-Belfast partnership board; the education officer in the Belfast Education Library Board.

Dissemination of findings

ETI, CCMS, Members of ALC, West Belfast Partnership Board, Belfast Education Library Board

EQI

Polycentric Inspection in Context – The case of West Belfast

Background information

- One of the highest levels of people claiming unemployment benefit in Northern Ireland (NI)

- The highest proportion of people (76%) living in the most deprived Super Output Areas of NI

- Ranks first on the NI Multiple Deprivation Measure (WBP, 2014, p.6)

- A significant number of the student population are entitled to Free school meals. 35% at Post-primary level and 60% at primary level.

EQI

Polycentric Inspection in Context – The case of West Belfast

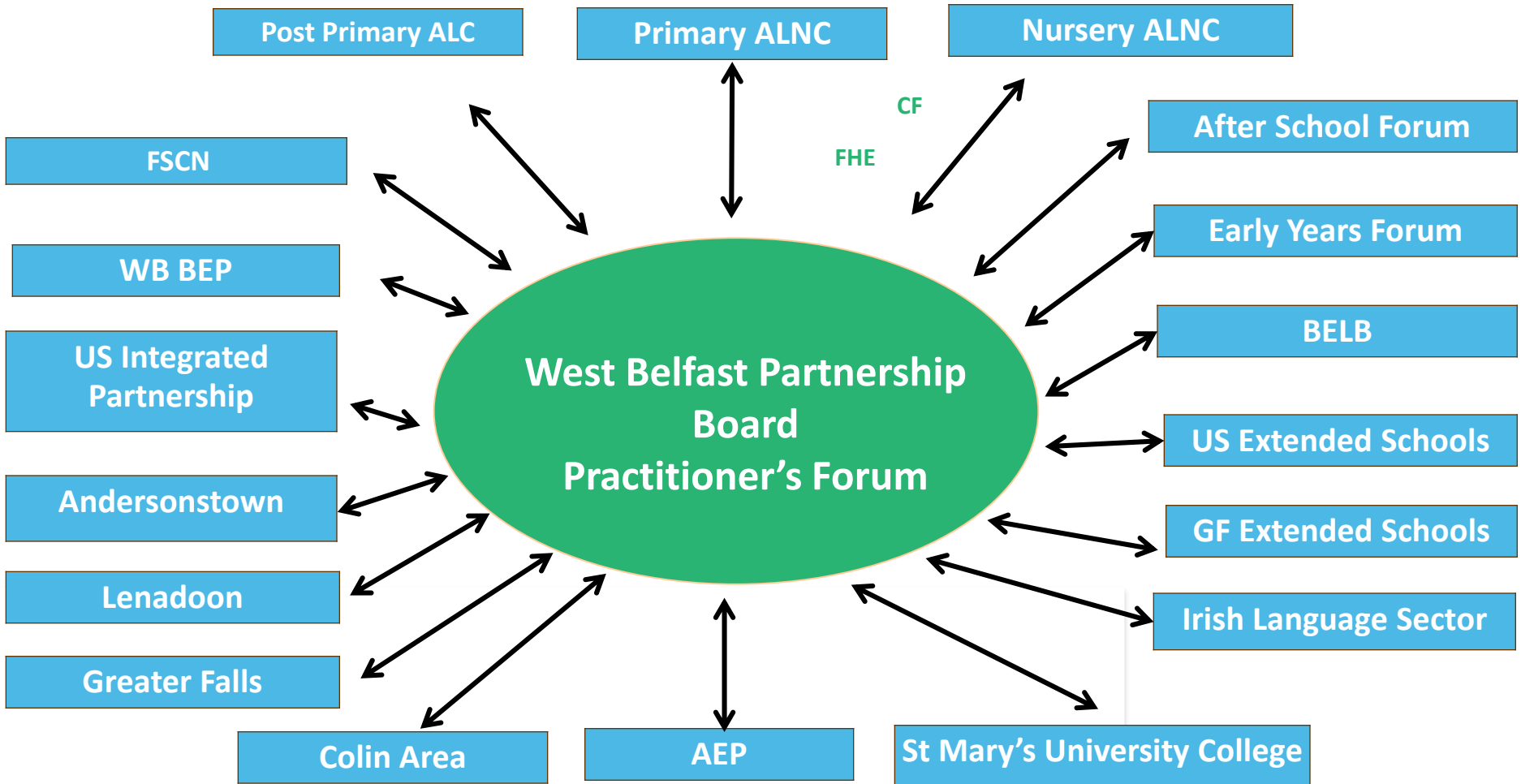**From the time of the first Area Inspection (2010)**

There has been a significant increase in the percentage of students at GCSE and A level achieving 5 or more at grades A* to C.

WBALC PERFORMANCE 2009/10 TO 2013/14	DE FIGURES				
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
GCSE					
Percentage achieving 5 or more at grades A*-C	79.2	80.8	84.5	85.7	91.9
Percentage achieving 7 or more at grades A*-C	60.0	63.6	69.5	70.5	80.2
A Level	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Percentage achieving 2 or more at grades A*-E	92.3	89.9	93.3	91.1	93.8
Percentage achieving 3 or more at grades A*-C	50.2	51.1	55.0	58.1	66.8

EQI

Polycentric Inspection in Context – The case of West Belfast

From the time of the first Area Inspection (2010)

The network has evolved considerably to one where ownership of the findings of the Area based inspection is distributed across the network and subsequently Quality Assured by the District Inspector.

