

School Inspection in a Polycentric Context

The Case of Northern Ireland

Dr. Martin Brown, Professor Gerard McNamara, Professor Joe O'Hara
(EQI) Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection



Centre for Evaluation,
Quality & Inspection

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ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Associate Assessor
ALC	Area Learning Communities
AQE	Association for Quality Education
BELB	Belfast Education and Library Board
BOM	Board of Management
C2K	Classroom 2000
CCMS	Catholic Council for Maintained Schools
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CUREE	Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education
DEL	Department for Employment and Learning
DENI	Department of Education (Northern Ireland)
DI	District Inspector
ELB	Education and Library Board
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate (Northern Ireland)
FSM	Free School Meals
GCE	General Certificate in Education
HMI	Her Majesty's Inspectorate
HOD	Head of Department
NI	Northern Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PRSD	Performance Review and Staff Development
QA	Quality Assurance
RI	Reporting Inspector
SAER	Summary of Annual Examination Results
SSID	Secondary School Information Disk
SICI	Standing International Conference of Inspectorates
WBPB	West Belfast Partnership Board

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Executive Summary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the results of case study research into area-based or polycentric inspection of schools and related institutions in West Belfast, Northern Ireland. The case study is one of four in the partner countries, England, the Netherlands, Bulgaria and Ireland involved in a European Union funded research project entitled Polycentric School Inspections.

Recently, influenced by the notion that schools may not be able to improve further when working in isolation, the idea of linking schools and other stakeholders in networks has become influential. However, for networks to achieve their potential there clearly has to be mechanisms for cooperation, knowledge exchange and evaluation. One proposed mechanism, which has received little or no attention in the research literature, is through inspecting networks as a whole, or what is described in this research as polycentric inspection. The theoretical proposition is that polycentric inspection might act as an enabling agent or catalyst to effective networking.

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

A number of interesting findings emerge from this research. Firstly there is probably a case to be made to distinguish between area-based and polycentric inspections. Inspectorates of education can usefully conduct thematic area-based inspections on matters such as, for example, the effectiveness of pupil transfer from one level of school to the next, even in the absence of a formal network. However it is hard to envisage that this kind of inspection would lead to improvement unless there is an ongoing linkage between the different actors, overseen continually by the Inspectorate. In other words polycentric inspection, as opposed to area-based inspection, probably implies the existence and nurturing of a vibrant and active network.

Linked to the above finding is the importance of the network involving all of the relevant stakeholders in the process. As originally envisaged area-based inspection was more concentrated on education and training institutions but a major impact of the polycentric inspection process has been the development of a much wider network. Since the ultimate purpose of networking and polycentric inspection is to generate solutions to cross-sectoral problems that individual institutions cannot possibly solve on their own, this is of particular importance.

A third important outcome refers to relationships and trust being built up both within the network and between the network and the Inspectorate.

It was stressed time and time again that the major success of the process, by far, was the gradual growth of trust and collaboration between the network member organisations. It is clear that the network and polycentric inspection act as a kind of catalyst or glue that has led to greater cohesion, communication and cooperation between the different partners.

The centrality of regular contact with and follow-up by the Inspectorate was emphasised by all parties. This is perceived as vital in growing the network and, as it becomes more mature, in helping it to focus on using available data including statistics to examine issues around teaching and learning and teacher professional development.

An important question of course is whether it can be shown that activities such as polycentric inspection of networks which improve cooperation and provide professional development opportunities for teachers do, in fact, lead to the most important outcome of all, improved student performance. It is always hard to establish such related effects in educational research but the respondents were quite clear that improving results in recent years in GCSE and A-level examinations in the area could be attributed, to some extent at least, to the work of the partnership and related inspection activities.

In terms of impact on the work of the network as a whole there was strong agreement that inspection and particularly the ongoing engagement of the Inspectorate with the network was vital in driving forward the improvement agenda. A key theme that emerges here is that the gradual change of ownership, as it were, from the Inspectorate to the network, is very important. In this context it was widely noted by respondents that the Northern Ireland Inspectorate places great emphasis on self-evaluation and in response the network and the individual schools within it have sought to develop self-evaluation capacity. The appropriate role of external inspection then becomes the quality assurance of the self-evaluation and data generation processes within a network.

Finally, an important aspect to be considered is the extent to which what appears to be a very successful and beneficial networking and inspection process in West Belfast could be replicated in other contexts both in Northern Ireland and further afield. This is a rather difficult question to answer. As indicated above there is probably a role in every jurisdiction for area-based inspections examining the boundaries between institutions to try to solve problems around student progression, transfer and so on. However the process in West Belfast goes well beyond that. There, community development partnership structures, which exist independently of the Inspectorate, are central to polycentric inspection being an iterative process in which the Inspectorate is an agent of change, constantly interacting with the network. In summary it seems that the involvement, in a very structured way, of multiple stakeholders is a core requirement in ensuring that polycentric inspection will have a significant impact on the quality of education provided in an area.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Background

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Introduction

In many countries including England, Northern Ireland and the Netherlands, school inspection has been in existence since the mid-19th century. In the case of Northern Ireland, for example, ‘the present Inspectorate is in direct unbroken descent from the Inspectorate established in 1832 by The Commissioners of National Education in Ireland’ (Education and Training Inspectorate, 2012). The role and influence of inspection has waxed and waned over the years but in recent decades has returned to the centre of efforts to ensure improvement, standards and accountability in education. Under the influence of international bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Development (OECD) and the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI), school inspection has become a key driver in the attempt to improve the quality of provision across the continuum of education.

Barber et al. in McKinsey (2010) sparked a debate in several European countries by suggesting that school improvement had plateaued. They argue that the education systems in many countries are ‘good’ but fail to improve to ‘great’ as schools are not aiming for higher levels of student achievement and fail to innovate in their teaching and learning. In a similar vein the Chief Inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), Northern Ireland, argues that, although a significant number of education providers have been evaluated as ‘good’, the system as a whole ‘has unacceptable variations and persistent shortcomings, which need to be addressed urgently if we are to improve our provision and outcomes from average to world-class’ (ETI 2014: 4). One potential mechanism that has begun to emerge to make this final but difficult leap from average to world class may be through the process of polycentric inspection that inspectorates in England, Northern Ireland and, more recently, the Netherlands, have begun to experiment with.

This report summarises research conducted as part of an EU funded Erasmus+ project, which set out to evaluate the potential of polycentric inspection and collaborative self-evaluation. It describes a case study analysis of inspection in Northern Ireland with a particular emphasis on polycentric inspection (or area inspection as it is also known). The project draws on the knowledge and experience of ETI and the members of a networked school alliance in order to analyse the implementation of polycentric school inspection as it operates in practice in Northern Ireland.

The first stage of the report offers an analysis of the rise of networking in education and defines how this development has informed the authors’ conception of polycentric inspection as it applies to educational networks. Leading on from this, the literature relating to the education and school inspection system of Northern Ireland is examined. Using case study as a method the third stage moves from analysis of documents to semi-structured interviews with inspectors and members of a polycentric network of schools in an Area Learning Community of Northern Ireland (West Belfast). Finally, the fourth stage of the report builds on the previous three stages to reach an overall interpretation of polycentric inspection as it has developed in Northern Ireland and an assessment of potential in other contexts.

1.2 The rise of networking and polycentric inspection in education

The concept and possible impact of educational networks is now of considerable interest. As Chapman and Hadfield (2010: 310) observe, 'the sheer plasticity of the term network means that it has been applied to a wide range of social and technological phenomena'. Diaz-Gibson et al. (2013: 180) in reference to Daly (2010) note that 'the idea of networks in support of educational improvement, while still in its infancy, is gaining momentum in education'. Feyes and Devos (2014: 3) are of the view that 'it is a growing trend among politicians and governors to use terms such as *network*, *partnership* and *collaboration*. In the public and non-profit sector, collaboration is no longer simply an option, it has become the new orthodoxy'.

There are many suggested benefits to being part of an educational network which include, but are not limited to, improved learning, the efficient use of resources, increased innovation capacity and system-wide improvement. (See, for example: Chapman, 2008; Chapman and Hadfield, 2010; Glazer and Peurach, 2013; Hands, 2010; Muijs et al., 2011). There is also an abundance of literature relating to the requirements for effective and sustainable networks including concepts such as network goal consensus (see Provan and Kenis, 2008), purpose and identity (see Chapman and Hadfield, 2010; Provan and Kenis, 2008), reciprocity (see Mooleanaar, 2010), and trust (see Daly and Finigan, 2012; Chapman and Hadfield, 2009). There is also a growing body of literature whose purpose is to describe the impact of networking on pupil attainment (see, for example CUREE, 2005; Sammons et al., 2007). However, although Hertting and Verdung (2012: 29) are of the view that 'evaluation and network governance are both among the top 10 trendy concepts in public policy', in comparison to single school inspections there is very little, if any, work relating to the impact or potential impact of inspection on networks of schools.

Research on the effects of school inspection has primarily focused on individual schools (see, for example Gustafsson et al., 2015; Brown et al., 2014; Brown, 2013; Dederling and Muller, 2013; Ehren et al., 2013; McNamara and O'Hara, 2012 ; Witziers et al., 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999). Interestingly in the context of this work, much of the research suggests that schools improve more through the indirect effects of inspection (accepting feedback, setting expectations and improving school self-evaluation capacity) as opposed to the direct effects of command and control accountability mechanisms.

As noted above, there is little in the literature concerning inspection and school networks probably for the following reasons:

- It is only recently, as the limitations of narrow, single school based approaches to improvement have become clear, that there has been a significant shift towards the notion of improvement through networks (see, for example Muijs, Ainscow and West, 2010). As Jackson and Timperely (2007: 45) put it, '...the school as a unit has become too small-scale and too isolated to provide rich professional learning for its adult members in a knowledge rich and networked world. A new unit of meaning, belonging and engagement – the network – is required'.
- It is more difficult to isolate 'the causal effect of network structure' (Siciliano, 2012: 2) in comparison to single school outcomes.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- While the idea of networking is well established in other areas such as business and psychology (See Burt et al., 2013), Muijs et al. (2010: 6) make the following observation on the rise of networking in education in comparison to other fields: 'Of course while networking has recently come to the fore in education, the concept is long established in other fields, with strong roots in social science, psychology, and business studies...'
- Because of the altruistic and collaborative nature of networks, there may be a reluctance to study them from a network governance perspective. As argued by Provan and Kenis (2008: 230), 'there seems to be some reluctance among many who study networks to discuss formal mechanisms of control. A common assumption is that, since networks are collaborative arrangements, governance, which implies hierarchy and control, is inappropriate. On the other hand, Lima (2010: 17) suggests that 'there are no studies of the failure rate of networks, either in education or in any other sector and yet, there is constant drive to establish school to school networking becoming an integral part of educational practice'.

The last statement above is an important point in the context of this research. As Lima (2010: 2) observes:

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

Of course there are different and often overlapping network structures and processes. The density of interactions in educational networks is likely to involve, to a significant degree, *serendipitous* interactions among group members, that is, 'networks evolve haphazardly from the interactions of individual actors, without guidance from any central network agent' (Lima, 2010: 11). However, to realise the potential of the network, some researchers suggest that there is a need to shift towards a different mode of networking referred to as *goal directed*, that is, '...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' (ibid.: 12). Of note, however, is the reality that it is not possible for networks to reside in an exclusive realm of serendipitous or goal directed interactions. 'Serendipitous interactions, of course, occur within goal-directed networks, resulting in coevolutionary trajectories that may prove advantageous or detrimental to network outcomes' (Provan and Kenis, 2008: 231). Nonetheless, for the shift towards a more efficient goal directed network to occur, networks need to be effectively led and to be open to guidance from other stakeholders who are not directly involved in the day to day operations. One proposed solution to achieving a balance between serendipitous and goal directed network activities in the case of schools and other educational stakeholders is through the process of polycentric inspection. In essence, the process of inspection becomes the catalyst enabling and energising network activity.

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The underlying theory of polycentric inspection is that, when schools reach a certain quality threshold, they can achieve further improvement not as a result of pressure from external inspection but by joint learning between networks of schools, communities and the inspectorate. This represents a major conceptual shift in that, for inspection of networks to work in practice, there may need to be a redefinition of accountability and improvement from an evaluation perspective. That means, 'at the level of the network as a whole, evaluation focuses on joint learning among all participating agencies and organizations of the network, not primarily the learning of each individual agency or organization' (Herrting and Verdung, 2012: 37). Such evaluation is horizontally driven, not by virtue of traditional hierarchical command and control processes, but rather through that of reciprocal relationships and joint evaluation activities between inspectorates and the various constituent actors within the network. Typically, polycentric 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;
- taking into account the perspective on school quality from the schools and the various stakeholders;
- quality assuring the network's collaborative self-evaluation of recommendations from previous polycentric 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.

For the purposes of this project the working definition of polycentric inspection is as follows:

School inspections from a polycentric perspective are external evaluations of schools together with their interdependent networks of stakeholders in order to provide feedback, disseminate good practice and, ultimately, to agree upon a shared agenda for change within the network.

The next section of the report provides a description of the education and school inspection system of Northern Ireland with a particular focus on polycentric inspection, or area inspection as it is also referred to.

Chapter 2

The Northern Ireland Education System

THE NORTHERN IRELAND EDUCATION SYSTEM

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a brief overview of the Northern Ireland education system including system structure and school types, some relevant data, and an account of the growth and role of 'Area Learning Communities', school networks and area-based or polycentric inspection.

2.2 Northern Ireland in context

At a system level: the Department of Education (DENI) is responsible for the implementation of Northern Ireland's education policy at pre-school, primary, post-primary and special education level, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) is responsible for policy at further education level and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) on behalf of the DENI and DEL evaluates the quality of teaching, learning, and teacher education across all phases of education.

At a local level: administration of education and youth services was devolved to five regional Education and Library Boards (ELB) in accordance with the *Education and Libraries (NI) Order (1986)* (Table 1). However, from 1st of April 2015, the newly established Education Authority took over the roles and responsibilities of the Education and Library Boards in Northern Ireland.

Table 1: Geographical boundaries of Educational Regions

Region	Area
Belfast	
North Eastern	Antrim, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Carrickfergus, Coleraine, Larne, Magherafelt, Moyle, Newtownabbey
South Eastern	Ards, Castlereagh, Down, Lisburn and North Down
Southern	Armagh, Banbridge, Cookstown, Craigavon, Dungannon and South Tyrone, Newry and Mourne
Western	Derry, Fermanagh, Limavady, Omagh, Strabane

Northern Ireland's growing population was estimated in mid-2013 to be approximately 1,829,725 which is a significant increase on the mid-2001 estimate of 1,688,838¹. This population increase has occurred against a backdrop of rising income inequality where, according to Shewbridge et al. (2014: 14), 'since 1975, income inequality among working-age persons has risen faster in the United Kingdom than in any other OECD country'. Indeed, as of September – December 2014, 5.8% (49,064) of the population of Northern Ireland were claiming unemployment related benefits with significantly higher levels of unemployment concentrated in urban areas² (Appendix 1).

¹ Comparative population estimates for the period 2001 to 2013 can be accessed at the following: <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp17.htm>

² Northern Ireland Statistics research: <http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/Theme.aspx>

Moreover, analysis of Northern Ireland’s statistics research database reveals that, if one uses free school meals entitlement³ as a proxy for social problems, deprivation for school going children at primary and post-primary level is significantly concentrated within urban areas (Tables 2 and 3).

These high figures are largely similar to data on social deprivation in other areas of the United Kingdom. The OECD (2014: 14) concludes that ‘compared internationally, the United Kingdom has a high level of regional economic inequality, and urban deprivation is an identified challenge’.

Table 2: Measure of social deprivation for primary school pupils within each Library Board region (2013–2014). Data accessed from Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

	Number of pupils	Number of pupils entitled to free school meals	% of pupils entitled to free school meals
Northern Ireland	171,550	53,195	31%
Belfast	23,390	11,280	48%
North East	39,035	9,570	25%
South East	37,625	9,310	25%
Southern	41,680	11,790	28%
Western	29,590	11,200	38%

Table 3: Measure of social deprivation for post-primary school pupils within each Library Board region (2013–2014). Data accessed from Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

	Number of pupils	Number of pupils entitled to free school meals	% of pupils entitled to free school meals
Northern Ireland	143,975	26,650	19%
Belfast	19,305	5,620	29%
North East	32,995	4,540	14%
South East	31,900	4,320	14%
Southern	33,295	5,960	18%
Western	25,965	6,195	24%

Remarkably, when the outcomes from international comparative standard evaluations such as PIRLS and TIMSS (2011) are analysed, Northern Ireland compares favourably with most countries at primary level education, even against a backdrop of fiscal correction, coupled with these high levels of social deprivation.

³ Free school meals entitlement is an official measure of deprivation within the education statistics of Northern Ireland.

THE NORTHERN IRELAND EDUCATION SYSTEM

In fact, according to Sturman et al. (2012) on behalf of the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)⁴, in terms of **reading attainment** (PIRLS), the average central point of the PIRLS scale was 500 whereas the average scale score in Northern Ireland for year 6 pupils was 558. This significantly higher score ranked Northern Ireland 5th among participating countries for reading. In terms of **mathematical attainment** (TIMSS), the average central point of the TIMSS scale was 500 whereas the average scale score in Northern Ireland for year 6 pupils was 562. This significantly higher score ranked Northern Ireland as 6th for mathematical attainment among participating countries. On the other hand, however, although PIRLS and TIMSS reading and mathematics scores are significantly higher than most countries at primary level, TIMSS 2011 average scale score for **science attainment** in Northern Ireland was 517 (slightly above the average central point on the TIMSS scale), ranking Northern Ireland as 21st among participating countries. One might assume that because Science is not a discrete subject at this level results would be lower. However, Sturman et al. (2012: 6) note that:

Although the curriculum in Northern Ireland does not include science as a discrete subject, it is covered as part of 'The World Around Us'. A comparison was made between the key stage 2 curriculum in Northern Ireland and the TIMSS Assessment Framework for science. It showed that all of the TIMSS science topics are in the Northern Ireland curriculum and almost two thirds of Northern Ireland's pupils had been taught these topics before or during the TIMSS assessment (a similar proportion to the average internationally).

At post-primary level the picture is less satisfactory. Analysis of PISA 2012 results by Wheeler et al. (2013) found that, in terms of **mathematical literacy**, Northern Ireland's pupils achieved a mean score of 487 which is significantly lower than the OECD mean of 494. Moreover, the number of countries with mean scores significantly higher than Northern Ireland increased from 18 to 20 in 2009 and to 25 in 2012. However, Wheeler et al. (2013: 15) also state that 'this increase is due in part to the high performance of countries participating for the first time, such as Shanghai-China and Singapore in 2009 and Vietnam in 2012, but it is also due to improved performance in other countries'. At a local level, variation in **mathematical literacy** scores may also be attributed to social deprivation where '17 per cent of the variance in mathematics scores can be explained by socio-economic background, which is slightly higher than the OECD average of 15 per cent' (ibid.: 34). This suggests that socio-economic background has a larger effect on mathematical attainment in Northern Ireland than in other OECD countries. In terms of **science performance** Northern Ireland's performance (507) was not significantly different from the OECD average (501) in PISA 2012. However, '...Northern Ireland tends to have a greater proportion of high achievers and a lower proportion of low achievers than the OECD average' (ibid.: 24).

⁴ The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) administered TIMSS, PIRLS (2011) and PISA 2012 survey in the UK.

In terms of **reading performance**, in PISA 2012 Northern Ireland's performance (498) was not significantly different from the OECD average (496). Of concern however is that 'Northern Ireland had a relatively large difference between the score points of the lowest scoring pupils and the highest scoring pupils compared with many other countries (ibid., 2013: 56).

Nonetheless, if one uses the results from TIMSS and PIRLS (2011) and PISA (2012) as a proxy to determine the quality of education provided in schools internationally at primary level, Northern Ireland is significantly above average for English and Mathematics attainment and slightly above average for Science attainment for children aged 9–10. At post-primary level, however, Northern Ireland's **mathematical literacy** scores are significantly lower than the OECD average and not significantly different to the OECD average in reading and Science

2.3 School types

There are different types of schools in Northern Ireland that are run by various management committees (Table 4). Controlled schools are managed by a Board of Governors and the employing authority is one of the five Education and Library Boards. Maintained schools are also managed by a Board of Governors. However, the employing authority is the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). Finally, a Board of Governors manages Voluntary grammar and integrated schools.

Table 4: Number of Nursery/schools in Northern Ireland by phase-type (2013–2014)		
Data accessed from Department of Education (Northern Ireland).		
Voluntary and Private Pre-School Education Centres		
Nursery Schools		
Controlled		64
Catholic Maintained		32
	Total	96
Primary Schools		
Controlled		370
Catholic Maintained		384
Other Maintained	Irish Medium	25
	Other	4
Controlled Integrated		19
Grant Maintained Integrated		23
	Total	825
Grammar school preparatory departments		14
	Total	839
Secondary (non-grammar) schools		
Controlled		53
Catholic Maintained		68
Other Maintained	Irish Medium	1
Controlled Integrated		5
Grant Maintained Integrated		15
	Total	142
Grammar Schools		
Controlled		17
Voluntary	Schools under Catholic management	29
	Schools under other management	22
	Total	68
Special Schools	Total	40
Hospital Schools	Total	1
Independent Schools	Total	15

2.4 Educational progression in Northern Ireland

It is compulsory for all children in Northern Ireland up to the age of 16 to attend a mainstream or alternative education provider. Children aged between 4 and 11 attend primary school and from 11 onwards transfer to post-primary schools (Table 5).

Table 5: Compulsory Education in Northern Ireland				
School years	Stage	Years	Age	Assessment
Primary	Foundation	1 and 2	4–6	
	Key Stage 1	3 and 4	6–8	Teacher Assessment
	Key Stage 2	5–7	8–11	Teacher Assessment
Post-Primary	Key Stage 3	8–10	11–14	Teacher Assessment
	Key Stage 4	11–12	14–16	General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)

All schools are required to follow the Northern Ireland curriculum and, for the most part, curriculum requirements and terminal examinations at each key stage are governed by the Council for Curriculum, Examination and Assessment (CCEA).

In terms of progression to post-primary schools, up to 2008 transfer was based on the 11-PLUS examination which was used to evaluate whether or not students could attend selective grammar schools. This type of selective progression is controversial in many countries. Research (Sutton Trust, 2005) suggests that the majority of 11-year-old students who gain entry to secondary education in England based on their 11-PLUS score are not among those affected by social deprivation: ‘children from better-off homes are more likely to pass a selection test at 11 and thus gain a place at a grammar school’ (Sutton Trust, 2005: 8). Moreover, OECD (2012) states that ‘early student selection has a negative impact on students assigned to lower tracks and exacerbates inequities, without raising average performance. Early student selection should be deferred to upper secondary education while reinforcing comprehensive schooling’ (OECD, 2012: 10). In order to encourage a more equitable society, academic selection in the form of the 11-PLUS examination was discontinued in 2008. However, there was strong opposition to this policy and, as a result, a significant number of Grammar schools decided to continue with unofficial academic selection for 10 and 11 year old children. Bringing academic selection into further disarray, attempts to create an unofficial 11-PLUS transfer examination could not be agreed among the various school bodies resulting in two unofficial 11-PLUS examinations, namely, AQE exams which are mainly used by state schools and GL Assessment exams that are by and large used by Catholic schools. As a result, students can sit either one or both examinations.

Illustrating the importance placed on academic selection in Northern Ireland, more than 60% of year 7 students sat either or both examinations in order to gain entry to a selective grammar school for the academic year 2015–2016. A total of 7,285 pupils sat this year’s AQE exam – the exam body’s highest number of entrants since the unofficial tests began. The number sitting this year’s GL Assessment also increased to 7,255 (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2015).

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On entering post-primary education (Key Stage 3), students study a broad curriculum that must include the following areas of learning and associated subject strands: Language and Literacy, Mathematics and Numeracy, Modern Languages, The Arts, Environment and Society, Science and Technology, Learning for Life and Work, Physical Education, and Religious Education. At Key stage 4 students decide which subjects to specialise in with many electing to study between 8 and 11 subjects for GCSE certification. Subsequently there is also a non-compulsory 2 school years for children aged between 16 and 18 who wish to sit GCE advanced/AS and A2 level subjects and/or more vocational subjects. On average, students choose between 3 or 4 subjects, the results of which for the most part determine entry into higher education.

2.5 Networked Schools in Northern Ireland

Of particular relevance to this research is the establishment of 'Area Learning Communities' (ALC) that consist of clusters of mainstream post-primary schools (including special schools with post-primary pupils) and further education colleges. At present there are 30 ALCs in Northern Ireland, defined by DENI as follows: 'ALCs are voluntary coalitions of schools which can be a useful forum for planning and collaboration to meet the needs of pupils in an area and for focusing on quality and sharing good practice' (DENI, 2010: 4). ALCs work together to provide a broad and balanced curriculum and to deliver on the requirements of the 'Entitlement Framework'⁵. The Entitlement Framework requires schools to provide pupils with access to a minimum number of courses at Key Stage 4 (24 courses) and a minimum number of courses at post-16 (27 courses). To reach these targets, Article 21 of the Education Order 2006 enables schools to secure course provision for students at other institutions within the ALC.

An earlier study by Brown (2013) analysing the capacity requirements for school evaluation in Ireland and Northern Ireland found a very positive response to the role of the ALC. Respondents felt that the required resources were not so much of a procedural nature, i.e. evaluative tools and frameworks, but rather there was a need for shared knowledge among schools. This was a need an ALC was in a position to meet. One principal, in reference to his own ALC, put it like this: 'without treading on anybody's toes, we are beginning to think yes, we've evaluated this, and there is something really good going on, and the kids really like this. How can we make the lessons learned from this more widely known and explicit for all staff of both schools?' (ibid.: 123).

The potential for shared evaluation knowledge was also highlighted by another principal who referred to it as potentially becoming, 'like a carousel of best practice' (ibid.: 123).

⁵ Circular 2007/20 The Education (2006 Order) (Commencement No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 179 outlines the statutory requirements for schools.

Indeed, another principal stated that this repository of evaluative knowledge could also be used as ‘a bank of expertise out there that you could tap into easily and readily. Everyone can buy into or extract from it as and when they need it and, again, get at the cutting edge of innovation in terms of teaching and learning’ (ibid: 123).

On the other hand, although there are many benefits to supporting organisational learning through a process of networking among schools, asking schools to move from a traditional culture of competition to a culture of cooperation has many potential difficulties. In particular, as indicated by one inspector participant in Brown (2013: 124):

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, which is competitive collaboration or collaborative competition. You use competition, but you want to be more cooperative and collaborative. At the same time, you don’t want to replace competition with collaboration alone because competition is quite healthy in terms of standards. Parents still view schools in a competitive way; they look at one as better than the other.

A study by Pedder and MacBeath (2008) on England’s *Learning How to Learn Project* found that there were considerable gaps between teachers’ practice on the one hand and values on the other. In this regard, where attempts were made by schools to use networking as a means of improving organisational learning, ‘schools typically seemed to struggle in developing ways of supporting networking as a means of developing expertise with staff at other schools’ (Pedder and MacBeath 2008: 221). Similarly, in the case of Northern Ireland, a Department of Education (2009a) publication titled *Together Towards Entitlement* also provides a plausible explanation as to why schools are unwilling to engage in collaborative networking:

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

Nonetheless, an inspector participant (Brown, 2013) strongly expressed the view that networking among schools does lead to improvement and should be looked upon more favourably as a means of improving organisational effectiveness:

People talk, I think personally, rather glibly about moving from competition to cooperation. I actually do think it’s a new construct. And where part of it is... and completely to answer your question...part of that is actually sharing practice effectively and it’s not so much that you share a practice in a way you handle a pass the package round, but you help each other solve problems, which is really what organisation is about in terms of improvement (Brown 2013: 124).

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In many ways, the inspector participants' perspective on cooperative competition, where schools help each other solve problems through mutual collaboration, is in line with MacBeath's assertion that 'networking implies a collegial relationship, founded on voluntarism and initiative. It is built on reciprocity and a measure of trust. The ties that bind are conditional not on authority but on mutual gain, give and take, learning and helping others learn' (MacBeath, 2006: .15).

Having already established the Area Learning Communities initiative, Northern Ireland may be ideally positioned to realise the potential of having a repository of evaluative knowledge that can be shared among and between schools. As one principal put it:

Now the other thing in Northern Ireland is the new Area Learning Communities. That has huge dynamic potential. It will mean that instead of us focusing on our own institution, we'll start looking at the education of the child within the broader region (Brown, 2013: 123).

This of course raises the question of how evaluative knowledge can be generated and shared among the network partners. In the case of individual schools and colleges this is a task led by the inspectorate. Can this role be expanded in the form of polycentric inspection across a network as a whole? The next section begins to focus on that key research question.

Chapter 3

Inspection in Northern Ireland

INSPECTION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

3.1 Overview of inspection in Northern Ireland

Inspection in Northern Ireland has primarily evolved from the Education Act of 1832. The present system of inspection is managed by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) whose responsibility is detailed in the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (Article Number 30). The act states that ‘the purpose of inspection is to promote the highest possible standards of learning, teaching and achievement throughout the education, training and youth sectors’ (ETI, 2012: 2).

However, in the case of Northern Ireland, there is also a clear responsibility placed on schools to carry out their own internal evaluations. According to Brown (2013: 142):

Educational evaluation is no longer merely considered an external monitoring process or top-down externally devised legitimate dictate of examining, sanctioning or rewarding...rather, educational evaluation is widely viewed as an allogamy of external evaluation carried out by the inspectorate in parallel with internal evaluation carried out by a school, the dual purpose of which is to serve both the accountability agenda on the one hand and the school improvement agenda on the other.

School self-evaluation is acknowledged by the ETI as an essential element in continuous school improvement, and various official documents, including *Together Towards Improvement: a process for self-evaluation*⁶ (2010), *Evaluating Schools* (1998), *Compendium of Case Studies by Schools who piloted Together Towards Improvement* (2003), and *The Reflective Teacher* (2006a), have been developed to augment a culture of self-evaluation in schools. According to the ETI, ‘using these materials many organisations are now undertaking rigorous self-evaluation of their provision, in order to improve the experiences of the pupils and the standards they attain’ (ETI, 2006: i). Moreover, the ETI sees its role in relation to school self-evaluation as not only that of a clearing house producing a set of tools to assist with the process but rather, in conjunction with the five regional Education and Library Boards, ‘to work with all involved to promote the development of self-evaluation’ (ETI, 2003: ii).

3.2 Stakeholders involved in inspection

Inspections are conducted by inspectors employed by the ETI and their work is guided by the ETI’s *Charter for Inspection* (2015). A reporting inspector leads the evaluation team and is responsible for drafting the final evaluation report as well as informing the school and board of governors of the results of the evaluation. The reporting inspector is normally assisted by two or more inspectors and an ‘associate assessor’. Most inspectors also act as District Inspectors and are responsible for a number of schools within a geographical area.

⁶ <http://www.etini.gov.uk/index/together-towards-improvement/together-towards-improvement-primary.htm>

The OECD, commenting on the District Inspector role (2007: 26) suggests that it ‘facilitates close links and provides a good communication channel between the schools and the Department’. District Inspectors also play a key role in creating the conditions required for school inspection and school self-evaluation to mutually and beneficially coexist. Indeed, in many ways, District Inspectors exemplify the belief that school self-evaluation and school inspection can benefit each other. Although District Inspectors also form part of the inspection team during the course of inspections and follow-up inspections, they are also involved in a series of district visits. The district visits complement more centrally-programmed inspections, according to the ETI (2008a: 8), and they provide ‘a valuable opportunity for the District Inspector and staff of the organisations involved to engage professionally, outside the context of the formal inspection programme’. Moreover, District Inspectors embody the terms of co-existence at a conceptual, communication (see Nevo 2002) and influential level (see Brown 2013). To be effective in this role, a District Inspector needs to:

Develop productive and purposeful working relationships with the leaders and other staff of the organisations in the district...develop his/her knowledge and understanding of the organisations, through direct observation of practice, and through dialogue with the leader of the organisation and other staff, while always taking cognisance of the organisation’s view of itself. (ibid. 2008a: 8)

Associate assessors are also included in the school inspection process. Associate assessors are normally school principals or deputy principals who have experience and/or training in a particular sector of education, such as that resulting from working in socially deprived communities, and who have generally received ETI evaluation training similar to inspectors employed by the ETI directly. According to the ETI, having associate assessors in the evaluation process can be beneficial to both the ETI and the organisation to which the associate assessor is attached. The ETI can benefit from having an associate assessor on the team through the increased awareness of local issues, and consequently, the role, it is suggested, ‘contributes to the improvement of the inspection process’ (ETI, 2008b: 3). The associate assessor can benefit ‘by developing the use of the self-evaluation process in their own organisations, in relation to learning and teaching/training’ (ETI, 2008b: 3). As confirmed by an inspector participant in Brown (2013: 141), ‘the evaluations of the associate assessor’s role reinforce the contention that they regard this as extremely beneficial in terms of their own practice and experience. We also regard it as a very good system, a check on our processes’.

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3.3 Frequency of inspections

Up to 2010, the frequency of full inspections of schools was ‘once in seven years’ (SICI, 2008: 11). However, more recently, in line with the changing face of school inspection in other countries such as England, Ireland and the Netherlands, the ETI has developed a proportionate, risk-based model of inspection to be phased in over a six year period from 2010. As described in Eurydice (2015: 176):

All schools will have a formal inspection activity at least once in a three-year period, but the length and nature of the inspection activity varies according to assessment of risk. This involves using information from performance indicators, such as the percentage of pupils achieving the target levels for attainment in assessments and national tests; risk factors, such as the length of time since the previous inspection; and ongoing monitoring of school by district inspectors.

3.4 Types of inspection

Inspection conducted by the ETI, whose mission statement is ‘Promoting Improvement’, utilises a number of inspection modes across the different phases/sectors of the education system of Northern Ireland. Although different inspection frameworks exist, in most cases inspection is focused on individual schools. As stated in ETI (2014: 1), ‘the work of ETI focuses mostly on the inspection of, and reporting on, the overall effectiveness of single organisations such as schools, colleges, training and other providers’.

3.4.1 Inspection of individual schools

Inspections of individual schools focus primarily on leadership and management at all levels, the provision for pastoral care and child protection, overall educational provision, and the school’s self-evaluation process which, according to the ETI, reinforces ‘the importance of strong and effective governance and leadership within schools in helping to maintain and improve standards’ (DENI, 2009b: 2).

The framework and quality indicators that guide inspectorate judgements are stated in *Together towards improvement, a process for improvement* (ETI, 2010a). The framework focuses on three distinct areas of educational provision (leadership and management, quality of provision for learning and quality of achievements and standards). Within these areas, the following questions are asked:

- How effective are leadership and management in raising achievement and supporting learners?
- How effective is teaching, learning and assessment?
- How well do the learning experiences, programmes and activities meet the needs of the learners and the wider community?
- How well are learners cared for, guided and supported?
- How well do learners develop and achieve?

This externally devised framework also serves the purpose of explicitly stating to the school community the requirements and standards needed for effective educational provision within each school. This structure aligns with that outlined in Eurydice (2015: 8): ‘to support their work, evaluators rely on a centrally set framework which establishes in a structured and uniform way not only the focal points of external evaluation but also the standards defining a “good” school’.

During the course of the inspection, inspectors meet with the principal, senior management, teachers, parents and students. To identify the views of all the members of the school community, parents and teachers are also asked to complete a confidential questionnaire (with the option of completing the questionnaire online). This asks their views of the leadership, teaching and learning in the school. The school is also asked to provide the inspector with quantitative and qualitative data (with assistance from support officers and data collected from the C2K.net website) and other information relating to the school. In acknowledgement of the importance that the inspectorate places on school self-evaluation, the school is also asked to detail any school self-evaluations it has conducted. When the inspection is complete, the reporting inspector communicates the findings to the school community and produces an inspection report detailing the results, including the quality of school leadership, the school’s arrangements for pastoral care and child protection, and the quality of teaching and learning. Similarly to other jurisdictions including England and Wales, ‘the initial school response to the report is limited to factual errors while the overall judgement cannot be discussed’ (Eurydice, 2015: 30).

Following the site based inspection, an overall judgement is made along a quality continuum (Unsatisfactory, Inadequate, Satisfactory, Good, Very Good, and Outstanding) and the final product of the inspection is the publication of an inspection report detailing the main strengths and areas in need of improvement within the school. The final report also provides a detailed account of examination results and compares the school to contextually relevant national averages and includes other statistical data relating to school attendance and the destinations of students that have left the school. This data is used to describe the strengths (and necessary improvements) of the school in the final report.

3.4.2 *Follow-up inspections*

In the event that certain areas of improvement are deemed necessary, the school is asked to complete an action plan addressing the highlighted areas within 30 working days of receipt of the report and ‘this action plan will be the basis for discussions during the follow-up process’ (ETI, 2009: 3). In the period between the inspection and follow-up inspection, ‘the reporting inspector will maintain contact with the organisation to monitor progress’ (ibid., 2009: 3). The district inspector also plays a significant role in monitoring and supporting the improvement actions during the follow-up inspection cycle.

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As stated by an inspector participant in Brown (2013: 179):

The district inspector's visit is a monitoring check that it's happening, so when the follow-up inspection takes place, the district inspector is not going in cold 12 months or 18 months a year. The district inspector is going in knowing that progress is being made or not, and therefore...I would say, all of these reasons why in 85, 87% of cases, we see improvement.

According to the ETI, 'the District Inspector's function is that of monitoring and reporting on the progress of the organisation in addressing the issues identified, with particular reference to improvements in learning and teaching, standards achieved, quality of leadership, and the effectiveness of external support' (ETI, 2012: 4). The follow-up inspection normally takes place 12 to 24 months after the inspection. The key requirement of the follow-up inspection is a self-evaluation report of the required improvements. As stated by the ETI (2009: 3), 'organisations will be required to write their own follow-up self-evaluation report and have it quality assured by the District Inspector'. In the event that the follow-up inspection still shows areas in need of improvement, another follow-up inspection is scheduled and conducted. Follow-up on recommendations from previous inspections is a key task for the ETI; not only is compliance to recommendations expected from all schools, but support is also provided to ensure that the required improvement actions are taking place. As an inspector participant in Brown (2013: 179) describes:

What happens then is that the advisory service within the education library boards has a role to play and to step in. They attend the report feedbacks, and they hear the findings, and they then step in for schools that have low levels of performance on inspection, and they work with the principal and the senior leaders to address whatever's faulty (inadequate) in the school development, or the action plan, or the evaluation, or the staff development, or whatever it is. Their action then is taking place.

In the majority of cases, follow-up inspections coupled with a school's self-evaluation have led to improvement. Indeed, an analysis of follow-up inspections conducted by the ETI (2014) found that '137 organisations had follow-up inspections (FUIs). Some of these FUIs will have been in schools that entered the Formal Intervention Process (FIP). In the period between DENI launching *Every School A Good School* in 2009 and 30 June 2014 (based on inspection reports published), 45 schools entered FIP, 29 exited (5 closed) and 11 remain in the process' (ETI, 2014: 30). Indeed Brown, in reference to the system of school inspection and school self-evaluation in Northern Ireland notes, 'although tensions inevitably arise; 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). The above description of inspection procedures refers to single school inspection but the emergence of area learning communities has now given rise to a new mode of inspection, area-based or polycentric inspections.

3.4.3 Area Inspections

Area-based inspections as developed in Northern Ireland evaluate and report on the quality of provision including the quality of support services in a geographical area, across a number of phases and are, to a significant extent, based on the capacity of organisations to carry out their own evaluations. There are two main types of area inspections. Area youth inspections inspect support services provided in a Library Board region, in the youth sector. However, in terms of inspecting the collective quality of educational provision in schools and other organisations, ‘full area inspections’ evaluate a particular aspect of education across different stages of schooling in a geographical area.

3.4.3.1 Full Area inspections

In Northern Ireland, full area inspections have been in existence since 2005, with the last full area inspection carried out in 2009. Full area inspections focus on a particular aspect of education across different stages in a geographical area. As stated by ETI (2005), ‘the aim of all inspections is to promote improvement, the purpose of the area inspection is to assess the relevance, appropriateness, adequacy and effectiveness of the provision of education and training within a given geographical area, in preparing 14–19 year old learners to progress to further education, training or employment’ (ETI, 2005: 2).

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

It is important that all organisations who work for the benefit of learners continue to explore ways of working together to provide effective transitions and a more coherent experience for all learners. The area-based evaluations of transitions within two distinct areas..., highlight the importance of effective and well-informed self-evaluation and of making more connections through working with a range of stakeholders to raise standards and to achieve better outcomes for learners. The importance of strategic planning cannot be underestimated. A shared approach to developing a curriculum which will serve the needs of learners and provide them with individual learning pathways which are broad, balanced and coherent is crucial (ETI, 2010b: 25).

The focus of full area inspections varies. However, in more recent area inspections (ETI, 2010c, ETI, 2010d), the focus of the inspection related to strategic planning for education and training within the area, the quality of learning for young people and the effectiveness of the transition arrangements for young people within and across the various sectors (Appendix 1). In the course of these inspections, a decision was made by the ETI to visit a representative sample of education providers within the area. Various documents such as student attendance, student performance in external examinations, and the results of previous inspections were also used in preparation for the area inspection.

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The ETI also requested that each organisation would complete a self-evaluation report on the strengths and weaknesses in their own organisation prior to the inspection taking place.

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

Interviews also take place with a range of other relevant organisations in the area such as the Curriculum Advisory Support Service, the Department for Employment and Learning and, in the case of West Belfast, the West Belfast Partnership Board.

When the inspection is complete, two types of inspection report are provided to the community.

3.4.3.2 *Individual organisation inspection report*

As with the inspection of individual schools, all organisations evaluated are provided with a report detailing the quality of educational provision relating to the focus of the inspection in their own organisation. The inspection report normally takes the form of a short document detailing strengths and areas for improvement within each individual organisation. Unlike single unit inspections, the report does not contain statistical information relating to areas such as attendance and performance in external examinations. Finally, the following statement is provided at the end of each individual organisation report in order to heighten awareness relating to the overall inspection findings: 'the overall composite report for the area-based inspection raises some important recurring areas for improvement. While these are not applicable in all the individual organisations, they are nevertheless important to address across the area' (ETI, 2009: 30).

3.4.3.3 *Composite Area inspection report*

Having gathered all of the required evidence from individual organisations the composite inspection report provides, in great detail, overall inspection findings relating to the themes inspected. Also, in line with individual institutional inspections, an overall judgement is made detailing the main strengths and areas in need of improvement. Inspection judgements fall within a quality continuum ranging from unsatisfactory to outstanding (Unsatisfactory, Inadequate, Satisfactory, Good, Very Good, and Outstanding). A set of quantitative terms is also used to describe the extent to which an organisation is achieving its objectives, namely, Almost/nearly (more than 90%), Most (75%–90%), A majority (50%–74%), A significant minority (30%–49%), A minority (10%–29%), Very few/a small number (less than 10%). The report also contains quantitative comparative data on areas such as Key Stage Assessment Results for the area in comparison to the Northern Ireland averages and the percentage of school leavers entering employment or higher or further education in the area. The report is divided into two distinct sections.

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

Part two (Conclusion and key priorities for development) of the report is also divided into different sections. The first section (Conclusion) provides an overall judgement on the quality of education provided in the area together with a statement detailing identified strengths and aspects for improvement. Furthermore, in line with other follow-up inspections, this section also states that (as is the case with the Ballymena (ETI, 2010c) and West Belfast (ETI, 2010d) area inspections) that ‘the Education and Training Inspectorate will monitor and report publicly on the progress made in addressing these areas for improvement’. (ETI 2010: 7; ETI 2010d: 9). The second section of the report (Key priorities for development) details the work needed to tackle the areas for improvement. However, in order to eliminate confusion relating to the responsibilities of area members in attaining these goals, this section provides a detailed description on the specific roles and responsibilities of each member to reach the identified targets for improvement. For example, ETI (2010c, 2010d) explicitly lists the roles and responsibilities of the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning, educational stakeholders (Education and Library Boards) and organisations (primary schools, post-primary schools, special schools, further education colleges, training organisations, alternative education providers and the youth service) in realising the terms of improvement outlined in the report.

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Oral feedback on the report is provided in a public forum to all organisations, stakeholders and interested individuals within the area.

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

Chapter 4

Research Methodology

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to look at the impact of polycentric inspection on quality and innovation and to examine the potential of this approach to drive improvement. The methodology used in the research was a triangulated case study strategy (Tellis, 1997: 2) since the work was not so much concerned with gathering data about large system level issues but rather ‘understanding the complex interplay between a given phenomenon and its broader context’ (Iorio, 2004: 60). In line with Stake (1994: 236), the study was concerned more with ‘individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used’. The theoretical framework of the research was not the generalisation of polycentric inspection to all populations but rather the generalisation of theoretical propositions. The overarching theoretical proposition is that polycentric inspection can contribute to improving schools. To test this assumption, it was decided to undertake a case study of an area in Northern Ireland that had taken part in an area-based inspection some years previously. The area chosen was West Belfast, urban and with a high level of social problems.

4.2 Data collection

In order to gain as complete a picture as possible of the impact of polycentric inspection on the network, the researchers collected data by interviewing the inspector who led the team and who is also the District Inspector for the area, the chief executive officer of the CCMS, the education manager for the West Belfast Partnership Board, and a Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) Curriculum Advisory Support Service officer (CASS). A focus group interview was conducted with members of the West Belfast ALC. A cross case analysis of area and youth inspections since 2005 was made including analyses of specific documents including the inspection report on West Belfast and the West Belfast Partnership Board’s⁷ response to that inspection. Finally data sets provided by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, the Department of Education and the West Belfast ALC, including data relating to terminal examination results, free school meals entitlement, the number of individuals claiming benefits and the destinations of students following GCE and A Level education, were analysed.

⁷ West Belfast Partnership Board manages two new education initiatives: the West Belfast Community Project and the Community Education Initiative Programme – which together comprise the WBPB Education Initiatives. Both were funded by the Department of Education until March 2015, and became operational in January 2014 (following a planning period at the end of 2013). The core aim of the work is to raise attainment levels across the education spectrum for children and young people experiencing disadvantage, poverty, exclusion and social emotional behavioural difficulties. (West Belfast Partnership Board, 2014, p.3).

4.3 Selection of participants

'The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites (or documents or visual material) that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question' (Creswell, 2008: 81). The selection of participants for this study was based on a purposeful sampling strategy: 'the purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study' (Patton, 2002: 46). It was seen as essential to interview key leading members of the network who might have varying perspectives on area-based inspection policy and practice. Therefore, it was decided to interview the chief executive of the CCMS, a Belfast Education and Library Board Curriculum Advisory Support Service officer and leading members of the ALC who form the core component parts of the network. Patton suggests that, 'the purpose of a stratified purposeful sample is to capture major variations rather than to identify a common core, although the latter may also emerge in the analysis (Patton, 2002: 240). The selection of inspectors was not based on a purposeful sampling strategy, but rather consisted of interviewing the lead inspector who carried out the area inspection and who is also the District Inspector for the area. From a research ethics perspective it should be noted that, as the interview data is reported using clear identifiers, the District Inspector is DI. An earlier version of this report was circulated and any amendments requested have been incorporated.

The next chapter details the data that emerged in the course of the research.

Chapter 5

Polycentric Inspection Explored

POLYCENTRIC INSPECTION EXPLORED

5.1 Polycentric inspection in focus – The case of West Belfast

West Belfast has a population of approximately 93,000 residents⁸. It has one of the highest levels of people claiming unemployment benefit in Northern Ireland (Appendix 2). Moreover, West Belfast 'has the highest proportion of people (76%) living in the most deprived 'Super Output Areas' of Northern Ireland and it ranks first on the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure⁹ (WBP, 2014: 6). There are 17,339 children living in West Belfast who attend one of the 10 post-primary or 30 primary schools in the area (Appendix 3). A significant number of pupils in the area are also entitled to free school meals. The average number of pupils entitled to free school meals is approximately 35% at post-primary level and 60% at primary level.

However and very interestingly in the context of this research, despite these significant challenges, since the first area inspection (ETI, 2010d), 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 (Tables 6 and 7).

Table 6: WB ALC GCSE Performance 2009/10 to 2013/14.						
Source: West-Belfast ALC						
GCSE	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2014 School figures
Number of pupils in Y12	893	775	840	894	878	839
Number of eligible pupils (for SAER)	827	734	780	826		789
% of ineligible pupils	7.4	5.3	7.1	7.6		6.0
% receiving 5 or more at grades A*–C	79.2	80.8	84.5	85.7		91.1
% receiving 5 or more at grades A*–C including English and Maths	52.4	49.0	49.1	50.7		61.3
% receiving 6 or more at grades A*–C including English and Maths	60.0	63.6	69.5	70.5		79.7
% receiving 7 or more at grades A*–C including English and Maths	50.7	46.5	47.7	48.7		59.3
% A*–C in English (Year 12 census)	60.7	62.8	58.7	61.4		77.2
% A*–C in English (Exam outcomes)	67.9	67.1	63.2	67.0		
% A*–C in Maths (Year 12 census)	54.1	51.0	51.9	52.7		65.4
% A*–C in Maths (Exam outcomes)	59.4	54.8	55.4	57.5		

⁸ http://www.westbelfast-partnership.com/uploads/documents/belfast_west_constituency_profile_2013.pdf

⁹ Super Output Areas (SOA) are used within the Noble Measures of Multiple Deprivation (MMD) to enable comparative analysis of small areas across Northern Ireland. The final rank given to an individual SOA is based upon several indicative domains including: income, health, employment, education, environment, services and crime/disorder (ETI 2010d, p. 2).

Table 7: WBALC A Level Performance 2009/10 to 2013/14.

Source: West-Belfast ALC

A Level	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2014 School figures
Number of pupils in Y14	697	666	793	710	783	801
Number of eligible pupils (for SAER)	560	536	564	573		632
% of ineligible pupils	19.7	19.5	28.9	19.3		21.1
% receiving 2 or more at grades A*–C	92.3	89.9	93.3	91.1		94.0
% receiving 3 or more at grades A*–C	50.2	51.1	55.0	58.1		66.8

As always in educational research making direct casual links is problematic but the above figures are, nonetheless, of considerable interest. The next section tests assumptions relating to polycentric inspection as it applies in practice by providing a narrative analysis of the findings from the qualitative interviews and focus group part of the study. For clarity, each participant has an identifier attached to the unit of analysis. For example, when referring to the code ALC1, the first letter identifies the participant as a member of the ALC, and the number after the letter indicates each member of the network.

5.2 Defining the network to inspect

5.2.1 Who is part of the inspected network?

According to the inspector participant (DI) and as stated in (ETI, 2010d: 1), all education providers in the area, including nursery, pre-school and alternative education providers form part of the inspected network:

The inspected network is the network of establishments of West Belfast. That's not just school, that's from the cradle to the grave. So the West Belfast area-based inspection spans from nursery right through to FE, training providers and even into community groups. It was unique in that sense, it inspected everything basically. So essentially, the area-based inspection lit the fire for social Networking in the community.

5.2.2 Who decides that these actors are part of the inspected network?

The inspectorate chooses a random sample of education providers in the area to form part of the area inspection: 'the inspectorate decided who would be inspected so we looked at the geographical boundaries of West Belfast and we selected a sample of different types of institutions and inspected them which is a cost effective way of doing inspections and all of the inspected organizations are listed in the report' (ETI, 2010d: 11). Organisations are not chosen using a risk based model but rather, 'they are chosen randomly across the area network' (DI).

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The process is outlined in detail by the DI:

We sent letters to all of the organisations in the area saying that the area is going to be inspected, we then let the sample know and then we explained the whole process to them. "Here's the framework, here's what we're going to inspect, here's what the report is going to report on." Different areas will have different areas inspected but in this case it was transition.

An important first achievement of this polycentric inspection was that the final report suggested that one of the areas for improvement was to 'align the strategic and operational plans of organisations and their key partners within the area' (ETI, 2010d: 5). As a result, the network has expanded considerably from the time of the initial inspection and now includes key stakeholders of the individual schools. As described by an interview participant from the West Belfast Partnership Board (WBPB):

We saw that there was a gap from primary schools, nursery schools to come together, a gap for after schools to come together and the practitioners group to drive everything forward. We would have the ALC, BELB, the CCMS, DENI, and ETI as well. So we let it evolve. So it's a bottom up approach. It's not us saying that you have to be in this network. It's us saying, this is what we're hoping to do because people have bought into it. So the WBPB is where all of these networks meet.

5.2.3 *How are these actors (stakeholders, other service providers) involved in the network? What is their role?*

According to the DI, there is a considerable number of stakeholders involved in the network, all with specific roles:

There are a whole lot of actors involved in the network. The West Belfast Partnership Board and the ALC are key players. As the network has rolled on in the last few years [after the area-based inspection took place] a lot of other organisations have come in. It has grown organically nearly but all of them are involved in either providing education directly or supporting education.

An example given by WBPB of the various stakeholders involved in the network is as follows: 'it's a bottom up stakeholder led approach. For example, activities outside of school hours often aren't inspected by ETI but they often are by other agencies such as social services' (WBPB).

Indeed, according to CCMS, the involvement of multiple stakeholders is a core requirement in ensuring that area-based evaluation and planning will have any significant impact on the quality of education provided in an area.

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This key point is stressed by CCMS:

The concept of stakeholders is very important here. Particularly when we are dealing with areas of multiple social disadvantage because schools cannot educate children alone and that's more obvious in areas of social deprivation. So the stakeholders have to be the schools and those who provide for the schools and by that I mean preschool settings, Sure Start¹⁰, etc. It also has to involve those for whom the schools produce so further education, employers need to be part of it and training organisations in between there.

5.2.4 *Are there other stakeholders who are/could be involved in the inspections, perhaps on a more ad hoc basis?*

From the time of the first area-based inspection, there was common agreement among those interviewed that there was a need to involve more stakeholders in the network. According to the Belfast Education and Library Board Curriculum Advisory Support Service officer (BELB-CASS), 'at that time, the time of the inspection, the ALC had not got to the stage that it is at now'.

In terms of those organisations being included on an ad hoc basis, BELB-CASS explains, 'the other parts of the Network [Area Learning Community] are statute based. However, there is another sector out there and that is the community sector and the WBPB is community based but overlaps with the statutory network in terms of provision of teaching and learning'.

When asked if the two (statutory and non-statutory) could be inspected together, BELB-CASS stated, 'that's starting to happen and the arena where that is taking place is the Area Learning Community. Let's say that there's an initiative in the ALC and they think, let's see how the partnership board can be part of this and vice versa. What the ETI are trying to do is to keep that partnership going'. Indeed, as the network has matured, the DI takes the view that almost all organisations are included in the network:

If you asked me that question a number of years ago, I would have said yes, we have to bring in more community groups. At this point in time, no, not really. We have the community groups, we have the CASS, we have the schools, we have the ALC, we have the partnership board, and we have community groups. Over a period of time, they have been drawn in on an ad hoc basis but they are formally in.

¹⁰ Sure Start is a government led initiative aimed at giving every child the best possible start in life and which offers a broad range of services focusing on Family Health, Early Years Care and Education and Improved Well Being Programmes to children aged four and under.

It was also suggested by the DI that for those stakeholders who are drawn in on an ad hoc basis:

There is a clear understanding that after a period of time you need to say that this is what we've done and this is the evidence of the impact of what we've done on the ground. Now the 'first-hand evidence' that a community group produces would be different to the evidence that a school produces. And the role of the inspectorate is that the inspectorate can quality assure all of this.

5.3 Defining polycentric inspection

5.3.1 *Polycentric inspection is about multiple actors sharing responsibility for education, and having a role in the steering, governance and evaluation of schools. What does this look like in your country?*

According to BELB-CASS, the concept of polycentric inspections came from other jurisdictions:

The way I understand it is, in America they used to have or they still do, schools would define themselves as professional learning communities and what they would look at is how collectively they could do that in terms of one school, and from that it came off as an area-based approach to education. From that we started to see in England what were called the National Learning Networks, primarily in the primary sector and I think that that impacted over here and there is an imperative in terms of finance and budgets being cut or shared services to take place right across schools but it's the same process in other organisations like health, etc.

As previously stated, inspection in Northern Ireland is centred on single institution inspections. On the other hand the DI points out, 'we have also been doing, we call them area-based inspections. We have had a number of those but this area is the only one that has been followed up in that sense. So what we have is mostly single unit inspections. We have had a number of polycentric inspections [Appendix 1] over a period of time'.

In terms of the need for follow-up inspection, the inspector participant explained that, 'normally in a single institution inspection you would have follow-up inspections if there were issues' (DI). However, there wasn't a formal follow-up comparable to the framework for follow-up that is used in single unit inspections. Rather, as explained by the DI, 'the inspector does not say, "This is what you've got to do". It's [follow-up area inspection] an evaluative role, listening to what they are doing and looking at the evidence of the effectiveness of what they are doing in terms of outcomes and giving ongoing evaluation and making suggestions for change and evaluating again' (DI).

The DI continued:

I keep saying again to you. You have to have a follow-up. First of all to say at a strategic level that there is improvement. That's important from a governmental point of view. It must also be part of the improvement agenda for the network as well. It drives the improvement process but it's the way that the follow-up is carried out in an area inspection. That's the important bit.

The importance placed on follow-up inspections being a key element of a polycentric inspection framework was also affirmed by CCMS when referring to transition arrangements among various sectors.

As stated by CCMS:

One of the areas that I know was followed up on was transition. Transition is a key area even with selection it's a key area because we have to work on this principle because of the background of these children. So that relationship between the schools that they are going into and the schools that they have come from is very important.

5.3.2 What is the role of the Inspectorate in this polycentric context?

The traditional role of the inspectorate is to carry out an evaluation of a certain element of practice in one school. In the context of polycentric inspection, the DI took the view that the role of the inspectorate is to act as a critical facilitator/friend. According to the DI, 'friend is a word that can sometimes be mis-interpreted. The role of the inspectorate is to be part of the change process and I think we need to change this notion that the inspectorate can't do that because if the inspectorate don't get involved in that, often you don't get change. There is a dual role there'. This perspective on the role of the inspectorate resonated with an interview participant from the Area Learning Community who stated that, 'I think that long gone should be the days where an inspector comes in and just goes out and I think that [name of District Inspector] has broken that mould' (ALC1).

In terms of the area-based inspection that was carried out in 2009 (ETI, 2010d), the DI states:

We visited, it must have been about 45 institutions. Every one of those institutions also had a single case report. There was a dual purpose to this 'Strengths and areas for development'...The starting point was to quality assure first hand evidence that the institution provided to us. Even by asking for that, that actually started the process five years ago. That's inspection as part of the change process... Think of the actual efficiency savings there. We didn't follow the individual institutions up which is interesting. In my view, we should have.

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When asked if any improvements could have been made to the area-based inspection process, the DI stated that, 'if that was being done again, the way I would do it is that the District Inspector for those schools would follow them up. There was quite a number of schools inspected and I wasn't the District inspector for all of those schools. I wrote the report because I was the Area Board coordinator. There's no reason why the District Inspector for post-primary couldn't follow-up those schools. A very cost effective way of doing follow-up'.

5.3.3 *Are polycentric inspections in your country only about inspections of networks of schools (and what does this look like)?*

Polycentric inspections in Northern Ireland include more than networks of schools as referenced in ETI 2010c, 2010d. Furthermore, as stated by the DI, 'I wouldn't define polycentric inspections as just being about schools. It's about whatever you decide it is to be about. It's whatever needs to be inspected for whatever reason'. Indeed, in terms of the area-based inspection (ETI, 2010d), BELB-CASS affirmed that 'they [The ETI] also looked outside of mainstream providers by looking at for example *Alternative Education Providers*' (BELB-CASS). The overarching logic to including other organisations in the area-based inspection is provided by WBP who states: 'In the last polycentric inspection you would have had inspection of full service community networks as well. No it's not only about schools and I think that what we are trying to do here is that the schools and community are interlinked' (WBP).

5.3.4 *Is there also an element of sharing inspection responsibilities (and what does this look like)?*

Given the scale and number of institutions that were inspected during the course of the area-based inspection, a number of inspectors from ETI, with expertise in a particular aspect of education, were engaged to carry it out. The DI describes the process:

We had over 15 inspectors on it. It was done over a week and it was quite a commitment of inspectorate time. We had somebody going to nursery, we had somebody going into primary and post-primary. It was quite an exercise to manage. However, I still maintain that it was cost effective... As long as you follow it up.

Following the area-based inspection, the District Inspector quality assured the network's self-evaluation of areas for improvement arising out of the inspection:

I think the aspect of all of this is to get the organisations to follow it up and the inspectorate to quality assure first hand evidence. This is still a work in progress and essentially what the inspectorate does is, they quality assure first hand evidence. The West Belfast partnership board are managing the production of that evidence. That's the essence of all of this... If it was just an external body coming back in three years to rubber stamp it, they [the network] don't feel part of the network. They have been involved in the change process themselves (DI).

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

When asked about the most profound difference between single school and area-based inspections, there was widespread agreement among the respondents.

According to BELB-CASS, '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'.

This perspective is endorsed by the DI who also explains that, on the one hand, 'there are still goals to be met. You still have the backdrop of the findings from the area-based inspection that people are working to and produce evidence of change in those things. In a sense there is a similarity there'. On the other hand, however, one of the most significant differences according to the DI is that polycentric inspection involves multiple stakeholders who collectively own the process, 'in other words there has been an inspection, here are the strengths, here are the areas for improvement, here is the first hand evidence that the network members are collectively producing and then we are quality assuring along their own self-evaluations. The organisations own the process. That's the most profound difference'. Indeed, it appears that ownership of the process is not only essential to the sustainability of the network but also to the sustainability of polycentric inspection in general. ALC2 provides an amusing yet realistic description of the difference between polycentric inspection and single unit inspections:

In some jurisdictions if there is a really 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 close West Belfast down; so ownership and an agreed agenda for change is essential.

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Relationships and trust are key:

The key issue if we peel everything away is relationships and trust. In that context the schools have left something aside which is part of the culture of education which is school against school. Our view of area planning and evaluation is: Instead of talking about building schools or closing schools, the other way of looking at it is to ensure that we're accessing the full range of the curriculum open to everyone. So that's area planning and evaluation. How do you do it? You do it through a network of schools (CCMS).

5.4 Inspection framework

5.4.1 What does the framework for inspections of networks/clusters of schools look like?

The framework for polycentric inspections as detailed in DES (2010c, 2010d) is similar to that of single unit inspections in that quality indicators and areas for improvement form part of the framework. However, as the DI outlines, 'the framework in itself is just like an inspection framework but it is more wide ranging than for a school'. In this regard, where single unit inspections evaluate, for example, the quality of teaching and learning, in the case of area-based inspections, although the quality of teaching and learning is evaluated, an overarching theme for the inspection is followed. As previously stated, in the case of ETI (2010d), the overarching theme for the area inspection was that of transition arrangements within the area.

5.4.2 How do you decide if the network is effective or ineffective (e.g. what are norm indicators, criteria for assessing effectiveness)?

When interview participants were asked to give their opinion on how to decide if the network is effective or ineffective, responses varied. However, there was a degree of commonality on how to judge effectiveness that related specifically to quantitative data arising from terminal examinations, analysis of minutes from meetings, and the level of consultation reported among the network members. In terms of data arising from terminal examinations, BELB-CASS recognised the limitations of using one single method of analysis to determine the effectiveness of the network: 'Who is to say that the results wouldn't have been the same if there wasn't an area-based inspection?' On the other hand, however, BELB-CASS also accepted the usefulness of using data arising from terminal examinations: 'Well the stats are a massive indicator. It's very useful to get the rough data and to have a polycentric approach if you like in terms of an area... Results could be one of the indicators yes'.

An alternative perspective (and also highlighting the need for success criteria in all modes of evaluation) is provided by the DI who argues that:

I'm not deciding if the network is effective because that implies that I'm deciding if those people are effective. We are deciding if the impact of what they are doing is meeting the success criteria that we have set out in order to... Are the educational outcomes, are the GCSE up?... We are not deciding on people if they are effective or ineffective. We are deciding on the outcomes. We are looking at first hand evidence and saying that the first hand evidence is showing that the quality indicators that we have set up for this area-based inspection are being met or not being met and that's what inspectors do. I make no apology for that and we say, yes it's up to the mark or not up to the mark. You have indicators and you have criteria and those are communicated in advance.

Finally, according to WBPB, one of the key indicators to determine the effectiveness of a network relates to transparency and the quality of the network's own self-evaluation:

Our whole thing is that everything has to be open and transparent. There are no back doors. We also do a massive amount of evaluation and if we see if something isn't working we look at why it isn't working. Do we need to do it in a different way? Do we need to do something different? The ideas come from working in partnership with other people so we don't decide anything, the Self-Evaluation and the data decides the effectiveness.

5.4.3 *To what extent do schools/actors in the network have a role in informing the inspection framework, or in bringing in topics for inspection?*

In accordance with all inspection frameworks devised by the ETI such as *Together Towards Improvement* (ETI, 2010), the DI confirms that, 'I certainly could see that organisations should have a role. Organisations do have a role in informing our inspection framework. We have an inspection framework, we put it out for consultation, we get feedback and we do it like any other inspection'. On the other hand, when deciding what aspect of educational provision needs to be inspected in the area, the DI adds, 'for the West Belfast area-based inspection, we set up the criteria, looking at aspects of transition and because we were looking at the effectiveness of transition that brought in everything'. He continued:

They should have a role in informing the framework for area-based inspection but the inspectorate will have a governmental agenda as well. There always has to be give and take but there is a bottom line as well... You still have criteria that you need to inspect. There is no reason why, as this develops that a school can't ask for a QA inspection. You could have a model where the area would say, we would like an area inspection on a particular area because we've been working on this. The inspectorate could then say, yes that's worth doing can you give us evidence on outcomes that we need to know about and the government need to know about? (DI)

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5.5 Evaluation process/inspection visit

5.5.1 *To what extent does the framework take into account/build on school/network self-evaluation and peer review?*

Self-evaluation is at the core of the area-based inspection framework and has also been central to all follow-up inspections in West Belfast. The DI describes the importance of self-evaluation in the following terms:

Self-evaluation is built into the framework. The original area-based inspection framework was predicated on self-evaluation and if you read the West Belfast inspection report it says that. We wrote the letter out to all organisations and we said that we are looking at transition and could you please give us an evaluation of where you are at? We asked them to do a quality audit and we said that we are going to quality assure it. Essentially what we did was that we quality assured the evidence that they gave us.

Moreover, given the capacity for many schools in West Belfast to carry out their own evaluations, BELB-CASS states that:

If you have a polycentric approach to inspection and you've got the individual school data but you've collectively got the data... If you've got good self-evaluation within schools themselves, you've got all of the material that you need so that the inspectorate can then put most of their focus on the area-based part.

Indeed, as confirmed by WBPB, 'it's all built around peer review. It's our whole ethos... It's pointless if you don't measure impact because people don't have a voice'.

5.5.2 *How are the schools/other actors (and potentially other stakeholders) involved in setting the agenda for inspection visits, in generating and collecting and interpreting evaluation data and in making judgements based on data?*

Schools/other actors (and potentially other stakeholders) were not involved in setting the agenda for the initial area inspection. Indeed, from a cross case analysis of area inspections (ETI 2010c, 2010d; ETI, 2006b; ETI, 2005), it would seem that the agenda for area inspections was focussed on system level priorities at the time of the inspection taking place (Appendix 1). On the other hand, however, because follow-up and collaborative self-evaluation are part of the inspection framework, the DI suggests that, in the case of West Belfast, 'they certainly were setting the agenda to a greater or lesser extent where organizations were producing evidence of improvement. What the inspectorate were very clear about was the first hand evidence that they were going to be producing: lesson observations, looking at books, data, etc.'. The DI also reaffirmed that 'the follow-up is predicated on first hand evidence. However, I want to emphasise that this is very complicated and some schools are very good at it and some are not. That's just the complicated network that we are working with'.

5.5.3 *How are assessments communicated and to whom?*

In keeping with the framework for area-based inspections, each inspected organisation is provided with a summary inspection report and collectively the area is also provided with an area-based inspection report (ETI, 2010c, 2010d; ETI, 2006b; ETI, 2005). Indeed, as with the majority of ETI inspections, all of these reports are publically available on the ETI website. In addition, as the DI points out:

Not only did we provide feedback to one institution, we also provided feedback to all of the different providers. What I did as area-based inspector was that I reported to all of the providers in St. Mary's College, there were people from the department there as well. So the WBPB, the ALC was also there amongst a whole other group of people. The WBPB, prompted by CCMS decided that they were going to respond and that started the ball rolling actually.

5.5.4 *How is ownership of findings created or enforced?*

According to BELB-CASS, there was no need for ownership of the findings to be enforced as 'it [The Area Inspection] was always based around self-evaluation any way. So they [the network] automatically have ownership so with [that] model if you like, you don't need an enforcement'. The DI elaborates:

It's certainly not enforced. That doesn't work. Of course at times you have to say that something isn't working. To answer your question it's through trust. Of course I'm coming in as an Inspector but I'm coming in to give advice as well. The point is, the advice has to work. You don't get a second chance at this. Essentially what you're seeing is what is working elsewhere... There's a lot of rigour to it as well. You also have to have communication on what the first hand evidence is saying.

5.5.5 *How/who decides on how to act on inspection findings and how is/should this be communicated to/with the Inspectorate?*

In the case of West Belfast, the network, with the support of the District Inspector, the Belfast Education and Library Board, the Area Learning Community and the West Belfast Partnership Board decided to act on inspection findings. Moreover, although not a requirement of area inspections, the West Belfast Partnership Board decided to formally respond to the area-based inspection report (West Belfast Partnership Board, 2012).

The thinking behind this course of action is explained by WBPB: 'Well, the West Belfast Partnership Board took it upon themselves to respond to the findings and from this there was the education and training forum that was set up and we looked at the three different sections that were highlighted in the report as needing room for improvement. That naturally evolved into what we have now'.

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The DI also provides clarity on who acts on the inspection findings:

The network decides to act on the inspection findings but they are judged based on the quality of first hand evidence that they are producing. First hand evidence doesn't lie. As long you stick with first hand evidence that gives it the rigour. The inspectorate is part of the process and you're quality assuring what first hand evidence is saying and the first hand evidence is being produced by the stakeholders. That is their responsibility that they are producing for their own benefit and that is why it is working.

In the case of West Belfast, it appears that the collective network decided to act on inspection findings using their own collaborative self-evaluation reports which were subsequently quality assured by the District Inspector.

Moreover, as indicated by ALC2, 'I also think that and it's not just because [name of DI] has been such an advocate of the work that we do. We also have a role to inform the inspectorate that this is the model of inspection, the role of the DI that we think could work in other areas'. This perspective is similar to that of ALC3 who is equally clear about the key role of the lead inspector: 'I'm not sure without the ETI and the District Inspector that we would have gotten as far as we had gotten in any shape or form because the District Inspector has moulded and put in shape and direction for how we have taken ownership of the findings'.

5.6 Embedding inspection in the regulatory context and creating clarity around formal responsibilities and roles.

5.6.1 Who is responsible for which part of the evaluation and improvement process (standard-setting, design and implementation of inspection measures, collecting and analysing findings, making judgements and deciding on actions)?

In the case of West Belfast, the DI states that, because evaluation is a continuous process within the network, various members of the network are responsible for the evaluation and improvement process within different stages of the evaluation cycle:

The ETI are actively involved and play a key role in both the evaluation and improvement process, not just the evaluation process. The organisation is responsible for the evaluation and improvement process. There is no division here but to be frank, the inspectorate are closely involved with the improvement process as well. You cannot just sit back from it and say, we are doing the inspection. If there is not an improvement following an inspection there is no point in having an inspection.

DI continues:

In all of this, the inspectorate have a statutory responsibility and they are responsible for evaluating the quality indicators. In this process we are quality assuring the school's self-evaluation from first hand evidence and if it's not good first hand evidence we will say that it's not good first hand evidence and if there's no evidence of improvement, we'll say that there's no evidence of improvement.

5.6.2 *To what extent are these responsibilities set in legislation or otherwise regulated or negotiated?*

The DI is clear on this question: 'under the education act it is the responsibility of the inspectorate to evaluate provision and outcomes set out in legislation. This is quite clear in legislation'.

5.6.3 *What is the regulatory/legislative context of the framework? Does it support inspections or the forming of networks? How? Does it support involvement of schools/actors in the network or other stakeholders to decide on the standards in the framework?*

According to the DI, because school accountability and inspection is engrained in Northern Ireland legislation, 'all we need to say is that we have a blend of inspections and then you say that to meet the department's priorities, we're going to carry out an inspection and it's set up within this framework and I think that from the evidence in West Belfast, it's worked'.

5.7 Potential (mechanisms and contexts of) effects and side effects

5.7.1 *What are the benefits and pitfalls of polycentric inspections, e.g. of inspecting networks of schools, and of sharing inspection responsibilities with (networks of) schools?*

In terms of the benefits, the DI believes that, 'the benefits are that you get buy in and you get people signing up. You get people feeling part of the process. The most important thing is that you get improvement in outcomes as we can see from, for example, the GCSE and A level results [Tables 5 and 6]'. Another benefit of polycentric inspection as stated by CCMS is that of greater cohesion and communication among schools': 'What the area-based inspection has done is that it has created a communication and a respect and therefore people are not afraid of each other. They do not feel that they have to defend their turf to the same extent that they used to'. CCMS continues, 'one of the things I mention to principals is interdependence over independence and it comes back to ALCs and the potential of ALCs not just to provide access to the curriculum but to create a forum for professional competence and how it can be developed and exchanged'.

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A number of potential pitfalls were also suggested. For example, because of the complexity of networks in comparison to single unit inspections, the credibility of polycentric inspection could, according to the DI, be brought into question if it was not as rigorous as a single unit inspection. The DI is clear that:

The major pitfall would be that the area-based inspection model would not have rigour but if they concentrated on first hand evidence. In other words, does the first hand evidence show that there is improvement in these areas? Then you avoid the pitfalls. You focus on outcomes rather than output all the way through the follow-up process and that gives it the rigor.

BELB-CASS also believed that for area inspections to work in practice, it would be an essential requirement to understand the context of the area:

The pitfalls are that the context of the community have to be understood because if you try and apply the approach in West Belfast with that in another area you are on a high end to nothing.

Nonetheless, CCMS was clear in the belief that there would be no reason why the overarching framework for polycentric inspection which was used in West Belfast could not be implemented in all areas of Northern Ireland.

The concept of polycentric inspection, if it can work in West Belfast it can be amended for any other area of Northern Ireland. If you've solved the big problem you have the potential to make it manageable in other places with slightly different emphases. It could also be modified to be used in a cross community way which is something that education has the potential to deliver because there is now a much greater focus which we buy into; a shared education.

5.7.2 *What are ways to improve these types of inspections and what changes to these inspection models are planned/needed?*

According to the DI, all systems require a blend of inspections whose overarching objective is the same and including single unit and area inspections. Moreover, and as with all modes of inspection, they must have credibility and rigour and have self-evaluation embedded throughout the evaluation cycle:

You need to have an inspection system where you have a blend of single unit inspections and area-based inspections that fit together in all sorts of ways. They fit together in philosophy, they fit together in rigour, and they fit together in terms of outcomes and also, self-evaluation is at the heart of all of this. I don't mean enforced self-evaluation because that doesn't work.

BELB-CASS also points out that, while there is a considerable amount of single school and system level data available, there is, in addition, a need for area-based data. BELB-CASS argues, 'the system itself needs to provide data on an area-based level. Now the mechanisms need to start looking at the area as being the unit'.

Another issue relating to the effectiveness of polycentric inspection concerns greater investment in community cohesion:

I feel that we do need to invest in creating community cohesion and that brings us back to polycentric inspection because in WB if we are getting additionality, it's because we have more partners involved and we have more facilities to develop those partnerships. If there's resources required to develop those partnerships in other communities then let's put that resource in. So it should not be just a measure through e.g. Free School meals. It should be a capability assessment (CCMS).

5.7.3 *What is the impact of these type of inspections on individual schools, the network and potentially other stakeholders? How do you know? What's the evidence of impact?*

There were varying perspectives on the evidence of impact in West Belfast, including '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' (WBPB). BELB-CASS adds, 'with polycentric inspection there is less of a threat of becoming institutionalised. 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'.

In terms of first hand evidence as a measure of impact, the DI argues that:

You know by first hand evidence. We also know that this is messy. When you do an inspection across an area, you also need to see the big picture. You might get some aspect going down in one bit and another aspect going down in another. You need to focus on the big picture and just having confidence. The inspection evidence on individual schools shows that it is happening as well. That's where you need both. The individual inspections then become a check on the area-based inspection.

POLYCENTRIC INSPECTION EXPLORED

BELB-CASS also states that another form of evidence is the analysis of minutes from meetings:

When you look at the minutes of meetings and you see the issues that people are talking about and you see that these are principals of competing schools. Over the past few years there have been falling population enrolments so you can have the tensions and yet if you look at the evidence in the minutes and you see that they're looking at everything from this issue, to finance, etc. well obviously this is evidence that something good is happening.

However, BELB-CASS also pointed out that 'we're at a very early stage and it's almost at prototype level. If you look at school based inspection, it has been going on for decades but I think that if you have this running and it matures and it's a regular feature, then we'll see things that we can't visualise now coming as a result of it'. ALC3 agrees:

I think that there is a lot of innovation here to make a real difference and I have to say that my only focus is West Belfast. Maybe all of the pieces of the jigsaw are on this table and I think that there is enough creativity and innovation to try and put that picture together for West Belfast... We are on a plateau, West Belfast is on a plateau, and we can have a major effect on the next generation. We have begun the process here.

According to CCMS, another issue relating to the impact of polycentric inspection that needs be taken into account is the extent to which the process informs policy and practice:

We need to see our system in a slightly different way and I think for polycentric inspection to have an impact, it has got to be inspecting against a policy backdrop which is different from the one that we have now while at the same time I think that it [research into previous area inspections] can pick up what has been done through these inspections, not just in West Belfast but elsewhere and seeing the extent to which those feed back into policy.

5.7.4 What elements/aspects of polycentric inspections have an impact?

Participants agreed that various elements of polycentric inspection have an impact and the key arguments made were:

Schools don't teach children, teachers do and I think what the area inspection has done is that it has improved policies at school level. They have seen other things that they can be doing, they have made education more porous in that the school is no longer a building surrounded by a high wall. There may still be a wall there but there are many gates in it and some of those gates are wide open (CCMS).

I think it does raise to a certain degree the level of professional language in schools particularly around self evaluation and planning and it forces schools to reflect. Now it is pressurised and it is stressful but it forces schools to periodically reflect on what they're doing and where they want to go (DI).

What is unique is that because the network focuses on teaching and learning this is what has made the difference in my opinion and we've moved away from the shadow of area-based planning which was always a very large elephant in the room. That has now dissolved as it's the area-based focus and things that matter to us (ALC4).

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's our community and they're our pupils and we need to start looking at it from that perspective (ALC5).

5.7.5 *How do they have an impact? What are the mechanisms of change? On which types of networks do you expect to have the most impact and why?*

All participants believed that the network had an impact because of the way that it was set up. According to WBPB:

Because of the way we are set up. Our strategic committee has the chairs of all of the ALCS so they are interconnected anyway. All of the chairs of the respective networks go onto the strategic steering committee. So you would have [NAME] who chairs the primary ALC, [NAME] chairs the nursery, [NAME] chairs the post-primary and [NAME] who chairs the afterschool would go onto that too.

On the other hand, however, WBPB was also of the view that because the post-primary ALC is funded and is the only ALC that has a legislative basis under the entitlement framework, the post-primary ALC would naturally be more sustainable in comparison to the nursery and primary networks. In other words, the three networks need to be supported. Indeed, according to WBPB, 'this is what we would be hoping for moving forward'.

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

There were many unintended consequences of polycentric inspections as described by members. According to ALC4, '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'. Indeed, according to the DI, one significant unintended consequence is that of 'knocking down the barriers between individual institutions. When you do single unit inspections and that is all that you do, you could essentially be reinforcing schools into working by themselves.

POLYCENTRIC INSPECTION EXPLORED

By doing a polycentric inspection the message you are sending is that you need to talk to each other because we are inspecting across an area. That's the unintended good consequence of polycentric inspection'. The DI goes on:

There is nothing wrong with competition. However, 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 bringing along first hand evidence and showing each school their first hand evidence. That's an unintended positive consequence. It's getting organizations to co-operate with each other and that is a major unintended positive consequence.

BELB-CASS concurs: 'I think at this stage it can only be positive...With polycentric inspection, you yourself would start to look for improvement because you don't want to let the team down. So I don't think that there are any negative unintended consequences'.

Finally, the DI also believed that one of the potentially negative unintended consequences of polycentric inspection is that there would be a tendency to have a single model of inspection when, in fact, 'you have to have a blend of inspections. You can't have a regulatory framework of inspections based purely on polycentric inspections. You need a blend of the two but it does pose questions for policy makers'. The DI goes on to suggest that if this were to happen, there would be an over reliance on polycentric inspections that would impinge on the individual responsibility of all schools: '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'. CCMS offers a similar view: 'what I felt was that people could draw on the area inspection and say that "we are part of this". However, if they have gotten an inspection that identifies an area as being weak, there is a point of saying, yes you are benefitting from the bigger picture here but when we get down to it you've also got work to do here, so we need a combination of both'.

Chapter 6

Discussion and Conclusion

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This report presents the results of case study research into area-based or polycentric inspection of schools and related institutions in West Belfast, Northern Ireland. The case study is one of four in the partner countries, England, the Netherlands, Bulgaria and Ireland involved in a European Union funded research project entitled Polycentric School Inspections. The project partners have conducted previous research into differing approaches to school inspection in each country. This previous research established beyond doubt the value of school inspection as a mechanism for both accountability and improvement in education. Equally however the research also indicated the limits of the potential of individual or single school inspection. In essence individual schools working alone can solve certain problems and improve performance but where improvement might best be achieved by cooperation with other schools or other types of institutions such as training agencies, employers, social services and so on, the capacity to effect change becomes limited. In part for these reasons the idea of linking schools and other stakeholders in networks has become influential. However, for networks to achieve their potential, there clearly has to be mechanisms for cooperation, knowledge exchange and evaluation. One proposed mechanism, which has received little or no attention in the research literature, is through inspecting networks as a whole, or what is described in this research as polycentric inspection. The theoretical proposition is that polycentric inspection might act as an enabling agent or catalyst to effective networking.

West Belfast was chosen as the Irish case study for this research because it has a flourishing education network under the West Belfast Area Partnership and the Inspectorate of Northern Ireland has conducted area-based inspections of this network as a whole. West Belfast therefore presented a perfect opportunity to study the working of a geographically based educational network and the impact that area-based or polycentric inspection has had on the development of the network. This report begins with a literature review on educational networks and then describes education in Northern Ireland including the school inspection system and the educational network in West Belfast. The research involved an analysis of available quantitative data but primarily concentrated on in-depth interviews with key players including the District Inspector for the area and the leading figures involved in the network.

6.2 Research outcomes

A number of interesting findings emerge from this research. Firstly, there is probably a case to be made to distinguish between area-based and polycentric inspections. Inspectorates of education can usefully conduct thematic area-based inspections such as, for example, on the effectiveness of pupil transfer from one level of school to the next, even in the absence of a formal network. However it is hard to envisage this kind of inspection would lead to improvement unless there is an ongoing linkage between the different actors, overseen continually by the Inspectorate. In other words polycentric inspection, as opposed to area-based inspection, probably implies the existence and nurturing of a vibrant and active network. This point emerges strongly from the research. There was widespread agreement among the research participants that, while it is appropriate for the Inspectorate to inspect the network and set goals to be achieved, nothing concrete will happen unless the network takes ownership of the process and sets in train and continually evaluates the necessary improvement strategies. In the case of West Belfast, there was no requirement on the network to respond to the area-based inspection report but it was decided to do so and, in conjunction with the District Inspector, to strengthen self-evaluation capacity and monitor goals and outcomes on a continuous basis. All of this is only conceivable in the context of a well-structured and funded network.

Related to the above finding is the question of the importance of the network involving all of the relevant stakeholders in the process. As originally envisaged area-based inspection was more focused on education and training institutions. It is pointed out by the key respondents in this research that a major impact of the polycentric inspection process has been the development of a much wider network. Without this growth the possibility for involving non-education based actors such as social services, community groups, employers and so on would be lost. Since the ultimate purpose of networking and polycentric inspection is to generate solutions to cross-sectoral problems that individual institutions cannot possibly solve on their own, this is of particular importance.

All of the respondents without exception stressed the importance of relationships and trust being built up both within the network and between the network and the Inspectorate. Within the network it was stressed time and again that the major success of the process by far was the gradual reduction in competition and indeed suspicion among the different players. In an area of falling enrolments there might have been a tendency to competitive tensions. It is clear that the work of the network and particularly polycentric inspection is a kind of catalyst or glue which has led to greater cohesion, communication and cooperation between the different institutions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This in turn, it is suggested, has improved a whole range of important areas for learners including access to a wider curriculum and greater ease of transfer and progression.

It has also led to significant developments for teachers in creating what amounts to a professional forum for the exchange of ideas, materials and experience. This outcome is contrasted in the research with traditional single unit inspections which, while very valuable in many ways tend, it is suggested, to encourage schools into working by themselves, reinforcing rather than breaking down barriers.

Regular contact with and follow-up by the Inspectorate was emphasised by all parties. More traditional modes of inspection with long gaps between inspection events were contrasted by respondents with the process of polycentric inspection. This approach was perceived as growing the network and, as it becomes more mature, helping it to focus on using available data including statistics to examine issues around teaching and learning and teacher professional development. In this way, it was suggested, boundaries between the Inspectorate and the schools are broken down and a shared agenda, constantly revisited, can emerge.

As was already suggested, an important question is whether it can be shown that activities such as polycentric inspection of networks which improve cooperation and provide professional development opportunities for teachers do, in fact, lead to the most important outcome of all, improved student performance. While it is always difficult to establish such related effects in educational research, most of the respondents stated that improving results in recent years in GCSE and A-level examinations in West Belfast could be attributed, to some extent at least, to the work of the partnership and related inspection activities.

In terms of impact on the work of the network as a whole there was strong agreement that inspection and particularly the ongoing engagement of the Inspectorate with the network was vital in driving forward the improvement agenda. A key theme that emerged is that the gradual change of ownership from the Inspectorate to the network is very important. Respondents noted that the Northern Ireland Inspectorate places great emphasis on self-evaluation and in response the network and the individual schools within it have sought to develop self-evaluation capacity. The appropriate role of external inspection then becomes the quality assurance of the self-evaluation and data generation processes within a network.

Finally, an important aspect to be considered is the extent to which what appears to be a very successful and beneficial networking and inspection process in West Belfast could be replicated in other contexts both in Northern Ireland and further afield. This is a rather difficult question to answer. As indicated above there is probably a role in every jurisdiction for area-based inspections examining the boundaries between institutions to try to solve problems around student progression, transfer and so on.

However the process in West Belfast goes well beyond that. There, community development partnership structures, which exist independently of the Inspectorate, are central to polycentric inspection being an iterative process in which the Inspectorate is an agent of change, constantly interacting with the network. In summary it seems that the involvement, in a very structured way, of multiple stakeholders is a core requirement in ensuring that polycentric inspection will have a significant impact on the quality of education provided in an area.

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Appendices

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Full Area Inspections across Different Phases (2005–2009)				
Area	Date of Inspection	Phase	Focus	Number and type of institutions inspected
Greater Newry	January – March 2005	Secondary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the strategic planning for 14–19 education; the range and adequacy of the provision; the key skills of the pupils and students, including the wider key skills; the quality of careers education and guidance. 	Four schools and an institute.
Coleraine	January – April 2006	Secondary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> strategic planning for 14–19 education; range and adequacy of the provision; achievements of the learners; key skills of the pupils and students, including the wider key skills; quality of careers education and guidance; effectiveness of the communication with organisations from or to which the pupils progress; quality of leadership in the organisations; effectiveness of the quality assurance procedures. 	Six schools, elements of the Coleraine youth service, a training organisation and the Institute.
Ballymena	February – March 2009	All phases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> strategic planning for education and training within the area; the quality of learning for young people within the area; and the effectiveness of the transition arrangements for young people within and across the various sectors. 	Five pre-school centres, four primary schools, three post-primary schools, the AEP, a special school, a training organisation, the local further education college and three youth settings.
West Belfast	March – April 2009	All phases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> strategic planning for education and training within the area; the quality of learning for young people within the area; and the effectiveness of the transition arrangements for young people within and across the various sectors 	Three pre-school centres, five primary schools, four post-primary schools, Alternative Education Provision (AEP) in two centres, a special school, a training organisation, the Belfast Metropolitan College, and four youth settings

Number of people claiming unemployment benefit (December 2014). Data accessed from Northern Ireland Statistics and research agency.		
Area	Number	% of total (rounded)
Belfast East	2,482	5%
Belfast North	4,504	9%
Belfast South	2,590	5%
Belfast West	4,225	9%
East Antrim	1,781	4%
East Londonderry	2,800	6%
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	2,385	5%
Foyle	5,353	11%
Lagan Valley	1,756	4%
Mid Ulster	1,927	4%
Newry and Armagh	2,993	6%
North Antrim	2,478	5%
North Down	1,722	4%
South Antrim	1,608	3%
South Down	2,511	5%
Strangford	2,043	4%
Upper Bann	2,949	6%
West Tyrone	2,957	6%
Total	49,064	

Appendix 3: Number of Pupils and Free School Meals Entitlement In West Belfast (2013-2014)

Number of pupils and Free School Meals Entitlement in West Belfast (Post-Primary). Data accessed from Northern Ireland Statistics and research agency.			
School Name	Number of Pupils	Number of Pupils entitled to Free School Meals	% of Pupils entitled to Free School Meals
St Louise's Comprehensive College	1516	563	37.1
St Rose's Dominican College	352	183	52.0
Christian Brothers' School	490	236	48.2
St Genevieve's High School	1078	409	37.9
De La Salle College	1093	345	31.6
Corpus Christi College	413	247	59.8
Coláiste Feirste	564	225	39.9
St Mary's Christian Brothers' Grammar School	1,208	267	22.1
St Dominic's High School	1,022	149	14.6
St Colm's High School	566	314	55.5

Appendix 3: Number of Pupils and Free School Meals Entitlement In West Belfast (2013-2014)

Number of pupils and Free School Meals Entitlement in West Belfast (Primary): 2013–2014. Data accessed from Northern Ireland Statistics and research agency.			
School Name	Number of Pupils	Number of pupils entitled to Free school meals	% of pupils entitled to Free school meals
Forth River Primary School	209	86	41.1%
Springfield Primary School	142	79	55.6%
Springhill Primary School	174	82	47.1%
Blackmountain Primary School	153	108	70.6%
Malvern Primary School	112	87	77.7%
Harmony Primary School	224	156	69.6%
St Mary's Primary School	134	108	80.6%
St Kevin's Primary School	528	349	66.1%
Holy Child Primary School	531	239	45.0%
St Teresa's Primary School	442	199	45.0%
St Oliver Plunkett Primary School	614	362	59.0%
St Peter's Primary School	275	224	81.5%
St Joseph's Primary School	200	137	68.5%
Holy Trinity Primary School	654	453	69.3%
St Paul's Primary School	299	226	75.6%
St Clare's Primary School	460	312	67.8%
St John the Baptist Primary School	406	176	43.3%
John Paul II Primary School	260	230	88.5%
Bunscoil Phobal Feirste	294	107	36.4%
Gaelscoil Na bhFal	187	103	55.1%
Bunscoil An tSléibhe Dhuibh	179	105	58.7%
Gaelscoil na Mona	94	73	77.7%
Gaelscoil an Lonnain	49	44	89.8%
St Luke's Primary School	208	157	75.5%
St Mark's Primary School	381	241	63.3%
The Good Shepherd Primary School	314	230	73.2%
St Kieran's Primary School	371	311	83.8%
Our Lady Queen of Peace Primary School	404	71	17.6%
Christ the Redeemer Primary School	624	307	49.2%
Scoil na Fuiseoige	115	71	61.7%

Appendix 4: Number of Pupils and Free School Meals Entitlement In Northern Ireland (2013-2014)

Number of pupils and Free School Meals Entitlement in Northern Ireland (Primary: 2013–2014). Data accessed from Northern Ireland Statistics and research agency.	
Area	All
Northern Ireland	53,195
Belfast East	2,365
Belfast North	4,860
Belfast South	2,165
Belfast West	5,655
East Antrim	1,790
East Londonderry	2,755
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	2,805
Foyle	4,880
Lagan Valley	1,860
Mid Ulster	2,820
Newry and Armagh	3,680
North Antrim	2,525
North Down	1,560
South Antrim	2,005
South Down	2,965
Strangford	1,750
Upper Bann	3,525
West Tyrone	3,170

Area Learning Communities in West Belfast are an excellent example of how partnerships of schools and community services can provide the conditions in which people can learn from each other, can jointly find ways to effectively develop and implement solutions to local problems and build the capacity to respond to changing circumstances.

The EU-funded study on ‘polycentric inspections of networks of schools’ analyses how inspection can develop effective methods of ‘polycentric inspections’ that are fit for a more localized and decentralized context of networks of schools.

The case study in West Belfast provides examples of how ‘polycentric inspections’ can work in practice. A well organised network supported and guided by inspection can bring together a range of educational stakeholders and the wider community, not just schools, to drive improvement. This research project on ‘polycentric inspections of networks of schools’ captures the impact of this approach on sharing resources, curriculum development, teacher professional development and network capacity building. It is clear that this approach can generate solutions to problems which could not have been tackled by any one organisation acting alone.

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