Post Primary ALC

Primary ALNC

Nursery ALNC

CF

FHE

After School Forum

FSCN

Early Years Forum

WB BEP

BELB

US Integrated Partnership

US Extended Schools

Andersonstown

GF Extended Schools

Lenadoon

West Belfast Partnership Board Practitioner's Forum

Irish Language Sector

Greater Falls

Colin Area

AEP

St Mary's University College

FHE = First Hand Evidence
CF = Continuous Feedback

Polycentric Inspection in Context – The case of West Belfast

Analysis – Comparison with single unit inspections

What are the most profound differences of this way of working with traditional inspections of individual schools?

- **The biggest difference is the potential for change** and to start to see that the solution for deficiencies in a system are **not going to be solved in one particular way or by one particular institution…** The potential is for more creative ways of tackling the problems that emerge. **(Interview participant)**

- The organisations own the process. **That's the most profound difference.**
(Interview participant)

- In some jurisdictions if there is a bad inspection, the powers that be would be able to put the school on special measures or eventually, suggest that the school is closed down. Now I can't imagine if we had a really bad area inspection which we didn't, that the inspectorate would have put West-Belfast on special measures or, West-Belfast down; so **ownership and an agreed agenda for change is essential.**
(Interview participant)

EQI

Polycentric Inspection in Context – The case of West Belfast

Analysis – Impact of Polycentric Inspection

What is the impact of these types of inspections on individual schools, the network and potentially other stakeholders? How do you know? What is the evidence of impact?

- **Increased collaboration**, integrated responses and collective responsibility. You see a child being a bit happier going to school and within their community, you see their attendance improving. **You also see the involvement of families. (Interview participant)**

- With poly-centric inspection there is **less of a threat of becoming institutionalized.** Hearing things from a different perspective is never really a bad thing and it gets you to **reflect** and **re-articulate** how it is done in your own environment. **(Interview participant)**

Polycentric Inspection in Context – The case of West Belfast

Analysis – Impact of Polycentric Inspection

What elements/aspects of polycentric inspections have an impact?

- A good communication of the findings, **persuasion on the part of the inspectorate that this is a good thing to do.** That is what has an impact and **buy in from the people to improving the findings as well.** **(Interview participant)**

- What is unique is that because the **Network focuses on teaching and learning** this is what has made the difference in my opinion. **(Interview participant)**

- I think it does raise to a certain degree the level of professional language in schools particularly around Self Evaluation and planning and it encourages schools to reflect. Now it is pressurized and it is stressful but it forces schools to periodically reflect on what they are doing and where they want to go. **(Interview participant)**

- The building up of very positive relationships where traditionally we would have been working out of silos in our own school. I keep on going back to the point that it is our community, they are our pupils, and we need to start looking at it from that perspective. **(Interview participant)**

EQI

Polycentric Inspection in Context – The case of West Belfast

Analysis – Unintended consequences

What are potential unintended consequences of polycentric inspections/inspections of networks?

- **We now have schools, heads of departments getting together.** It's hard enough in an individual school to put a group of teachers together where they are now brining along first hand evidence and showing each school their first hand evidence. That is an unintended positive consequence. **Its' getting organizations to co-operate with each other and that is a major unintended positive consequence.** (Interview participant)

- One of the **potential negative consequences** is that there is an over reliance on polycentric inspection result findings as opposed to individual responsibility for the single based inspection findings. You need both. **(Interview participant)**

- I see it as the beginning of a process of looking at our pupils as opposed to our individual school and I think that that's a process that's long overdue and it will also **begin the debate around what a school effectively is.** (Interview participant)

EQI

Conclusion

If you look at the results of all the Post-primary schools in this area, either the stats are really high and they are being maintained or all of the graphs are going up in every single school.

In addition, I think that is to the great credit of the **Network**, the **District inspector** and the **Principals** and **teachers** in these schools because there is something in the water in West-Belfast that is working.

I think it is developing a system of Self Evaluation both collectively in the area and in the school and it is rigorous Self Evaluation that has made a massive difference.

So we are looking here and we're saying, oh the results have gone up in this area. Why is that? There are things happening here, a whole range of things; cluster groups, ALCs in a wider area and **if we can get to the bottom of it we can definitely inform policy makers and I actually think that policy makers are genuinely interested and will listen.**
(Interview Participant – Member of Area Learning Community)

EQI

Moving Forward

Project Innovation

- This project will allow us to investigate innovative models of evaluation and inspection, and examine cyclical cause and effect relations to explain and understand their impact on well performing schools.

- The inclusion of both **researchers**, **inspectorates of education** and **networked school alliances** in the project will allow us to test, develop and disseminate new and innovative knowledge about the workings of polycentric networked school inspections, which have the potential to create **new, more effective and sustainable system-wide school improvement.**

Project Updates will be available at:

- **EQI: Centre for Evaluation, Quality & Inspection**
 (www.dcu.ie/ceqie)

- **Project Website**
(www.schoolinspections.eu)

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS