

**Improving learning through whole-school evaluation:  
moving towards a model of internal evaluation in Irish  
post-primary schools**

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## Glossary of abbreviations

ASTI	Association of secondary teachers in Ireland
CPD	Continuous professional development
CSEP	Cooperative school evaluation project
DEIS	Delivering equality of opportunity in schools
DRIP	Data rich information poor
EPSEN	Education for people with special educational need
ESSE	Effective school self-evaluation
I(C)T	Information (and communication) technology
JCSP	Junior certificate school programme
LAOS	Looking at our school
LCA	Leaving certificate applied
LCVP	Leaving certificate vocational programme
LDS	Leadership development for schools
LEA	Local education authority (England)
NCCA	National council for curriculum and assessment
PE	Physical education
PISA	Programme for international student assessment
PLC	Professional learning community
SDP	School development planning
SDPI	School development planning initiative
TUI	Teachers' union of Ireland
TY	Transition year
VEC	Vocational education committee
WSE	Whole-school evaluation

## **Abstract**

This study explores the concept of school evaluation and in particular how the Irish education system and post-primary schools can successfully move from a centrally controlled system of evaluation to a model based on school self-evaluation. Within a context of increasing interest in school evaluation nationally and internationally, the relationship between evaluation, decentralised decision making and increased school autonomy is discussed. The purpose of evaluation and its importance in fulfilling accountability and improvement needs is acknowledged. The impact of the introduction of whole-school evaluation (WSE), as a model of external evaluation, on schools whose quality assurance heretofore was assessed predominantly through state examinations is investigated. The formal introduction of internal evaluation to schools in Ireland, advanced through recent social partnership agreements, anticipates that schools will assess their teaching and learning practices through the use of a specific framework. The extent to which post-primary schools engage in internal evaluation and the support required to enhance this is examined.

The experience of key personnel in the Irish education system was explored to increase knowledge and gain deeper understanding of school evaluation and its impact on the quality of education provided. Reflections and insights of inspectors who take responsibility for external evaluation, of support service personnel who provide support for school leadership and for school development planning, and of principals of post-primary schools were obtained through the use of focus groups. Their views were analysed using a number of themes. In particular, the role of evaluation in creating schools as learning organisations was investigated. The absence of teachers' voices in particular, and of students' and parents' voices, is acknowledged as a limitation in the study.

Results of the research indicate that support provided to assist schools to engage in school development planning, combined with the experience, support and pressure of external WSE, has laid the foundation for the introduction of internal evaluation. Collaborative improvement processes have been initiated, on which internal evaluation can be based. While aspects of external evaluation are criticised, there is general acceptance that a model that balances external and internal evaluation is desirable. The need for clear guidelines and appropriate support is stressed. Crucially, the model of internal evaluation proposed is one of reflection and inquiry, using suitable benchmarks and data, and taking account of context to ensure that evaluation assists schools in becoming learning organisations.

## Introduction

Evaluation has become an important aspect of education in a number of countries in recent years. Increased interest in evaluation internationally is rooted in reform efforts and in a desire to improve the quality of education provided in schools. Within the context of decentralisation of decision-making and increased levels of autonomy given to schools, greater attention is paid to quality assurance (Maslowski et al 2007). Consistent with international trends, the role and function of evaluation in Irish schools has been the subject of much debate since the work of the Inspectorate was put on a statutory basis through the Education Act (1998). This debate has been of particular interest to the researcher, having trained as a school self-evaluation trainer (1994) and provided support for school self-evaluation to principals and teachers in primary schools. Subsequently appointed to the team charged with establishing the school development planning support service (1999), interest in school evaluation continued. Advances in the evaluation system remained a professional interest when appointed to the Inspectorate in 2000. They have become a crucial aspect of work in the currently-held position of assistant chief inspector and member of the senior management group of the Irish Inspectorate. The development of new models of evaluation and their successful implementation to ensure quality education in schools is of particular interest. As new models of evaluation have been developed and as external evaluation in post-primary schools has been formally introduced, it is pertinent to conduct research at this level. The thesis will explore the context in which debate and changes in evaluation practices are occurring, with particular reference to autonomy and change in the Irish post-primary sector.

As greater autonomy is afforded to schools, it is expected that individual schools will accept greater responsibility for the quality of education they provide. While evaluation within schools and classrooms has always existed, it has been limited to assessment of students (Nevo 2002). Evaluating the quality of education provision on a whole-school basis in Irish primary schools has traditionally been through inspection, an external mechanism with a focus on compliance and on standards. Quality at post-primary level in recent years has been determined through the state examinations. At both levels, inspectors served a quality control function and the work of schools was subjected to scrutiny. Across many countries, a change from quality control to quality assurance can be detected. In order to focus on quality assurance, an ongoing process of monitoring is required. In some countries including Ireland, this has led to a change in evaluation

practice. While external evaluation on a whole-school basis has been reintroduced to post-primary schools, schools are also expected to engage in internal evaluation on a continual basis. The experience of external evaluation in schools and the extent to which schools engage in meaningful school self-evaluation will be investigated in this study. In particular, the impact of external evaluation on schools and the capacity of Irish post-primary schools to play a quality assurance role are examined.

The role of external and internal evaluation in ensuring quality in the education system cannot be determined unless clarity exists about the purpose of evaluation. It is apparent that evaluation is founded on covert and explicit values and that it serves multiple purposes, which must be clear and honest in relation to who it is for and who will benefit from it (MacBeath 1999). The multiple purposes of evaluation can be broadly grouped into two main purposes: accountability and school improvement. Many types of accountability, ranging from bureaucratic and contractual to professional and responsible have been identified. A number of concepts relating to school improvement, such as school effectiveness and organisational learning exist. The range of accountability purposes and the variety of perspectives on school improvement available in the literature and the role played by evaluation in ensuring accountability and ongoing school improvement in Irish post-primary schools will be reviewed in this thesis. In particular, the influence of evaluation on continuous learning through the concept of schools as learning organisations (Senge 2006) will be investigated. The study will identify characteristics associated with schools as learning organisations and will establish how evaluation practice in the Irish context assists schools in developing them.

Establishing the purpose of evaluation cannot be separated from the purpose of schooling and of schools. The concept of schooling and the reason for the establishment of education systems relate to a country's understanding of education and its function in society. While this debate begins with ancient philosophers, it has been extended by sociologists and is a complex issue, which will become only a minor part of this thesis. However, establishing current views about the purpose of schooling, and exploring the degree of consistency of thinking in this regard will enable the development of insights into the expectations of partners in education about the possible outcomes of education provided in schools. This insight will be useful in deciding, through evaluation, if schools are achieving both system and school goals



successfully. It should also assist in bringing clarity to the purpose and focus of evaluation.

As the purpose of school evaluation is clarified, the role of the system and external evaluation and that of schools needs to be established. Structures are required to make explicit the balance between external and internal evaluation. Willingness on the part of schools to embrace internal evaluation and structures to support them in developing competence are needed. It requires: a level of trust between the system and schools and among participants in school communities; support to ensure that schools are capable of engaging in internal evaluation; and pressure from sources such as parents, state examinations and external evaluation (MacBeath 1999). In the Irish context, the structures and supports need to take account of the range of school types at post-primary level. These include secondary, vocational and comprehensive schools. While each of these provides the prescribed courses to enable students to take the state examinations and are subject to inspection by the Department of Education and Science, they differ in origin and governance.

Voluntary secondary schools, which educate about fifty three percent of students, are privately owned and managed. Many were founded by religious groups and the vast majority are managed by a board of management appointed by patrons or trustees, with a very small minority having either a board of governors or a single manager. Traditionally they provided an academic type of education but in recent years they also teach technical and practical subjects. Ninety-two percent of voluntary secondary schools participate in the free education scheme and receive allowances and capitation grants as well as over ninety-five percent of teachers' salaries from the state.

Vocational schools and community colleges educate thirty-four percent of students and are administered by Vocational Education Committees (VEC), which are statutory bodies set up under the Vocational Education Act 1930 (and amended). The state provides up to ninety-three percent of the total cost of provision, while the balance is generated by the committees. Vocational schools were established, in the main, to develop manual skills and to prepare young people for trades. However, they now provide the full range of second level courses.

Comprehensive schools are entirely financed by the Department of Education and Science and combine academic and vocational subjects in a wide curriculum. They are managed by a board of management representative of the diocesan religious authority, the Vocational Education Committee of the area and the Minister for Education and Science. Community schools offer a broad range of subjects embracing practical and academic subjects and are funded completely by the state through the Department of Education and Science. They are managed by a board of management representative of local interests (Department of Education and Science 2009). Students in all schools follow the same curriculum and sit the same state examinations. While each type of school has access to national support services, some VECs provide additional support for their schools.

Teachers in Ireland are highly unionised with ninety-one per cent of post-primary teachers belonging to a teacher's union (LDS 2007). Two unions represent post-primary teachers. The Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) represents teachers in voluntary secondary schools and in some community and comprehensive schools. The Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) represents teachers in vocational schools and in some community and comprehensive schools. Many school principals are also members of these unions. Teachers' unions play a significant role in Irish education. Besides negotiating on issues of working conditions and pay, they have been involved in discussions relating to change and development in many aspects of the education system, including evaluation.

Changes envisioned in recent social partnership agreements with teachers require schools to engage in self-evaluation. The role of the system in ensuring that this change is successfully executed and that public confidence in the education system is maintained, and the role of various members of the school community in establishing effective school self-evaluation practices and procedures merits attention. The thesis will examine the variety of approaches to balancing external and internal evaluation outlined in the literature and will explore how the Irish system could move in this direction with a view to enriching understanding of how school self-evaluation can be successfully introduced.

The concept of evaluation and in particular how the Irish system and post-primary schools can successfully move from a centrally controlled system of evaluation to a

model based on school self-evaluation is the main theme of this thesis. In order to develop a theoretical framework for the research, Chapter one provides a review of relevant literature related to evaluation. Section one of the literature review outlines the context and purpose of school evaluation, examines the accountability and improvement purposes, and relates these to the perceived purpose of schooling. Section two examines literature concerning the impact of external evaluation on schools and emerging models of internal evaluation, along with the important role played by trust in evaluation. Section three reviews the growth of evaluation in the Irish context with particular reference to the post-primary school sector. Chapter two describes the methodology used in the research. Focus group research was used to elicit the experience of and insights into evaluation of key personnel in the Irish post-primary education sector. The findings from each of four groups, inspectors, members of Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) who support school leaders, and of the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) and principals of schools, are outlined in Chapters three, four, five and six. Chapter seven contains discussion on the findings, organised in four major themes: autonomy, standards, responsibility and learning organisations. From these findings, conclusions and recommendations arising from the research are drawn and suggestions for further research are made.

# Chapter 1 Literature review

## The purpose of school evaluation

### 1.1 Introduction

The importance attached to the evaluation of schools is apparent in the attention paid in literature and discussion to the issue in education systems in many countries. Evaluation of schools is undertaken essentially to ensure the provision of quality education. The level of interest in this topic has increased in recent years as greater autonomy has been afforded to schools. The context in which this increased interest has occurred is explored in this section.

School evaluation can take many forms and serve a variety of purposes. These depend on the particular interest of those engaging in the evaluation. In order to gain a deeper understanding of evaluation and its purpose and how this might influence the nature of evaluation activity, this section explores the literature related to the various purposes of evaluation. Particular attention is paid to accountability, to school improvement and to learning organisation theories as these theories play a significant role in determining the focus and the nature of evaluation systems.

### 1.2 Evaluation in context

Heightened awareness of and interest in evaluation has coincided with the introduction of certain levels of autonomy to schools throughout Europe in the 1990s. Schools are autonomous in several different aspects of management, and to varying degrees. They may be fully responsible for decision-making through legislation, or autonomy may be implied through the absence of rules and regulations (Eurydice 2007). A number of reasons for educational decentralisation leading to greater school autonomy are exposed in educational literature. These include financial motives and restoring the legitimacy of politics and institutions through the redistribution of power to local actors (Maslowski et al 2007). Providing greater autonomy is believed to increase the commitment of local actors and stimulate educational innovation tailored to local needs, both of students and of employers. Maslowski et al conclude that ultimately this leads to the provision of better quality education and that schools with greater autonomy in the personnel management domain tend to have higher literacy scores for students. Sun et al (2007) describe the centralisation or decentralisation of decision-making in terms of the distribution of power within organisations or social systems. For

them functional decentralisation concerns detailing which functions are decentralised, to what degree, for what purpose and to what effect enabling systems to decentralise certain domains and centralise others. England and Wales is cited as an example where decentralisation in the financial, personnel and instructional domains were accompanied by the centralisation of national goals, curriculum and standardised testing. Sun et al (2007) maintain that school autonomy will make monitoring of system-wide goals concerning performance standards more difficult and therefore they see common standards as a prerequisite for quality control and coordination between levels of schooling. They view an appropriate balance between centralisation and decentralisation as essential to effective functioning of the government. Literature reveals a number of areas where autonomy is desirable and where it is not. It is maintained that individual schools require a certain degree of autonomy, of freedom of action to turn into a 'good school' (Winter 2000). Citing examples of schools in Germany, Winter maintains that providing autonomy in staff development enabled schools to engage in whole-school innovation to change pedagogy. However, the granting of autonomy, as a market-place model where schools would become service enterprises offering value for money, is not considered acceptable. He believes "a democratic society should grant the individual school maximum pedagogical autonomy, but not relinquish responsibility for the best possible school provision for its younger generation" (p82).

The issue of evaluation and its relationship to autonomy in schools has received a degree of attention. Some authors have linked the increased focus on evaluation to a neo-liberal agenda or to the concept of 'new public management' where aspects of school management and responsibility are decentralised giving schools greater autonomy (MacNamara and O Hara 2008; Johannesson et al 2002). Johannesson et al (2002) maintain that the neo-liberal education policy has dominated education discourse internationally and has had an impact on practices of governance. The influence of this policy on school governance in Finland, Iceland and Sweden, they argue, is evident in the fact that: decentralisation has moved the responsibility for compulsory schooling to municipalities and schools; deregulation means that goal setting and school-based self-evaluation have become the norm; and managerialism has led to principals being seen as business managers with full responsibility for the school as an enterprise. Parental choice, privatisation, school autonomy, competition and performativity have been introduced to some extent in each of the three countries.

School-based self-evaluation, while not in itself a symptom of the neo-liberal policy epidemic, is seen as an accountability mechanism linked to financial devices. Dunford (2003) contends that in England in the 1980s and 1990s schools were seen as producers and providers of education, and parents, as consumers of education, were encouraged to choose the best school for their children. He argues that the culture of accountability in the public sector led to an unending stream of legislation, instructions and guidance for institutions requiring conformity to procedures and protocols and success in reaching targets. A move towards the marketisation of schools is evident in parts of Germany where new institutions such as the Institute for Quality Development was founded in Hesse in 2005 to bring the principle of independence with responsibility to schools (Schreier 2005). In this context the focus was on establishing quality-oriented goals, devising instruments for fixing standards, developing assessment concepts and accreditation for improving market transparency, offering external assessment of school management and helping schools take on responsibility for their actions. In reviewing research on school-based management and school autonomy Maslowski et al (2007), referred to above, cite authors who maintain

that decentralization will only work if it is accompanied by developing the capacity of schools and communities to pursue and sustain improvement at the local level. Moreover, a rigorous external accountability system must be established that forces schools to pay close attention to standards and performance, as well as access to innovations by schools. (p307)

The ‘hype’ concerning school-bound curriculum development, the development of school programmes by schools, self-evaluation and quality management by schools across Europe is based on philosophies of ‘relative autonomous schools’ according to van Bruggen (2000). He explains the move towards external evaluation as resulting, not from increased decentralisation of decision-making but from the slow progress made in improving schools by other means: first by enhancing inputs, second by strengthening output control and finally by endeavouring to empower schools by enabling them to take ownership of innovation. Evaluation is seen in this context as a means of assisting schools to improve. MacBeath (1999) reminds us that evaluation always has a political agenda as “evaluation is a motivated behaviour” whose purpose is “rarely without prejudice” (p5) and he acknowledges the political agenda served by Ofsted in England. He explains that the audience, the public at large, is crucial in evaluation and schools need to put a “political spin” on their story to counter performance tables in order to

remain competitive in the free market. However, while awareness of the political context is crucial for schools, “it is not the guiding precept” (p5) as evaluation has other purposes.

It is apparent that the redistribution of power in a number of domains from central government to schools, whether for the purpose of managerialism and formalised checking of standards or to assist in school improvement, is linked to increased interest in school evaluation. It is also clear that evaluation serves a political agenda. However, evaluation serves a variety of purposes, which have been debated and contested. These purposes will be explored to gain a deeper knowledge of how evaluation can benefit education systems and individual schools.

### **1.3 Purpose of evaluation**

It is apparent from the literature that the purpose of evaluation needs to be clearly understood by all those involved in the process. Nevo (2002) explains that since the early sixties, much progress has been made in defining the meaning and function of educational evaluation, mostly within the context of curriculum development. However, he notes that many of the concepts and practices related to evaluation did not reach schools and classrooms. Therefore, the purpose of evaluation discussed in this section is gleaned from the literature related to school inspection.

According to van Bruggen (2000) the concept of inspection of schools has been developed in many European countries as an instrument to generate discussion about indicators and criteria for what constitutes good schools. In his view, real improvement through self-evaluation entails a lot of work, is difficult and can be threatening. External evaluation can stimulate development by confronting schools with an independent judgement, which invites reactions. It can also check compliance and request that results are taken seriously and acted upon. The goal of inspectorates, he notes, is to stimulate improvement by identifying weak points and analysing causes. A further purpose of inspection is noted in a report of the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI). This report indicates that in order to reach the European Union’s strategic target for 2010 to be the most competitive, dynamic and knowledge-based economy in the world requires a modernisation of the educational system in Europe (Webb cited in SICI report 2005). This will require national inspectorates to encourage transparency, quality evaluation and self-evaluation. The

idea behind inspection, Webb stresses, is not just to control using a checklist, but also to enhance quality assurance focusing on what educational institutions achieve. He notes the importance of school self-evaluation but stresses that it does not exist in a vacuum but in a context where external support and benchmarks are available. The importance of balancing the different perspectives of quality assurance is noted by Thune (cited in SICI 2005). Politicians may view quality assurance as a way to prove education is providing value for money; for professionals quality assurance may focus on how to do things better in schools; and for stakeholders it may be a means of providing transparency and of knowing which schools to choose. These three perspectives, accountability, improvement and transparency need to be balanced to ensure a focus on processes and outputs of the work of schools. Ehren and Visscher (2006) assert that evaluation serves improvement and accountability agendas, since being accountable implies that some improving action will follow. MacBeath (1999) provides five purposes for evaluation, besides the political purpose. The accountability purpose satisfies parents and the public that taxpayers' money is used wisely and children's lives and future are considered. The professional development purpose ensures that pupils' learning is enhanced through meeting the needs of teachers within the context of the school. The organisational development purpose is based on the concept that the capacity of individual pupil and teacher is multiplied in social settings where quality discourse enables people to learn from one another. He stresses that gathering information to help decision-making, as part of the evaluation process, is "where knowledge creation begins" (p7). The improvement of teaching purpose, involving self-evaluation in the classroom, is an ongoing exploration of teaching that welcomes the insights that other perspectives can bring. The final purpose is the improvement of learning and this, along with the assessment of the value of the learning, is considered by MacBeath to be the most important purpose of evaluation. He maintains that learning will improve when teachers have the tools and grasp the meaning of being learners; schools will improve when they provide opportunities and time for teachers to share with one another; and the system will improve when schools are enabled to learn from one another.

The purpose of evaluation varies from country to country and determines, at least to some extent, the role played by external evaluators in the process. Matthews and Sammons (2004) distinguish between the statutory roles of inspectors in a number of European countries. The purpose of Ofsted inspections in England is to appraise and



evaluate the quality and standards of education in schools in an objective manner (Earley 1998 p2). Matthews and Sammons (2004) explain that Ofsted inspectors have no statutory remit in relation to improvement although they adopted the phrase 'improvement through inspection' as their logo. Their role is that of detached and independent external evaluators. In France, on the other hand, inspectors carry out performance assessment on all teachers, while in the Netherlands, inspectors have two specific duties – to guarantee that schools meet certain minimum requirements and to urge schools to improve the quality of education. Inspectors in the Netherlands, therefore follow up each school annually to check on progress and to intervene if necessary to ensure improvement (Matthews and Sammons 2004). In Ireland the functions of inspectors is outlined in the Education Act (1998) and include evaluating, assessing and reporting to the Minister on the quality and effectiveness of education and the standards reached in schools (section 13).

Ouston and Davies (1998) maintain that the conflict between inspection for accountability and inspection for development can be seen in schools' preparation for inspection. Some schools, they claim, perceive inspection as audit, as a free consultancy, leading to development while others that consider themselves to be at risk of failure or closure view inspection as accountability. Earley et al (1996) pose a number of questions in relation to inspection and school improvement. Among others, they wonder: whether the twin aims of inspection for public accountability and school development can sit comfortably side by side; under what conditions inspection is sufficient in itself to promote improvement; and how might feedback be best utilised?

A report on evaluation from the European Union suggests that

the judgement formed during evaluation (has) a different connotation depending on whether it relates to norms and standards that should be respected, means or processes that should be adopted, or outcomes that should be secured. (Eurydice 2004 p130)

In the case of the norm or standard the judgement relates to compliance, a process judgement is less straightforward, relating to teaching and learning in accordance with particular criteria, and an outcome judgement is concerned with what has or has not been achieved. The report infers that judgements related to norms and outcomes expect compliance and fit into an accountability category while those related to processes will result in advice about change and are part of the improvement agenda.

A number of divergent purposes for school evaluation are identified in the literature. Besides the political and market place agenda, which are implicit in all evaluations, two broad purposes are deemed to be served by evaluation: accountability and improvement. The accountability and the improvement agenda merit further examination, as they are likely to influence the nature of evaluation and its impact on the schools being evaluated.

#### **1.4 The accountability agenda**

The concept of accountability has been defined in terms of responsibility (Davis and White 2001), relationships (Adams and Hill 2006) and actions (Darling-Hammond 2004) and has different connotations in different studies (Leung 2005). Approaches to accountability relate to how the concept is defined, and the relationship between accountability and standards and measurements is the focus of much attention (Scriven 1991, Sirotnik 2002, Darling-Hammond 2004, Gunzenhauser 2006).

Scriven (1991) defines accountability as “responsibility for the justification of expenditure, decisions, or results of one’s own efforts” (p46). He asserts that teachers should be accountable for their salaries, expenditures and time or for the achievement of their pupils, or for both. Accountability therefore requires a cost-effectiveness evaluation where it is possible not only to explain how money is spent but also to justify this in terms of results achieved. Teachers cannot be wholly responsible for results achieved as other factors contribute to these scores. However, they can be appropriately accountable for the difference in learning gains of one set of pupils against the gains of another similar set taught by other teachers. The less specific the work is, the more difficult it is to create valid measurements. Measurement processes therefore need to be carefully selected and applied to ensure that educational accountability can be enforced in an equitable way.

Davis and White (2001) view accountability in children’s education as holding those responsible for education to account, checking that they are doing a good job and indicating short falls. It involves democratic checks that children are receiving basic education, learning what is necessary for them to become good citizens, and determines that those providing the education are answerable for this. Accountability applies to all those who provide education and this includes parents, schools and government. The accountability of parents, in their view, has not yet been sufficiently discussed but

might involve teaching children the rudiments of language, initiating them into their culture, working in partnership with schools or controlling their access to television and computers. Although governments might set the agenda for schools' accountability with concentration on performance in tests and examinations, class size, and teacher recruitment, there may not be agreement on these as good indicators. Governments, they feel, should have responsibility for providing the necessary resources for learning and for financial prudence in this provision.

A number of forms of accountability have been described in the literature. The conflict between contractual accountability and professional accountability has led to a widening of approaches according to Leung (2005) who credits Leithwood with bringing clarity to the concept by categorising current accountability policies into four basic approaches: the market competition approaches; the decentralisation of decision-making approaches; the professional approaches; and the management approaches, including bureaucratic and contractual accountability.

A number of accountability frameworks that have influenced US education policy are identified in the literature. Bureaucratic, legal, professional, political, ethical and market place frameworks are considered (Darling-Hammond 2004; Adams and Hill 2006). One view of accountability is in terms of relationships and involves asking the question "Who is responsible to whom for what?" (Adams and Hill 2006 p218). **Bureaucratic** accountability emphasises relationships between superiors and subordinates. **Legal** accountability distinguishes between those who make policy and those who implement it. **Professional** accountability makes a distinction between the experts and those without expertise or the 'lay person'. **Political** accountability guides relationships between representatives and constituents. **Ethical** accountability concerns relationships between individuals or between groups and individuals. A regulated **market** model of accountability requires four sets of conditions: conditions related to accountability functions; market structure; regulatory boundaries; and investments in educational capacity.

Another view, to broaden the standards-based system measured by testing, is in terms of actions of policy makers to produce higher levels of learning for students and to address shortcomings in opportunities to learn (Darling-Hammond 2004). **Political** accountability is where legislators and school board members stand for election and

answer for their decisions. **Legal** accountability ensures that schools operate within legislation and citizens can seek the judgement of courts about complaints or violations. **Bureaucratic** accountability relates to schooling taking place in accordance with procedures set down through rules and regulations determined by the state. **Professional** accountability demands that teachers and other staff acquire specialist knowledge, meet agreed standards for entry and uphold professional practice. **Market** accountability determines that parents and students can make choices about schools or courses that are most appropriate for them. Darling-Hammond (2004) sets out the merits and limits of each and asserts that no one form of accountability operates alone in public life. Legal and bureaucratic strategies have dominated public school systems in the US for the last 20 years, focusing on standardised procedures, prescribed curriculum and test-based accountability. She contends that genuine accountability involves “supporting changes in teaching and schooling that can heighten the probability that students meet standards” (p1078). This requires systemic school reform in how teachers are hired, retained, prepared and supported to develop high quality teaching. It involves attention to three major areas: teachers’ knowledge and skills; school structures that support quality teaching and learning; and creating processes for school assessment to evaluate students’ opportunities to learn and to provide leverage for continuous change and improvement. While accepting the importance of using test data to provide relevant, timely, valid and useful information, she stresses that it is not an accountability system in itself. It only becomes part of accountability when processes exist for interpreting and acting on the information in educationally productive ways. She concludes that issues of standards and accountability cannot be separated from issues of teaching and learning, assessment, school organisation, professional development and funding.

Although working in the business world, Ray and Elder (2007) have suggested a system of horizontal accountability, as opposed to vertical accountability in organisations. They describe vertical accountability as tending to ensure compliance rather than commitment and goal focus. They maintain that vertical accountability does little to address the flow of communication and interaction among those who do the work. On the other hand, horizontal accountability is defined as “the degree to which people communicate across the organisation, problem solve with all employees and teams, and build accountability for superior outcomes” (p1). They assert that horizontal accountability creates trust among employees and management. It facilitates efficient

problem solving and goal achievement and tends to bring loyalty among the workforce, to management, to each other and to the goals of the group. It teaches team members to assume high levels of responsibility for goals and performance.

The concept of responsibility at work has been explored by Gardner (2007) and others in the Good Work Project. In this work, the classical view of a profession is described as one that “entails a commitment to act as a responsible worker” (p4). Responsibility is explained as being more than a contractual obligation. It is viewed as deriving from the notion of responding to a call or vocation, which brings with it a duty to do excellent work but also requires individuals to care about something (Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura 2007). Gardner concludes that the teaching profession has a strong sense of responsibility because individuals are willing to take on the responsibilities that they deem to be important, whether or not support is available from others. The work of Sirotnik (2002) draws attention to the development of responsible accountability systems. In criticising the US high-stakes testing form of accountability he proposes ideas that are consistent with a set of beliefs about good teaching and learning and the educational needs of all students and their families. These beliefs are based on the view of public education as a moral endeavour that plays a vital role in educating people to fulfil multiple roles in social and democratic society. Government and the public have a right to a responsible accountability system, which ensures that all those involved want to do the right thing even if they do not always know how, distributes resources in an equitable manner and puts responsibility at the core of accountability. Distinguishing between assessment and accountability, he suggests that accountability entails making judgements based on the information collected from assessment. Professional judgements are made using multiple indicators that are sensitive to the needs of individuals and the complexities of schooling, including contextual conditions, school processes and outcomes of teaching and learning. Sirotnik notes that a responsible accountability system must be built on trust and goodwill and he cautions that responsible accountability systems will take time and require a long-term focus. The model of accountability is formative and it envisages an “ecology of accountability” operating simultaneously on two fronts: the day-to-day improvement efforts in schools and the demand that the political infrastructure alters its priorities and invests resources where they are most needed. The model might involve auditing processes that include: the development of the processes in collaboration with educators and their communities; basing the audit on site visits by teams of professionals and

representatives of the public using case study methods; focusing on the school's community and on teaching and learning, conditions and circumstances, goals and assessment and on the school's own information on how it is serving students and how well it is doing.

The implications of the accountability context for school leaders are explored by Leithwood (2001). He uses the four-fold classification of educational accountability approaches already referred to: market, decentralisation, professional and management. Market approaches increase competition among schools for students by allowing school choice, altering the basis for funding or ranking schools on the basis of student achievement. School leaders need marketing and entrepreneurial skills in such competitive environments. However, market approaches are highly inequitable. If equity is strongly valued, leaders need the ability to market schools in ways that students from all family backgrounds have access. Decentralisation of decision-making approaches to accountability gives rise to site-based management and places curriculum, budget and personnel in the hands of parents and the community. Sometimes it is rooted in new managerialism, which emphasises decentralisation, deregulation and delegation and is influenced by policies that create more cost effective and efficient school administrative structures. In this approach the school leader's task is to empower those with newly found voices, usually parents and teachers. They become members of teams and help others make defensible decisions. The school leader is the keeper of the process. In practice, it places increased emphasis on budgets, is demanding on time and leads to less attention being paid to curriculum and instructional leadership. Research suggests that site-based approaches to accountability have made disappointing contributions to school improvement. Professional approaches to accountability have produced two separate strategies: professional control increases the power of teachers but also holds them more directly accountable and a standards approach emphasises heavy control of entry to the profession by government with subsequent monitoring handed over to the profession itself. In these approaches school leaders need to keep abreast of best professional practice and to assist staff in identifying professional standards for their work. They need to set expectations and create conditions for professional growth. This approach to accountability and school improvement is severely limited by its focus on the capacities of individual professionals, as it is the collective effort of professionals that has a significant impact on student learning. Fostering learning communities and transformational leadership

practices are associated with this approach. Management approaches to accountability include systematic efforts to create more goal-oriented, efficient and effective schools through rational procedures. It assumes that strategic, school improvement and school development planning and monitoring progress will improve schools. Principals are expected to be strategic managers, interpreting systematically collected data and developing improvement goals with staff. They establish a culture of inquiry and reflection, with a commitment to collaborative planning with a focus on student learning. This can lead to a narrowing of curriculum and minimising individual differences while focusing on test preparation.

In summary, accountability research highlights the requirements of accountability in education in terms of cost effectiveness and the achievement of results. It holds governments and policy makers, teachers and, to a lesser extent parents, accountable. It identifies approaches to accountability related to compliance and bureaucratic issues and approaches leading towards development. While it is accepted that measurement processes are required for accountability, the narrow view of high-stakes accountability based on testing is contested. A broader view of accountability, based on trust and goodwill and on including school communities in the process, is emerging. This view envisages a formative accountability system that will operate on two fronts: the improvement efforts in schools, to include the professional development of teachers and the willingness of political systems to invest resources where they are most needed.

School evaluation serves an accountability purpose, which requires decisions to be made about standards, about what to measure and about how to measure. Formative accountability requires systems to work with schools in an ongoing process of development to enhance standards. This ongoing development of standards in schools is a goal of school improvement. The process of school improvement, documented in a wide range of research, is examined to determine how it is linked to school evaluation.

## **1.5 The school-improvement agenda**

### ***The concept of school improvement***

School improvement and school effectiveness have received much attention in educational literature. School improvement theory was based on the assumption that the school was the centre of change and that internal conditions were a key focus in accomplishing educational goals more effectively (Gray et al 1999). School

effectiveness theory confirmed that schools can make a difference to the life chances of students but cannot compensate for society, that children experience schools differently and that school effects are complex and multi-layered with aspects within schools also having different effects on students (MacBeath and Mortimore 2001). While the concepts developed separately, a merging of thinking led to the *Improving School Effectiveness Project* in the 1990s. This project aimed to create a valid means of judging performance in schools, taking account of different intakes, and to gain an understanding of the processes that take place in different schools. The importance of three factors emerged from one aspect of the project: leadership and management, academic expectations and clarity of standards (Robertson and Toal 2001).

A school's capacity to change, with an expectation of teachers' engaging in continuous learning, for the purpose of enhancing pupil learning, is viewed as being at the heart of school improvement (Joyce et al 1999; Robertson and Toal 2001). The amount of value added to the attainment level of students generated by schools is another important aspect of school improvement (Creemers 1997; Gray et al 1999). Improvement activities should therefore focus on student achievement and classroom and organisational conditions that support this. Three routes to improvement are identified: the tactics route focusing on outcomes; the strategic thinking route focusing on responding to challenges and weaknesses; and the capacity building route attempting to institutionalise the concept of the learning organisation (Gray et al 1999). The importance of having sufficient data available to determine that schools have changed is highlighted. The choice of measures used to evaluate performance is considered vital and should relate to three aspects of the school: outcomes such as changes in knowledge and attitude that measure effect; processes or the activities carried out that measure effort; and structures that measure the capacity to perform the work (1997).

School improvement practice has been contested in spite of the belief that it plays a vital role in transforming schools. Lodge and Reed (2003) stress the importance of being aware of a discourse that relates school improvement to undesirable features such as seeing the school as a "hermetically sealed environment, having little interaction with its immediate context, let alone as a part of a complex and shifting world" (p36). This limits school improvement to immediate, narrowly defined and incremental changes. They argue that school improvement needs to take a longer view that meets the needs of the future of young people, a wider view that considers the context in



which teachers and schools are working and a deeper view that focuses on learning. They maintain that attention must be paid to young people's experience of learning more than to their performance. They investigate three interrelated themes which require attention if school improvement is not to lose its emancipatory and transformative possibilities: the context of rapid change in which education systems, schooling and school improvement occurs; the need for these to evolve in response to the changes; and the need to focus on learning to contribute to a more sustainable future for school communities. They conclude that school improvement should take account of: the compression and disintegration of aspects of our world and of schools as holistic and systemic organisations; and the interconnectedness of schools to their local and national contexts. This demands learning that is emancipatory and that encourages lifelong personal and social experiences that involve creativity, risk and challenge. They believe it is people, personally and collectively, who are the most important transformational element of change.

### ***The school as a learning organisation***

The need to focus on continuous learning is a feature of much school improvement literature. The learning organisation concept

functions as the guiding vision for an organisation as a living organism with an open, powerful learning environment which inspires, facilitates, and empowers the learning of its members to enhance its capacity to change. (Sun et al 2007 p98)

The concept of a learning organisation requires us to think about schools as open systems dependent on the external environment but with boundaries that differentiate them from one another (Hanna 1997). An important point to note from the literature is that organisations can learn only through individuals who learn (Senge 2006). Senge associates five disciplines with organisational learning, and he claims that they must operate at both individual and organisational level. Personal mastery involves personal growth and learning through continually clarifying what is important (vision) and seeing more clearly what is current reality. Mental models involve surfacing, testing and improving internal pictures of how the world works so that assumptions will not remain unexamined and unchanged. This requires the development of the skills of reflection. Shared vision is vital for a learning organisation as it provides the focus and energy for learning. Team learning has three critical dimensions: to think insightfully about complex issues through tapping the minds of many; to ensure innovative,

coordinated action based on operational trust; and to foster learning teams through participation. Systems' thinking brings together the other four disciplines into a coherent whole. It fosters long-term commitment to the shared vision; it enables openness to shortcomings in the way we see things through mental models; it assists in developing the skills to see the larger picture through team learning; and it fosters the personal motivation to continually learn through personal mastery. At the heart of the learning organisation, according to Senge (2006) is the shift from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to being connected to the world; and from seeing problems as caused by 'others' to seeing how our own actions cause problems. It enables people to continually discover how they create their reality. Leaders in learning organisations are responsible for learning and are viewed as designers, stewards and teachers, with responsibility for having the vision, communicating it to others and instructing organisational members in the five disciplines.

A number of authors have developed and expanded the learning organisations concept. Silins et al (2002) examined the characteristics of learning organisations in secondary schools in South Australia and Tasmania and identified four factors: trusting and collaborative climate; taking initiatives and risks; shared and monitored mission; and professional development. In order to develop assessment tools for the school as a learning organisation, Bowen et al (2007) describe learning organisations as

associated with a core set of conditions and processes that support the ability of an organization to value, acquire, and use information and tacit knowledge acquired from employees and stakeholders to successfully plan, implement, and evaluate strategies to achieve performance goals. (Bowen et al 2007 p200)

Having worked with schools in North Carolina, they present a *School Success Profile Learning Organization* as a tool for completing the first step in gathering evidence to conceptualise and assess a problem. This should be followed up by the use of focus groups to allow those involved to give voice to the data with descriptions of their experiences.

The learning organisation theory assumes that schools function as professional learning communities, a concept of school improvement outlined by Dufour (2004). He outlines the core principles of professional learning communities in terms of 'big ideas'. Three big ideas are described: ensuring that students learn; a culture of collaboration; and a focus on results. Ensuring that students learn requires a shift from a focus on teaching

to a focus on learning in schools. It needs every professional in the school to engage with colleagues in ongoing exploration of three crucial questions: what do we want each student to know? how will we know they have learned it? and how will we respond when students experience difficulties? Solutions must: involve coordinated strategy; be systematic, school wide and timely; be based on intervention and be directive. Developing a culture of collaboration to achieve the collective purpose of learning for all requires more than congeniality, consensus and committees, although these can be useful. Collaboration in professional learning communities is a systematic process where teachers work together to analyse and improve their classroom practice. They study state and national standards, curriculum guides and student achievement to determine the knowledge and skills required by students and then agree on critical outcomes for each student to achieve. They develop common formative assessment to monitor attainment and they set standards for each skill and concept to judge the quality of student work. They make public goals, strategies, materials, concerns and results that were traditionally private. Building communities of professional learners requires teachers to stop working in isolation and schools to provide time for collaboration. In emphasising the need to focus on results, DuFour highlights the fact that schools and teachers suffer from DRIP syndrome – Data Rich/Information Poor. Those who focus on results welcome data but also turn data into useful and relevant information. They use test results for comparison purposes, to determine how each student is progressing and they share their results with colleagues. Schools must hold themselves accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement. This he concludes depends on the commitment to education within schools.

Bolam et al (2005) explored the concept of schools as professional learning communities (PLC) in the English context using the following definition:

An effective professional learning community has the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning. (Bolam et al 2005 piii)

They identified five important characteristics of PLCs in literature: shared values and vision, collective responsibility for pupils' learning, reflective professional inquiry, collaboration focused on learning, and group as well as individual professional learning. They added a further three characteristics: inclusive membership; networks, partnerships and openness; and mutual trust, respect and support. They also identified four key processes for promoting and sustaining PLCs: optimising resources and

structures; promoting individual and collective learning; specifically promoting and sustaining the PLC; and leadership and management. They proposed a model of a school as a PLC in the form of a *Development Profile* that could be used by schools as a self-audit tool. They suggested that this should be used as a trial in a research and development project.

A distinction is made between learning organisations and organisational learning in some of the literature (Sun et al 2007). Organisational learning is defined as “the deliberate use of individual, group, and system learning to embed new thinking and practices that continuously renew and transform the organization in ways that support shared aims” (Collinson and Cook 2007 p31). It is regarded as a collective learning improvement process and is associated with organisational culture, which in turn is important in dealing with change in organisations (Sun et al 2007). Having analysed the theories and literature on organisational learning Collinson and Cook (2007) developed a framework with five core assumptions to foster understanding of organisational learning and to facilitate organisational learning in schools and in school systems. Organisational learning is multilevel and depends on learning at individual, group and organisational levels. It requires inquiry to test assumption, detect errors and uncover taken-for-granted routines. It relies on shared understanding among members. It is at its best when it involves both behavioural and cognitive changes (double-loop learning). It includes embedding new knowledge and practices into organisational routines. Organisational learning is identified as enabling organisational renewal so that the organisation can take a proactive rather than a reactive role to environmental influences. Renewal for sustainability involves a balance between continuity and change. It requires that organisations learn how to learn and six conditions for learning are identified: prioritising learning for all members; fostering inquiry; facilitating the dissemination of knowledge; practising democratic principles; attending to human relationships and providing for members self-fulfilment.

Schmoker (1999) contends that organisations that succeed are those that are concerned only with processes that affect results. These organisations concentrate on short-term and on long-range results. Short-term results act as the vital feedback and provide encouragement towards continuous improvement. Teachers need to work collaboratively to determine desired goals. In his view specific, measurable learning goals are the key to organisational enthusiasm as they tap into the basic sense of

accomplishment and improvement that makes life interesting. Just as goals are an essential element of success, data are an essential part of working towards goals. Measuring progress against both the ideal outcome and the actual baseline is vital. He maintains that although this may cause conflict, as teachers may fear the strengths and weaknesses that will be revealed, ignoring data can promote inaction and inefficiency. The capacity of data to generate collaborative dialogue should be captured. It should also be used to celebrate progress and improvement in practice. This provides opportunities to convey and replicate effective methods. It also affords teachers opportunities to gain true professional status by being accountable to their 'clients'. Data enables teachers and schools to provide information to the community about progress in using effective methodologies and achieving good results. Besides the three key concepts – collaborative teamwork, goal setting and the use of data - Schmoker indicates the importance of staff development and of adding to traditional assessments by increasing both the modes of assessment and the aspects of performance we currently measure. He stresses the importance of leadership, not only the instructional leadership of principals but also and especially the concept of teacher leadership. He concludes that the principles of teamwork, results-oriented goal setting, effective use of data, along with staff development and shared leadership point up to the importance of taking full advantages of the greatest resource at the disposal of schools: individual and collective intelligence.

The concept of professional development of teachers is inherent in the notion of schools as learning organisations. Brown Easton (2008) describes progress in the development of the concept of staff development from a focus on training, to a focus on development and ultimately to a focus on learning. She contends that since educators often need to change what they do on a daily or even an hourly basis, to respond to the needs of learners, what they need is learning. Thus, professional learning should replace professional development as educators must know enough in order to change and they must change in order to get different results. "They must become learners, and they must be *self-developing*" (Brown Easton 2008 p756). Moving towards professional learning, in her view, requires changes in thinking about where learning takes place, about leadership and governance, about data collection and use, about learning activities, about evaluation of professional learning, about role changes and about cultural changes. Learning activities could involve school-based conversations,

problem solving, coaching, mentoring, observing and being observed, collecting data, analysing data, making recommendations and planning.

In summary, school improvement theory informs us that schools need to have the capacity to change, to engage in continuous learning and to enhance student learning and achievement through the use of data and measures. Learning organisation theory emphasises the school as an open system with the capacity to change to meet the needs of the external environment. Learning occurs through shared vision and team learning in a systems thinking framework. Organisational learning theories stress the need for collective inquiry, the collection and interpretation of reliable data, structures for disseminating information and respectful relationships. Schools need to become professional learning communities with a focus on learning, on working collaboratively and on holding themselves accountable for students' achievement.

The quest for continuous improvement through collective inquiry is at the heart of school improvement. This demands a clear view of the purpose of schooling so that the goals of school are defined and thus accurate judgements can be made about performance. The purpose of education and of schools has been debated and discussed in literature and remains a highly contested notion. A brief review of this literature is merited in order to bring further clarity to the purpose of school evaluation.

### **1.6 The concept and purpose of schooling**

A recent article (Kasper 2005), comparing educational reforms at the end of the twentieth century with the ideology of education outlined by Quintilian at the end of the first century AD, provides a comprehensive view of what schools are about. Quintilian stressed the importance of: providing enjoyable learning experiences for young people so that they become interested in learning; individual readiness; making learning meaningful and connecting curriculum to activities outside the classroom. Teachers were seen as life-long learners, as exemplary models of the educated citizenry who are capable of preparing students for life. Education was viewed as a dynamic undertaking, with the ultimate goal of developing independent thinkers. Kasper maintains that similar views are apparent in the original purpose of public schooling in America and in recent reform documents. Schools were established to meet society's need for an educated citizenry and recent reforms evolved from a debate about two assumptions about schools – that elementary schools provided the mechanism for socialising

immigrants into democracy and that the role of school was to transmit the dominant culture. Four broad goals were recommended for schools across the American nation: academic goals; vocational goals; social, civic and cultural goals; and personal goals.

Mitchell and Mitchell (2003) argue that not enough attention is given to the fact that schools serve a variety of personal and societal purposes, which are deeply contested. In addressing the debate about class size in American schools, they consider four distinct answers to the question “what kind of economic good is education?” Education can be seen as a service industry, a producer of durable goods, a system of investment in human capital formation or a conduit for passing cultural legacies between generations. The purpose of schools, they claim, range from creating a safe and nurturing environment for children to supporting the development of civic cultures and productive economies. The former can be assessed immediately and the latter can only be assessed long after children have completed school and taken up roles in adult society.

Bellamy and Goodlad (2008) consider that the role of schools in establishing democracy in America began with the purpose of “civilizing” the children of newcomers, teaching them the laws of the land and supplementing the church in instilling moral principles and behaviours. There was an assumption that a democratic public was a well-educated one but not necessarily a much-schooled one, as it was clear that education included the total experience of life. They identify a four-part mission for schools in a democracy to ensure that education continues the renewal of the social and institutional underpinnings of democratic life: providing access to high quality, school-based learning for young people; promoting responsible stewardship of school and universities; improving teaching and learning through pedagogy that nurtures and challenges all learners; and providing students with knowledge, skills and dispositions to become fully-engaged participants in society (p566). Bellamy and Goodlad indicate that the general population agree that schools should attend to the personal, social, vocational and academic development of young people. Educators who see schools as becoming increasingly more diverse have emphasised equity and social justice rather than economic competitiveness as the guiding values for schooling.

The role of curriculum in relation to the purpose of schooling has been debated. Murray (1998) makes a distinction between the instrumental purpose of education with its

heavy emphasis on curriculum subjects, attainment standards and performances in public examinations and the social purposes of schooling based on the promotion of spiritual, social and cultural development. A renewed interest in the social and moral aspects of schooling in the 1980s and 1990s in England, reflecting Durkheim's view of socialisation and education being synonymous, he contends, is based on curriculum initiatives in the 1980s, research pointing to the importance of family and school environment in shaping adolescent response to society and concerns about rapid social change and the erosion of traditional values. In this context schools became the focus of education for citizenship, personal development and values clarification. Thus while schools have always been engaged in social education as they transmit the host culture, induce young people to take roles in society and bring about change from 'a relatively non-competent child to a relatively competent adult in wider society' (p34), the complexity of personal and social education makes it difficult for teachers to know what to deliver. The need for policy makers to clarify the place of personal and social education in the curriculum and to reconcile its cross-curricular nature with curriculum subjects is highlighted.

In the context of recent discussion about the introduction of a national curriculum in Australia, science teachers have implicitly expressed views on the purpose of schooling (Turnbull 2008). It is advocated that a national Science curriculum should be a framework based on key concepts and ideas rather than a tightly prescribed syllabus based on content and knowledge. The inclusion of Science on the school curriculum is to develop scientific literacy so that students "become well-informed citizens who have an understanding of their scientific world, are questioning, can draw evidence-based conclusions, and can make informed decisions on issues that embrace science" (Turnbull 2008 p4). This view of the well-informed citizen being more important than the acquisition of knowledge is reiterated when the acceptance of Australia's high ranking in the 2006 PISA Science survey (8<sup>th</sup> of 57 countries) is placed against its poor performance in the attitudinal responses related to enjoyment of Science, engagement with scientific issues, and thinking of future careers in Science.

The importance of curriculum in serving the educational aims and thus the quality of education is considered by Sun et al (2007). They maintain that a national curriculum embraces the goals of the nation. To serve the purpose of guiding delivery of curriculum content, national educational goals need to be translated into standards and



benchmarks. Without national standards, outcomes of schools vary greatly and therefore the schools attended make a difference for individual students. How the curriculum is defined, planned, implemented and finally evaluated determines the quality of education. In their study of contextual factors in effective school improvement Sun et al conclude that the strategy used by the central government of a country to encourage effective school improvement greatly depends on the nature of its vision and goals for education. Countries that want to become more competitive must ensure a highly responsive economy and therefore a highly responsive education system, which “equips citizens with suitable knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p117). Such countries, including the UK have an economic-driven and market-oriented vision and goals for education and put pressure on schools through increased accountability for student outcomes and centralised intervention for failing schools. Countries where vision and goals for education focus more “on the happiness of the child, social justice, and equality” (p118) tend to reject notions of competition and refer to what is best for the development of the child, the nation and the country. The two kinds of national goal settings are rooted in the culture and values of a country and are greatly influenced by the government of the country. National vision and goals in turn influence levels of autonomy, external evaluation, school accountability and support for school improvement.

A brief overview of relatively recent views of the purpose of schooling identifies an instrumental purpose with academic and vocational goals, and a socialisation purpose with social and personal development goals. The instrumental value of education as a durable good with a future value on the labour market can be measured with relative ease through academic attainment. The service quality and cultural legacy value of education contained in the relationship between schooling and broader social issues, is more difficult to measure and should receive significant weighting in accountability systems. The influence of curriculum on the purpose of schooling is evident in terms of the inclusion of specific subjects in national curricula and of particular emphases within subjects. Ultimately, how a national curriculum is defined, delivered and evaluated determines the focus of national education goals and the quality of education provided for students. National goals and vision for education are influenced by the culture of a country depending on whether market driven, economic competitiveness or the happiness of the child, social justice and equality are the focus of government.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

This section explored the purpose of evaluation in schools. It revealed a complex web of theories ranging from school autonomy to the purpose of schooling itself. Theories related to enhanced school autonomy suggest that the decentralisation of decision making will only work if schools' capacity to engage in sustained improvement at local level is developed and when this is accompanied by external evaluation. Many purposes of school evaluation are listed in the literature but these can be summed up in two basic concepts: improvement and accountability. The multi-faceted nature of accountability ranges from ensuring that education provides value for money to looking at the relationships between those providing and receiving education and the actions of policy makers, teachers and parents. Accountability involves measuring standards but requires a broader examination than results of tests. Formative accountability seeks to ensure continuous development based on trust and goodwill. The quest for school improvement is equally complex, involving theories of school effectiveness, school improvement and organisational learning. How schools improve through individual, group and system learning to enable them to be proactive rather than reactive to external influences requires the building of communities of inquiry capable of deciding on priorities and measuring improvement through the effective use of data. Deciding on priorities demands a clear purpose for education and for schools. The role of schooling in the instrumental and socialisation aspects of education needs to be clearly outlined and curriculum and measures of achievement should be decided collaboratively so that evaluation can focus on relevant elements of attainment.

The purpose of school evaluation can be perceived from the manner in which schools are evaluated. The following section will review the literature related to the role of evaluation in schools. It will examine external evaluation systems and how they impact on schools. It will investigate the conditions necessary in evaluation systems if they are to be effective accountability mechanisms and the conditions required if evaluation is to enable schools to engage in continuous improvement.

# **Developments in evaluation practices and impact on schools**

## **1.8 Introduction**

This section will explore the role and impact of evaluation on schools. In particular, the experience of external evaluation and its consequences will be examined. Recent trends in school evaluation in European countries and in particular the increasing attention being paid to internal evaluation and its potential will be reviewed. The conditions necessary to develop an approach to evaluation based on balancing external and internal evaluation will be investigated.

## **1.9 External evaluation and its impact**

The concept and purpose of evaluation influences the approaches taken to school-based evaluation. Models of evaluation reflecting particular concepts, methods and approaches are described in previous research (Mathews 1997). In the past decade, forms of evaluation have been broadly categorised and research has moved towards analysing the impact of evaluation on schools and on learning.

A report on the forms of evaluation used in European countries since the mid 1990s defines three main organisational policies (Eurydice 2007). In the first scenario, found in the majority of European countries, the authority responsible for evaluating education traditionally, most frequently the inspectorates, were given responsibility for evaluating schools in the context of autonomy, either centrally or devolved. The function and independence of inspectorates in some countries were strengthened. The criteria for evaluating schools have become increasingly standardised and form the basis for arriving at judgements. The trend towards standardisation appears to equate with the reinforcement of accountability and at the same time with increased professionalisation of the evaluation service. The second scenario sees schools as accountable to local authorities that play a pivotal role in the evaluation process. However a growth in national structures that are involved in developing national standards and attainment tests is apparent. This is to counter the inexperience of local authorities in evaluation. These standards are used in external evaluation in countries such as Denmark, Belgium, Hungary and the Netherlands. The third scenario involves countries that have remained at the periphery of the external evaluation. While Italy and France have been in this category, they are moving towards developing

standardised evaluation systems with benchmarks being developed, self-evaluation being strongly encouraged and procedures for involving agencies in evaluation being considered.

Inspection, as one type of external evaluation, is commonly referred to in literature. Wilcox and Gray (1996) describe inspection from four perspectives: as evaluation, audit, disciplinary power and social action. Inspection as *evaluation* has positivist characteristics such as the use of quantitative methods, the quantification of data and explicit criteria but also draws on practices and assumptions, which reflect interpretative and naturalistic traditions of evaluation. It assumes that procedures are objective and therefore eliminate the scope for personal judgement. Inspection as *auditing* is where inspection takes control and makes transparent the internal workings of an organisation. It is seen as a neutral technique in representing financial and economic facts. Inspection as *disciplinary power* draws on the work of Foucault using performativity and normalisation as its mechanisms. Inspection involves hierarchical observation and normalising judgements. Inspection as a *form of social action* draws on Habermas and his theory of communicative action. He sees social interaction being mediated through language with two types of social action – strategic and communicative. Inspection feedback is seen as strategic action as an actor is oriented to intervening in a social context according to criteria of effectiveness and success rather than communicative action where interaction is between those who establish interpersonal relations. Inspection can thus become a steering mechanism, which colonises the lifeworld of the school. While each of these perspectives assumes that inspections are control mechanisms, recent research provides evidence that evaluation systems offer the possibility of empowerment and development as well as being systems of control.

The contribution made by inspection to school improvement is apparent in research and a range of studies of Ofsted inspections in the English context are available. Inspection is considered to bring a sharper focus on quality and improvement (van Bruggen 2005) and to provide schools with a baseline from which they can look to future improvement (Fidler et al 1996). Ofsted inspections are credited with providing the combination of pressure and support needed for school improvement, with schools generally finding the process helpful to their development (Fidler et al 1998). They have played an important role as a catalyst for change and improvement in the 10-year period from

1993 and 2003 (Matthews and Sammons 2005). Ofsted has had a positive impact on education across most areas of its work, notably in contributing to the improvement of the least effective schools (Matthews and Sammon 2004). Inspection has a three-fold value: providing schools with an incentive to develop in preparation for inspection, offering an outside audit and a list of points for action, and highlighting crucial preconditions for improvement such as leadership and having the skills and confidence to respond (Fidler et al 1996).

Evidence from Ofsted inspections also indicates that there is no guarantee of improvement following inspection unless there is an expectation of follow-up activity of some kind (Matthews and Sammons 2004). In this context, schools were categorised and a process of monitoring and re-inspection in proportion to the need as judged by inspectors followed. Schools causing concern were placed in a category known as 'special measures' and were monitored on a termly basis until a report stating that special measures were no longer required was completed. Perryman (2005) describes the effects on one school placed in special measures as a result of inspection. The *disciplinary power* of inspection was felt as the school was subject to five inspections within a nine-month period. This led to a feeling of being constantly under surveillance. The school was only released from special measures when a change in discourse occurred, with the school's self-evaluation documents mirroring the language of Ofsted and school management taking over from inspectors in ensuring continued change and innovation. Seeking improvement through this type of panopticon system (Foucault), she concludes, cannot be maintained, as the drive for improvement is external to the school. A mixture of internal moderation and external support, she suggests, would produce a more permanent sense of normalisation and discourse change and maintain practices of which the school had ownership.

Differences between the potential of Ofsted inspections to assist improvement and actual improvement have been reported. Wilcox and Gray (1996) draw attention to conditions such as the implementation of recommendations and the drawing up of action plans, which have the potential to lead to change. However, they stress that recommendations related to teaching and learning and to curriculum are difficult to implement and that the resources available to schools, particularly in terms of staff skills, are of paramount importance. Hopkins et al (1999) argue that while inspection plays a role in school improvement, in itself, inspection is not a sufficient means of

leading to improvement. They cite a number of conditions that are necessary to ensure that inspection fosters school improvement. The first of these is the nature of the inspection process itself. Although most accounts of inspection suggest it serves both an accountability purpose and a developmental purpose, the methodology and the emphasis placed on proving rather than improving leads schools to see inspection as an accountability exercise because of the public nature of the reporting. The need to conceptualise the process as developmental is emphasised. The second condition, the Ofsted inspection framework, is an important means of providing an initial diagnosis for schools as it allows schools to know, from an external perspective, where they are. The third condition is support for schools to develop the capacity to improve. In the English context the role of Local Education Authorities (LEA) is deemed of paramount importance. Fidler et al (1996) suggest that inspection is likely to lead to single loop learning - doing present things better, but that a vision of a better future is necessary for double loop learning - doing different things.

Commenting on the new productive relationships envisioned in changes to Ofsted inspections, Richards (2004) notes the lack of clarity about the nature of inspection. He considers that clarification is essential if the limitations and the strengths of inspection are to be appreciated. He provides a number of defensible purposes for school inspection, which should be debated, including: complying with relevant statutory requirements; reporting on particular initiatives or on the effects of policies in practice; offering explanation of particular outcomes in schools and disseminating this; offering judgements about how schools are meeting their own aims and values, how well lessons are conducted and the quality of students performance and validating schools self-review processes. In acknowledging that schools need to be held accountable, he suggests that they deserve intelligent, respectful and enabling inspection that recognises the complexity and value-laden nature of teaching, learning and inspection. This intelligent accountability, based on trust, requires sensitive and equal partnership with schools.

In attempting to define the impact of inspection on school improvement in the Dutch context, Ehren and Visscher (2006) identify certain essential characteristics. Among the important features of the process are: relationships, styles of communication, feedback, school factors and external features. Professional relationships founded on mutual trust are deemed to be the starting point for inspections having an impact on school

improvement (Matthews and Sammons 2004, Ehren and Visscher 2006). The more the relationship is characterised by trust the more it is likely that inspectors take into account what really matters for schools and the more willing the school is to act on recommendations made in reports. The issue of reciprocity with two dimensions, a balance between the information the inspectorate wants and what the schools get in return, and the transparency expected from schools versus the transparency of the inspectorate's own work is deemed important (Leeuw 2002). The inclusion of the public in the process of developing inspection norms and criteria is deemed important (Richards 2004, Swaffield and MacBeath 2005, Ehren and Visscher 2006).

Communication style (Ehren and Visscher 2006) and oral feedback (Matthews and Sammon 2004) are regarded as important features in the process. Strategies for providing feedback related to formative assessment of students suggested by Black and Wiliam (1998, 2004) are considered suitable for formative evaluation (Ehren and Visscher 2006). The strategies focus on progress made, on ability, and on explaining what underperformance is occurring. Hopkins (1994) highlights four issues of note in relation to evaluation feedback. Firstly, feedback should be provided as the evaluation progresses, developing critical dialogue so that both evaluator and schools can learn from the experience. Second, the contents of the report should be discussed verbally before submitting the final report. Third, allowing the school a right to reply allays fears that the report is 'cast in stone'. Fourth the use of particular language can lead to misinterpretations and negative reactions. Ehren and Visscher (2006) conclude that inspectors' feedback should: generate positive relationships of trust between staff and pupils; focus on a limited number of goals in the areas of teaching and learning; build bridges with the community and create learning environments; raise morale; and make effective use of information such as exam results for classroom decision making. They note that school factors, including attitude to change, competence in implementing innovation and being a learning organisation influence schools' response to inspection while external impulses and support such as the local community, external advisors or researchers are among those who might play a part in bringing about change.

It is clear that inspection, as a form of external evaluation, is unlikely to effect improvement on an ongoing basis. External agents, acting as a surveillance mechanism, are unlikely to induce schools to engage in organisational learning. An increased interest in school self-evaluation has therefore become widespread. A review of recent

developments in self-evaluation will be undertaken to determine its merits in the school improvement and accountability agendas.

### **1.10 Evolving models of school self-evaluation**

A move towards internal evaluation is evident in the literature since the 1970s when self-review was associated with school development planning. This provided schools with opportunities to take control of aspects of their own developments and enabled teachers to engage in collaborative discussion about change. In more recent research, the “plethora of terms for self-evaluation” is described (MacBeath 2006 p56), features of effective school self-evaluation are identified (Hofman et al 2005, Leung 2005; Moore et al 2006, Peng et al 2006) and a move from evaluation as external control to one of balancing internal and external evaluation (Stoll and Fink 1996, MacBeath 1999, 2006, 2006a, Nevo 2002, Mac Namara and O Hara 2007) is evident.

School development planning became an important school reform mechanism in the latter part of the last century. The purpose of school development planning has been to “improve the quality of teaching and learning in a school through the successful management of innovation and change” (Hargreaves and Hopkins 1991 p3). One of the aims of school development planning from the outset was the creation of a partnership between teachers, school management, parents, local authorities and others, and sharing responsibility for the school’s progress and success in achieving improvement. This partnership of mutual support and accountability was seen as a prerequisite to effective development planning and school improvement. School development planning was a way of enabling teachers to feel ownership of and commitment to innovations, increasing schools’ control over change. It acknowledged the complexity of schools as organisations and the subtle nature of change in schools and offered a more systematic and sustained approach to change with careful selection of a limited range of priorities, better planning with support and staff development, and more thorough evaluation to establish new strengths on which to build over time.

The initial use of school development planning for curriculum and professional development purposes enabled schools to develop whole-school policies through the process of self-review, supported by local education authorities in England (MacGilchrist et al 1995). It also encouraged schools to be more accountable for the curriculum provision and for the professional development of staff for school



improvement. The introduction of local management of schools broadened the purpose of school development planning and it became a management tool in the development process. It was thus seen as a means of controlling schools and making them more accountable. School development planning moved from being a vehicle for self-review, evaluation and development to being perceived as an external measure of a school's effectiveness. Cuckle and Broadhead (2003), in their research involving a series of three projects dating from 1994 to 2001, conclude that school development planning is well established as a means of managing change in schools. It is suggested that its continued evolution should entail providing help for the identification of success criteria in the planning stage to enable more clearly focused implementation.

The integration of development and evaluation has been considered over a number of years with Stenhouse (1975 cited in Hopkins 1994) arguing against the separation of developer and evaluator in relation to curriculum research. Hopkins (1994) maintains that the evaluation and development functions were devolved down in the English system because the emphasis on monitoring and evaluation became so great that it could not be handled at LEA or HMI level. He describes school evaluation and improvement in three ways: evaluation *of* school improvement is concerned with the outcomes of improvement efforts; evaluation *for* school improvement is formative evaluation concerned with bringing about improvement in practice; and evaluation *as* school improvement conveys the idea that evaluation and development are one and the same. In his view, evaluation as school improvement can take the form of self-review, teacher-researcher or action research.

Davies and Ellison (1999) suggest that strategic planning is necessary for school development. They consider approaches needed to analyse areas related to the school such as the environment, the customers, the product and services, and the competitors. They list self-review and external inspection, among others, as appropriate approaches to planning for development and see a role for self-evaluation and monitoring at both the strategic planning and operational planning stages of development planning. They explain that ongoing monitoring and evaluation, as part of a school's normal management cycle, provide an ongoing source of information for the planning process. They emphasise the need for schools to establish structures and procedures to review activities and targets annually, as planned evaluation can assist in ensuring that the most effective means of reaching desired goals are chosen. Integration of external and

internal evaluation is regarded positively as reports from external evaluation provide a wealth of data that can be built into the planning process and the school's operational target-setting plan can provide part of the information for any external evaluation.

School self-evaluation is regarded in literature as a tool for school-based management (Nevo 2002) that is grounded in the theory of school development with the school as the basic unit of change (Simons 2002). Its origin is traced back to the decentralisation of education systems and to an increased interest in accountability, and to school effectiveness and school improvement research (Scheerens 2002). School effectiveness studies identified evaluation among the categories considered to be positively associated with pupil achievement while school improvement research saw school-based review as a lever for change and innovation, providing a more practical alternative to planning approaches than those emphasising mission and objectives. Fidler (1997) maintains that to be effective, schools should be doing the right thing and this demands an appropriate means of deciding and reviewing what is the right thing. It involves allocating accountability for ensuring that the right thing is done and that outcomes match expectations. He suggests that structures within the organisation should ensure internal consistency and address issues such as involvement and accountability, control and discretion, development and maintenance, and motivation and obligation. MacBeath (1999) suggests that self-evaluation has emerged as a healthy system of school evaluation with a primary goal of helping schools to improve through critical self-awareness. It equips teachers with knowledge of how to evaluate the quality of learning in their classrooms rather than relying on, but welcoming, external views and perspectives.

The dilemma of school self-evaluation serving both development and accountability purposes has been identified. Leung (2005) contends that school self-evaluation for development requires: the willingness, commitment and enthusiasm of teachers to devote time and effort to it; freedom to decide on the form and distribution of the report; mechanisms to support school improvement after external evaluation; trust from the government and educational authorities; and training for teachers on how to conduct school self-evaluation. Accountability on the other hand requires: external inspectors to honestly identify the weaknesses in management, teaching and standards; evaluation findings to be publicly reported; the use of performance indicators to focus on measurable items; and that negative findings will lead to serious consequences for

the school. Her research in a Hong Kong school considered conditions that facilitate the implementation of school self-evaluation for both development and accountability. A number of implementation strategies are identified. The necessity of 'being slow' is emphasised; sow the seeds and allow time for teachers to change their beliefs. Negotiation is important; this enables teachers to be involved in the design of indicators or observable features rather than having them imposed. The last strategy is 'pressure and support': the pressure of a heavy workload of documentation, frequent meetings and classroom observation is balanced by a supportive climate with provision of ample professional development, the presence of senior management personnel at important occasions and suitable resource arrangements.

School self-evaluation is considered a powerful approach to auditing teaching and learning since it "necessarily requires systematic collecting and analysing of information in order to form value judgements based on firm evidence" (Neil and Johnston 2002 p 73). Neil and Johnson contend that while external inspection checks legal requirements regarding education, as well as the broader school context and climate, the power of self-evaluation is in its potential to help identify how to improve. It involves reflection on the school's aims, establishing criteria for success and determining the appropriate methods for judging actions within the school. Hofman et al (2005) claim that external evaluation focuses on the maintenance of quality standards in schools while internal evaluation supports the school's goals, improves the teaching-learning process and the quality of education provided in the school. In practice, they note, the external and internal components of accountability depend on and influence each other. External accountability strengthens internal monitoring and evaluation systems, searches for the sources of success and failure in education and stimulates achievement-oriented education and the development of school policy.

The relationship between self-evaluation and external evaluation is debated in literature. Swanfield and MacBeath (2005) maintain that policy thinking in this regard is in a state of flux and transition and few administrations have resolved the issue between what schools should do autonomously and what support and intervention they should receive externally. Nevo (2002) suggests that internal and external evaluation should coexist and that they can benefit from one another. External evaluation might: stimulate interest in internal evaluation; expand the scope of internal review; and validate internal review findings. External evaluation can benefit from internal

evaluation by: expanding the scope of interest; improving the interpretation of findings and increasing the utilisation of findings. He suggests that a blend of external and internal evaluation can create appropriate grounds for dialogue through a process of two-way communication flow, by focusing on relevant issues and particular data and through mutual respect and trust.

Three models of evaluation, balancing internal and external evaluation, in use in different administrations are described (Alvik in MacBeath 1999). In the *parallel* model the two systems run side by side with their own criteria and protocols. In the *sequential* model external bodies follow on from the schools' own evaluation and use that as the focus of their quality assurance system. In the *cooperative* model the external agencies cooperate with schools to develop a common approach to evaluation. Recent developments in England and Hong Kong suggest a move towards 'light touch' inspections with greater focus on self-evaluation (MacBeath 2006).

A study of evaluation carried out in European countries (Eurydice 2004) examines relationships between internal and external evaluation in schools. The study distinguishes between countries where external and internal evaluations are independent and interdependent. Where they are *independent* they refer to: the parallel model where internal and external evaluation have broadly the same focus and share certain goals but are conducted in parallel; and complementary models where the internal and external evaluation may differ in focus or the goals underlying them are different. *Interdependence* implies that the external evaluation takes account of the results of internal evaluation and vice versa and three possible scenarios are described: external evaluation is partly based on the judgement formed during internal evaluation; external evaluation is informed by internal evaluation while the judgements of external evaluation are used in internal evaluation; and external evaluation involves supervising the processes of internal evaluation. It is suggested that where common criteria are used for internal and external evaluation, external evaluators have a rich source of information available to them but it is noted that the task of gathering the information is very laborious for schools. The danger of playing down problems by schools or of duplication of evidence gathering is noted.

A report on a project undertaken by the Standing International Conference of Central and General Inspectorates of Education (SICI) states that without the external

perspective “self-evaluation can result in self-delusion, introspection and superficial change” (Webb 2004 p6). However, by using a partnership approach, the empowerment necessary for real improvement can occur with external evaluation becoming a useful outside lens to enhance internal improvement efforts (Stoll and Thomson 1996). Simons (2002) contends that schools can strengthen and validate the process of school self-evaluation as a major vehicle for school improvement and for community judgement. She suggests that, while it is teachers in the main who engage in the process of self-evaluation, when the evaluation results are targeted at external audiences, it is useful to include a broader constituency to triangulate data and strengthen the validity of the conclusions. She outlines several ways to strengthen the process including: changing the organisation of the school to create conditions for school self-evaluation; pairing schools for team meetings with nominees from each school on each team; and working with a consortium of schools in a district on a particular issue to build a cumulative knowledge to inform policy.

Mac Namara and O’ Hara (2008) accept a number of trends identified in the literature by Nevo (2002): school evaluation is being redefined or newly constituted in almost every country; until recently evaluation mechanisms ranged from ‘hard-edged’ evaluations based on results to a norm-based approach based on teacher compliance with little use of external or self-evaluation; both approaches are being replaced by a standards-based model, where performance indicators or themes for evaluation or self-evaluation are defined. Data is collected through a mixture of internal and external evaluation. The main variation from one country to another is the relationship between external and self-evaluation. They outline a spectrum of evaluation from inspection to self-evaluation, which they envisage as the emerging map of school and teacher evaluation. The spectrum places the purpose of evaluation in a range from accountability to development and the method of data collection in a range from quantitative to qualitative. They maintain that the evaluation systems of a number of countries can be placed at a point along this continuum.

### ***Elements of successful school self-evaluation***

A number of elements are recognised as requirements for moving towards proportional evaluation and successful school self-evaluation. MacBeath (1999) identifies a number of guiding principles necessary in order to bring external and internal school evaluation together in a coherent and systematic way. These include: negotiating the conduct and

focus of external review with the schools; discussing and disseminating external evaluation criteria; agreeing protocols of behaviour and professional relationships; establishing faith in the credibility and competence of the external evaluation team; accountability of external evaluators to schools for the quality of their work; evaluation being seen by key stakeholders as being worthwhile and supporting school development; sharing responsibility for evaluation between internal and external sources; external review focusing primarily on the school's own approach to school improvement; and the external team taking time to get to know the school before embarking on the evaluation. An Effective School Self-Evaluation (ESSE) project undertaken by SICI (2003) concluded that effective school self-evaluation requires external support, guidance and training and that the blend between self-evaluation and external evaluation needs to be right. It further asserts that a number of key features are required for effective self-evaluation in schools. These include: strong leadership in schools; shared and clearly understood school aims; engagement of key stakeholders in self-evaluation and improvement activities; clear policies and guidelines; self-evaluation activities that focus on learning, teaching and improving outcomes; strong staff commitment to self-evaluation; monitoring and evaluation processes that are systematic, rigorous and robust; and well planned actions that impact on improving outcomes. The study identified five key components necessary for successful self-evaluation: statistical data for comparison and benchmarking; a set of quality standards; training in self-evaluation methods; regular independent external inspection or moderation of self-evaluation; and a legislative framework.

Many of the issues identified in the ESSE report are referred to by other researchers. Choosing a fitting instrument for school self-evaluation is considered in the Dutch education system where an overload of instruments creates problems for schools (Hofmann et al 2005). Hofmann et al suggest that instruments can be assessed for their focus on school accountability, on school improvement and on both and that school leaders should select an instrument that is fitting for the school situation. The development of indicators in Hong Kong (Moore et al 2006) and of suitable methods to determine value added in China (Peng et al 2006) are also reported in the literature. Moore et al (2006) highlight the complexity of selecting performance indicators, particularly in the affective and social aspects of education and in norming these in the context of a rapidly developing world. Peng et al (2006) argue that the availability and analysis of longitudinal individual pupil-level data is essential to examine pupil

progress and different aspects of their effectiveness. This would provide the baseline for measuring value added in the self-evaluation context. They caution that pupil progress is not the only criterion that should be used for judging school effectiveness and for evaluating school performance. MacBeath (2006a) views school self-evaluation as a voyage of discovery that is systematic, evidence-based and that has a clear sense of purpose and outcome. He identifies seven key elements of self-evaluation that schools should consider: purpose, audience, framework, criteria, tools, process and product. He also suggests four key precepts - trust, networking, support and challenge - as necessary in moving towards effective self-evaluation.

In summary, the use of internal evaluation, originally seen as a tool in the school development process, is increasingly regarded as an aspect of evaluation systems in European countries and beyond. Self-evaluation as part of a cyclical school planning process enabled schools to manage change and engage in innovation practices to improve teaching and learning. The issue of balancing external inspection and internal review is still being debated in the literature but it is generally accepted that European countries can place their evaluation system on a continuum between inspection and self-evaluation. A range of factors is identified as necessary to ensure that evaluation, both external and internal, assists in assuring quality and in enhancing learning in schools. Among these, trust, support and pressure are viewed as essential in moving towards systems of school self-evaluation.

### **1.11 The importance of trust**

Trust is an important aspect of responsible accountability and many definitions of trust are articulated in literature (Kramer 1999, Tan and Tan 2000, Shockley-Zalabak 2000, Hoy and Tschannen-Moran 2003). The nature and function of trust within organisations have been explored (Kramer 1999, Tan and Tan 2000, Hubbell & Chory-Assad 2005) and the importance of trust in relationships at work and school are outlined (Hargreaves 2002, Tschannen-Moran 2004). Kramer (1999) suggests that trust “entails a state of perceived vulnerability or risk that is derived from individuals’ uncertainty regarding the motives, intentions, and prospective actions of others on whom they depend” (p571). It consists of a three-part relationship involving properties of a truster, attributes of a trustee and specific context over which trust is conferred as a way to move forward.

### ***Trust in organisations***

Organisational trust is considered to be complex, communication-based, dynamic and multi-faceted. Aspects of trust have been labelled as dimensions (Schokley-Zalabak 2000), facets (Hoy and Tschannen-Moran 2003) and antecedents and outcomes (Tan and Tan 2000). Tschannen-Moran (2004) defines trust as “an individual’s or group’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest and open” (p186).

In accepting that trust between individuals and groups is highly important for the long-term stability of organisations and their members, Tan and Tan (2000) identify three main areas of trust: interpersonal trust, trust in supervisor and trust in top management. Managerial trust and organisational trust are examples of motivating factors that encourage individuals to stay in organisations (Hubbel and Chory-Assad 2005). Organisations with high levels of trust are more successful, adaptive and innovative than those with low levels of trust (Shockley-Zalabak 2000). Whipple (2007) maintains that in high-trust organisations: problems are dealt with easily and efficiently; people are not distracted by a need to be defensive and they can focus instead on achieving the vision of the organisation with energy focused on the customer; leaders freely share valuable insights about the business; they rely on solid, reliable communication; workers have a passion for their work that is obvious to the customers; the atmosphere in the organisation is real and all workers are aligned under a common goal that permeates all activities; and workers respect one another and work to support and reinforce the good deeds of fellow workers.

The role of trust in facilitating change in organisations is considered by Basso (2004). He maintains that leadership teams cite trust or the lack of it as a major reason why communities do not fully support or effectively participate in change efforts. He believes that organisations and their leaders can assess their current situation and establish a number of initiatives to increase trust, thus enabling them to engage in cultural and other change efforts. The initiatives he suggests include: developing plans with action steps to improve elements of trust; improved external and internal communication plans; expanded community development and strategic partnership; hiring and performance management systems that recognise and seek to measure trust; and less top-down and more inclusive decision-making methods.



### ***Trust in schools***

Bryk and Schneider (2003) maintain that trust among teachers, parents and school leaders is essential to school improvement. Relational trust influences reform efforts and is derived from the distinct role relationships that characterise social exchanges in schools. They outline the benefits of strong relational trust as: collective decision making occurs more readily and this is essential for successful reform; reform initiatives are more likely to diffuse across the school as trust reduces the sense of risk associated with change; relational trust supports a moral imperative to take on the difficult work of school improvement because it is 'the right thing to do'; schools with high relational trust are more likely to demonstrate marked improvements in student learning. They identify conditions necessary for building relational trust, such as the day-to-day social exchanges, the recognition and active moderation of parents' vulnerabilities and structural factors such as small school size, stable school community and voluntary association, where participants deliberately affiliate with the school.

Hargreaves (2002) highlights the importance of trust in creating collaborative school communities. He notes the difficulty that teachers encounter in dealing with conflict, either avoiding it by establishing norms of politeness or clustering together like-minded colleagues who share ideas and beliefs. Since facing conflict involves significant risk, the existence of deep trust among workers is a vital ingredient of productive professional communities. Lateral trust is important in schools, as sustainable school improvement that stimulates lasting gains in student achievement depends on teachers being able to work together in strong professional communities. Hargreaves concludes that teachers who feel betrayed avoid interaction with those who betrayed them, thus diminishing their opportunities for professional learning and ultimately lessening the chances of school improvement.

Hargreaves (2001) considers trust as an intrinsic part of social capital, which for him has cultural and structural components. The cultural component relates to the level of trust between people and the generation of norms of reciprocity. The structural aspect is the network in which people are embedded by strong ties. In a school rich in social capital, high levels of trust generate strong networks and collaborative relations and this strengthens the school's intellectual capital. In such schools people share their knowledge, both intellectual and moral, and this supports transfer of high leverage teaching strategies, which enhances student achievement. Teachers trust research

evidence or the experience of other teachers as potential sources of ideas and practices. This knowledge feeds back through internal networks, transferring knowledge through mentoring and coaching.

It is apparent from the literature that trust in organisations contributes to loyalty and commitment, enables efficient performance without constant monitoring, and assists members to be adaptive and to partake effectively in change efforts. In schools, it is a key element in collaboration and it encourages collective decision-making. Professional trust assists in creating professional communities where knowledge and experience are shared. Trust in schools is essential in successful reform and it contributes to marked improvements in student achievement.

### **1.12 Conclusion**

A review of evaluation literature reveals that inspection, as a form of external evaluation, continues to be associated with control mechanisms. The fact that reports are made public can leave schools feeling that it is necessary for them to prove rather than to improve. If external evaluation is to lead to improvement, certain conditions need to be met. These include: an emphasis on the developmental purpose of the evaluation; agreement on the framework to be used; and support for schools to develop capacity. The difficulties associated with implementing recommendations related to teaching and learning are highlighted and a case is made for requiring action plans to be drawn up and for follow up inspection to be undertaken.

It is apparent that a blend of external and internal evaluation is accepted as providing the most effective means of ensuring ongoing quality education in schools. While the precise nature of the blend is still somewhat contested, it is suggested that it requires systems to define the role of external and self-evaluation and to determine the appropriate balance so that schools are aware of their responsibilities and systems can provide the relevant support and pressure. It assumes that frameworks and quality indicators are agreed and available and that schools have suitable data at their disposal to measure the outcomes of their work. It also presumes that agreement has been reached about the purpose of schools and what needs to be measured. Trust, networking, support and challenge, along with the willingness of teachers, and structures within schools are all deemed necessary for effective self-evaluation.

The importance of trust in enabling successful evaluation is apparent. Trust in schools is positively related to successful school reform and improved student learning, to the development of professional collaborative communities and to the production of networks to share intellectual capital in the form of knowledge.

To further enhance understanding of the extent to which the Irish education system supports effective evaluation, the next section will examine recent experiences of external and internal evaluation in Irish schools.

## **Evaluation in the Irish context**

### **1.13 Introduction**

This section relates the concepts of evaluation, accountability and school improvement explored in the previous sections to the Irish education system with particular reference to post-primary schools. Recent developments in external evaluation and experiences in school self-evaluation are outlined. Support for engaging in school development planning, internal evaluation and school improvement are described and the impact of this on Irish post-primary school processes are reviewed.

### **1.14 Supporting quality assurance in Irish schools**

The Education Act (1998) and the various partnership agreements in the past decade have required schools in Ireland to take responsibility for internal review and improvement through the process of school development planning. Enhanced roles for senior and middle management, linked to increased allowances, have entailed greater responsibility being devolved to teachers. Curriculum development, undertaken at a national level by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), has led to a number of changes in curriculum at both primary and post-primary level. As schools adapt the various curricula to suit the needs of their particular students, they are expected to take responsibility for a range of measures aimed at improving learning and teaching and they are encouraged to involve all the education partners in these measures (Department of Education and Science 2004). A variety of support services has been established to enable schools to build the required capacity to take on their responsibility. Among these are school development planning initiatives, curriculum support services and leadership development support at primary and post-primary level. While each of the services provides support to enhance quality assurance, the school development planning initiative is most closely linked to the evaluation system.

#### ***Support for school development planning***

As in other countries, school development planning has been associated with evaluation processes in Irish schools. While primary schools have long engaged in a degree of planning from a whole-school perspective, planning at a whole-school level is a more recent innovation in post-primary schools. The Education Act (1998) places a duty on boards of management to prepare, implement and regularly review a school plan in consultation with all the staff, patron, parents and students. To enable schools to engage

effectively in the school development planning process, the Department of Education and Science provided guidance and support in a number of ways. Two documents were published and distributed to schools in 1999: *Developing a School Plan Guidelines for Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Science 1999) and *School Development Planning An Introduction for Second Level School* (Government of Ireland 1999). These publications provide the rationale for the formal introduction of school development planning as a tool in the school improvement process. They emphasise the importance of the process of school planning and of the significance of involving all the partners in the process. The link between school planning and evaluation is highlighted: “The School Plan will serve as a basis for the work of the school as a whole and also for evaluating and reporting on whole school progress and development” (Department of Education and Science 1999 p8).

The School Development Planning Initiative, established in 1999, was introduced against a backdrop of international debate about quality assurance and with the view that school development planning was a powerful means of enhancing quality in education. The purpose of the initiative was “to stimulate and strengthen a culture of collaborative development planning in schools with a view to promoting school improvement and effectiveness” (Department of Education and Science 2003 p7). A national coordinator was appointed for each level and a team of facilitators was drawn from the teaching population to work with schools on a regional basis. The support teams provide advice, seminars, workshops and facilitation, along with training, support and resource materials. At post-primary level, the initiative also established a summer school to train facilitators and others to build school planning capacity in the system. The summer school programme subsequently became a component of a Higher Diploma in Professional Education Studies (School Planning) validated by NUI Galway.

A national progress report, *School Development Planning Initiative National Progress Report 2002* (Department of Education and Science 2003) provided jointly by the primary and post-primary support services indicated key strengths and successes of the initiative. By 2002, post-primary facilitation was successful in promoting school development planning as an ongoing process rather than a transient event, and the advisory service proved effective in introducing or reviving the school development planning process. However, in both sectors the core issue of planning having a positive

impact on teaching and on pupil learning remained an issue. Other challenges included: developing monitoring and evaluation skills within schools; creating and maintaining a climate of ongoing planning; and ensuring that internal school management received relevant support. The report recommended that support personnel at both levels should work together to build schools' capacity for rigorous self-evaluation focused on the core issue of teaching and learning.

Although no independent evaluation of the progress of schools in the area of school development planning has been formally undertaken, when whole-school evaluation (WSE) was introduced as a system of external evaluation in 2004, whole-school planning was evaluated as part of the process. Additionally, the inspectorate conducted a thematic evaluation of planning in thirty primary schools and published its report in 2006 and NUI Galway provided a composite of issues related to planning identified in post-primary school WSE reports (Reid 2006, 2007, 2008).

The report *An Evaluation of Planning in Thirty Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Science 2006) provides the results of the evaluation carried out by the inspectorate. The report concluded that schools were incrementally becoming familiar with whole-school planning processes and its associated benefits but that the challenge of achieving continuous improvement through whole-school planning remained. It contended that as part of an integrated school evaluation policy, a rigorous system of school self-review was needed. It recommended that all those involved with providing funding, support and training for schools should address the lack of connection between whole-school planning and improved outcomes for pupils.

An informal analysis of WSE at post-primary level (Reid 2006, 2007, 2008) focused on issues related to school improvement. In reports published between October and December 2006, all schools had mission statements that guided policies and procedures. In schools where the school development planning process was effective and ongoing, dynamic leadership and an emphasis on collaborative approaches were reported and schools used targeted continuous professional development to up-skill teaching staff. However, the same analysis indicated that schools were recommended to make school planning formal, and to establish or extend collaborative subject department planning. Recommendations were also made to senior management to delegate leadership to give more meaning to middle management and to boards of

management to develop formal procedures for producing reports to improve communication with all stakeholders. Reports published between January and June 2007 indicated that progress was evident in a number of areas. At the same time, the majority of reports recommended that: schools concentrate on mid to long-term strategies to address future needs; build an ethos of collaboration in the school community; appoint a more discrete planning team to steer the planning process and liaise with all the stakeholders; and define a clear and consistent approach to the development of school policies (Reid 2007).

To further assure quality in education for students from disadvantaged communities, a number of strategies have been developed. From the establishment of the School Development Planning Initiative, priority for support was available to schools serving disadvantaged areas. Subsequently, a new programme, Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) was developed and schools that accepted an invitation to participate in this programme were required to implement a range of planning, target setting and ongoing review processes (Department of Education and Science 2005). The programme envisaged the development, on a partnership basis, of planning templates and a common set of indicators. These would be used by schools to report on the progress of the implementation of school action plans, which would operate on a three-year cyclical basis.

### ***School self-evaluation***

Irish schools' commitment to school self-evaluation is closely linked to school development planning. In the latest social partnership agreement *Towards 2016 Ten-Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2016* (Department of the Taoiseach 2006), teachers have committed themselves to establishing and maintaining systems whereby efficiency and effectiveness can be assessed. The School Development Planning Initiative is identified as the mechanism to continue providing support for schools in the process of internal review. In recognising the contribution made by teachers to the overall performance of the school, the agreement notes that the most appropriate basis for developing strategies to enhance team and individual contribution is in the context of school development planning and holistic self-evaluation. The agreement requires schools to "utilise the Department of Education and Science publication *Looking at our School – an aid to self-evaluation in primary schools (2003a)* and *Looking at our School – an aid to self-evaluation in second level*

*school (2003b)* to conduct a self-evaluation of school performance” (p125). Each school will assess performance by using the themes outlined in the document for teaching and learning as a dimension of overall school performance.

Besides developments in the area of planning, with its expectation of internal review, the Irish system has facilitated a small number of schools to take part in European projects in the area of school self-evaluation. Participation in such projects enables the system to maintain awareness of and contribute to developments in school self-evaluation. It assists schools in building capacity in the area and ensures that their improvement efforts are in keeping with those of other countries. Irish schools participated in the following projects: *Evaluating Quality in School Education at Second Level* (Government of Ireland 2000), sponsored by the European Union; the *Effective School Self-Evaluation* (ESSE) coordinated by SICI (2003) and previously referred to; and the *Cooperative School Evaluation Project* (CSEP) under the auspices of the European Network of Policy Makers for the Evaluation of Education Systems (Department of Education and Science 2006a). In each case, Irish schools were selected to partake in the project with a view to enhancing knowledge and experience of school planning and self-evaluation. Each project was directed by a steering committee on which the inspectorate was represented. A report, which is available on the Internet, was written and disseminated at the conclusion of each project.

Five post-primary schools took part in the *Evaluating Quality in School Education at Second Level* project. The Irish schools participated in sub-project 1 intended for schools with little or no previous experience of self-evaluation. Suggestions, procedures and tools for initial self-evaluation were provided. The schools were asked to monitor and report on how useful the experience had been. Each school wrote a report describing their experience and completed a questionnaire to determine factors that had been conducive to successful school self-evaluation. Schools were encouraged to establish a steering committee, to appoint a critical friend and to use a specific *self-evaluation profile*, which would serve as the launch pad for discussion, begin the search for evidence and identify key areas for action. Teachers, parents, pupils and board members participated in the project and the Irish schools used questionnaire and survey most frequently in evaluating their selected areas, although interviews, focus groups and peer observation were also used. Overall the experience of the five Irish schools replicated that of the larger European project involving over 100 schools. Thus the



recommendations in the Irish report drew on the experience of the overall project. A number of measures to enhance the process of school self-evaluation were identified as a result, including: the need for ongoing support and training; the publication of clear guidelines with instruments and indicators, methods for evaluation and advice on interpreting data and report writing; involvement of stakeholders; the use of a critical friend or support team; and time, resources and networking. Contextual factors that facilitated successful school self-evaluation were identified in the EU Final Report (European Commission 1999). These include factors that are determined by government and national policies such as the degree of autonomy, the trend towards school self-evaluation and the relationship between internal and external evaluation. It was noted that the introduction of school development planning and the evolution of WSE augured well for the successful introduction of school self-evaluation.

The ESSE project was undertaken by SICI, mainly as a meta-evaluation of self-evaluation. It aimed to identify key indicators for evaluating quality self-evaluation procedures, to develop a methodology for inspecting self-evaluation, to determine strengths and weaknesses in self-evaluation practices, to analyse the relationship between internal and external evaluation in the participating countries and to produce case studies of effective self-evaluation. Two Irish schools participated in the project, one primary and one post-primary. Fourteen European countries were involved. While the report on the ESSE project does not provide an account of the effectiveness of self-evaluation in the participating schools, it makes suggestions about areas for improvement in each of the countries, through country reports. Of greater significance, however, is the provision of quality indicators, most notably with regard to the quality of external support for self-evaluation provided to schools by countries. The Irish country report (SICI 2003) suggests that a number of issues need to be addressed in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland. A common understanding of self-evaluation principles should be established. Quality indicators and evaluation instruments should be developed. Key areas of data of interest to schools should be identified and user-friendly systems of interpreting and analysing the available national data should be provided to assist schools in using statistical and benchmarking data more effectively. The report asserts that examples of good practice should be disseminated and that training in a number of areas should be provided.

The European Network of Policy Makers for the Evaluation of Education Systems promotes best practice in various aspects of school evaluation and the use of evaluation outcomes to inform and develop educational policies at national level. The *Cooperative School Evaluation Project* was a study of the development of non-curricular school policies in the school development-planning context. It entailed drawing up, testing and refining quality indicators for evaluating school performance in the area of policy development. Among the expected outcomes of the project were the production of a set of quality indicators for evaluating schools' policy formation processes and validation of these indicators to ensure that they would reflect good planning processes, outline a useful framework for school self-evaluation, help external evaluators work with schools in assessing the planning process and provide pointers for improved practice. Three countries took part in the project: Finland, Norway and Ireland. Indicators were devised and the report concluded that the indicators and the associated instruments provided a good framework for reflection and for giving developmental feedback to schools. Evaluations from the partner countries showed that the indicators were valid and reliable in a variety of different situations within both primary and post-primary schools and between countries. The instruments were found to be comprehensive and could be used by schools for self-evaluation or by external evaluators as part of a transparent system. The use of questionnaires, which were not part of the project, rather than interviews would allow for greater involvement of partners in the process. The indicators were developed to evaluate non-curricular policies. When applied, their focus was clarified as being more related to the process of planning rather than the outcomes of a particular policy. When boundaries between curricular and non-curricular policies were unclear the indicators had a general application and could be used to evaluate the planning process in curricular areas.

In summary, a range of initiatives and projects undertaken within the Irish education system to enhance the quality of education through school development planning and school self-evaluation has improved the knowledge base both at system level and in schools. Schools have accepted that school planning is an ongoing process and have committed to engaging in school self-evaluation, but a number of challenges still remain. Involvement of a small number of schools in European projects has provided experience and opportunity to compare Irish schools with those in other countries. Measures required to enhance capacity for self-evaluation, such as training and support, provision of instruments, provision and use of data and regular external evaluation or

moderation of self-evaluation, have been identified. A framework *Looking at our School*, containing themes for evaluation, as well as instruments developed for Irish and European projects are available for use by schools.

### **1.15 External evaluation**

The inspectorate in Ireland has a statutory quality assurance obligation in relation to education provision, as set out in section 13 of the Education Act (1998). In re-organising the structure and management of the inspectorate in response to changes in the educational environment at the beginning of the new century, the chief inspector cited its goal as contributing as effectively as possible to the complex interaction of clients, consumers and service providers and promoting excellence in the system through the performance of its functions (Department of Education and Science 2002). Its functions are described broadly as the evaluation of the education system and the provision of advice to the education system and to policy makers. Three main objectives are identified: contributing to evaluation, to development and to the support of the education system. The inspectorate recognises that an integrated approach to quality assurance plays an important role in improving learning outcomes. The integrated approach emphasises the fact that quality is best achieved through a combination of complementary measures including internal review, curriculum development, and the use of a range of assessment modes, along with external evaluation.

The *Professional Code of Practice on Evaluating and Reporting for the Inspectorate* (Department of Education and Science 2002a) outlines the guiding principles that inform the work of inspectors. Among its general principles are commitment to: fostering mutual respect and trust as a foundation for the development of a positive professional relationship between inspectors and the school community; partnership and collaboration through the participation of the school community in the evaluation process; and engaging in dialogue with school staffs and the education partners. During evaluation, reporting inspectors are committed to: making every effort to foster positive relationships with all members of the school community; ensuring that teachers receive a fair and accurate evaluation of their work and are made aware of the basis on which judgements are made; and that the positive relationships between teachers and pupils are preserved.

A team of inspectors conducts the evaluation and the process involves meetings with management, parents, the principal and teams of teachers. In post-primary schools, interviews are also held with students. Inspectors visit classrooms and observe teaching and learning, interacting with students where appropriate and examining student work, including written assignments and portfolios. Evidence schedules are completed and judgements are made that form the basis of the evaluation report. Although the evidence base includes measures of attainment such as those provided through the use of standardised test results in literacy and numeracy at primary level and state examinations at post-primary level, such evidence, which could be used to create league tables, is not included in the final reports. The procedures followed are outlined clearly in two publications *A Guide to Whole School Evaluation in Post-Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Science 2006b) and *A Guide to Whole School Evaluation in Primary Schools* (Department of Education and Science 2006c).

#### ***Approaches to evaluation***

The range of approaches to quality assurance employed in the Irish education system include: promotion of school self-evaluation; extensive support for school development planning; teacher in-career development and support in the context of curriculum change; school-designed assessment and reporting to parents; use of standardised assessment and state certificate examinations; external evaluation of schools by the inspectorate; programme evaluations focusing on aspects of curriculum provision and system evaluation through international surveys of attainment (Department of Education and Science 2004). The inspectorate conducts a range of external evaluations. Among these are: whole school evaluation, subject inspections at post-primary level, individual inspection of probationary teachers at primary level, thematic evaluations and focused inspections.

The WSE model of external evaluation is viewed as an evaluation mechanism that complements internal continuous improvement activity in schools. It is designed: to facilitate full participation of the whole-school community in the process; to contribute to school development; to ensure school and system accountability; to enable teachers and schools to use the evaluation criteria for school self-review and improvement; and to contribute to system improvement. The model expects inspectors to take account of schools' own review and development work and to affirm good practice and achievement. The themes outlined in *Looking at our School* are also used in the WSE

process and inspectors are committed to basing judgements on first-hand evidence and to applying evaluation criteria objectively and reliably. A review procedure under section 13(9) of the Education Act (1998) *Procedure for Review of Inspections on Schools and Teachers* (Revised) (Department of Education and Science 2006d) provides details of how teachers or boards of management can request a review of any school evaluation carried out by an inspector.

Whole-school evaluation (WSE) was introduced into the Irish education system in 2004 following a pilot project in 1998. It replaced a system of *School Reports* (Tuirisc Scoile) in primary schools and was accepted after initial industrial relations issues at post-primary level where whole-school external evaluation had not been common practice. The model, originally called whole-school inspection (WSI), evolved through consultation with all the education partners and was renamed WSE. In spite of the renaming, the model is a centrally controlled system of inspection and the term WSE has become synonymous with external evaluation only. Little research has yet been undertaken with regard to WSE in general, and in particular about the impact of whole-school evaluation (WSE) on school improvement. It is deemed to be ‘light touch’ inspection (Mac Namara and O Hara 2008) and the tone of reports is noted as hugely positive (Reid 2006). Reid (2006) accepts that this is to be expected since post-primary schools have been “monarchs of all they surveyed” for many years. She suggests that the Department’s ‘softly, softly’ approach can be described as a weaning off period, when “schools are first coaxed out of their comfort zone into the reality of constructive engagement with relentless environmental change”. A study undertaken in the Netherlands (2005), using MacBeath’s Cube (MacBeath 1999 p2) places Ireland’s evaluation model on the support end of the support-pressure continuum (Verhaegen 2008). Initial research by Mac Namara and O’ Hara (2005, 2006) focuses on the provision of evaluation criteria through the publication and distribution of *Looking at our School*. This, they suggest, indicates an emphasis on school self-evaluation and significantly downplays the external evaluation. They accept that the first priority for the Department of Education and Science is to establish the process of evaluation and they recognise that this is still developing and evolving. Their research indicates that schools describe the WSE process as positive, affirming and supportive; that the process provides a focus for schools and has benefits in terms of increased cohesion and collegiality; and that the reports are considered fair and helpful. On the negative side they report that schools have not yet embraced self-evaluation and have not yet

developed the concept of gathering and analysing data to build evidence on which to base evaluation judgements.

### ***Evaluation framework***

*Looking at our School* provides the framework for WSE at primary and post-primary level. Inspectors evaluate the quality of a number of components in the key areas of management, planning, curriculum provision, teaching and learning and support for pupils. The WSE process involves three clear evaluation stages: pre-evaluation, in-school evaluation and post-evaluation phases. Potential for school improvement exists through the evaluation framework (*Looking at our School*) and at each of the stages. Early research available indicates that the framework has been received positively by schools with all schools agreeing that the themes for self-evaluation succeed in obtaining a comprehensive picture of the school and not just the academic outcomes. It is considered to be “an excellent start heading in the right direction” (MacNamara and O Hara 2006 p576). Improvement at the pre-evaluation stage is noted as schools report that the process brings staff together and gives them a sense of collegiality in preparation for the evaluation. Reports of ‘endless meetings’ and ‘a mountain of paperwork’ being prepared to bring together and update existing documents suggest that schools are spending time preparing for the external evaluation. However, the study points out that schools are not equipped to gather and analyse data, which might be useful and desirable. It also reports that schools in their research did not intend to continue to engage in self-evaluation as an ongoing process. The in-school phase is regarded as worthwhile and positive although it is less clear if school leaders perceived any tangible improvement emerging from the evaluation. At the post-evaluation stage, the process of receiving the report for comment is reassuring for schools and reports are seen as providing a fair reflection of the work of the school. However, it is noted that a small number of schools had used the process of appeal to the chief inspector. Both Reid (2006), and MacNamara and O’Hara (2006) raise the question of dealing with issues arising from the evaluation. Reid comments that in spite of the ‘softly, softly’ approach, the recommendations made are quite specific and this begs the question: “will subsequent evaluations focus on whether or not schools implement the recommendations?” MacNamara and O’Hara comment on the fact that schools feel they will be left to their own devices to pursue such issues, as they do not believe the Department will intervene.

A very recent publication (MacNamara and O'Hara 2008) provides a comprehensive overview of the development of WSE, the framework described in the *Looking at our School* publications and the experience of schools with the process of external evaluation. It summarises the evaluation of the WSE pilot project (Department of Education and Science 1999a) and the Customer Survey (Department of Education and Science 2005a) conducted externally. The publication concludes with the view that overall the first efforts at WSE and SDP must be regarded as a success. WSE has been received positively in schools and among key stakeholders. MacNamara and O'Hara contend that the fundamental problems which have emerged include the lack of data and evidence on which to base judgements and the very limited role of parents and pupils in the process. In analysing the *Looking at our School* documents, the authors accept that the Irish evaluation system is characterised by an emphasis on cooperation and collaboration and on school and teacher self-evaluation, which is largely in line with international trends. They maintain that there is a reluctance: to engage in serious data collection and analysis; to develop a serious role for parents and pupils; or to use the evaluation reporting system either to tackle serious problems or to reduce the "culture of secrecy endemic in Irish education" (MacNamara and O'Hara 2008 p78).

#### ***Data gathering and benchmarking***

The importance of data gathering is acknowledged in the literature and inspectors engaging in external evaluation of schools request a range of information from schools. As part of the WSE process, inspectors require schools to complete a school information form; in the course of meetings, inspectors complete pro forma interview schedules; and during in-class observation, schedules of evidence are completed. Information is also gleaned from state agencies such as the National Education Welfare Board and the State Examinations Commission. A wide variety of information is thus gathered, which includes both qualitative and quantitative data. Statistical data in the form of staff numbers, pupil enrolment trends and attendance, assessment results and state examination results are gathered. However, the value of gathering information about the working of schools that is not easily measured is highlighted in school improvement literature and much of the focus of external evaluation is on these aspects of education provision. Quality indicators contained in the *Looking at our School* documents and augmented by recently devised statements of level within the indicators are used by inspectors as the basis for making judgements in areas such as the quality of school planning, overall curriculum provision, teaching and learning and supports

for pupils. Although final reports do not comment on the specific measurable results, the schools' ability and practice in relation to analysing results internally is noted. At post-primary level, the state examination results are a clear benchmark for schools in assessing the level of progress.

### ***Evaluation reports and findings***

Since 2006 WSE reports have been published on the Department of Education and Science website. Details of publication are available in *Publication of School Inspection Reports, Guidelines* (Department of Education and Science 2006e). As part of the publication process, school staff, management and parents' associations are informed in advance that the report will be published; that management has the right to respond in writing to the report in advance of publication and that normally the response is published with the report. On completion of the final report, a copy is sent to the principal and management who are invited to respond through one of three means: accept the report without comment; respond formally to the report; or request a formal review of the inspection. The purpose of the school response is to allow schools to make observations on the content of the report and to set out how the report will be used in the context of the school's ongoing programme of self-evaluation, planning and improvement. This development provides a first step in encouraging schools to use the findings of the evaluation for school improvement. Evidence from WSE reports published at post-primary level in June 2008 suggests that the majority of schools now provide a school response indicating how the recommendations will be implemented. Further follow-up, in the form of meetings or communication between Department officials and school trustees or board of management, has been undertaken where serious concerns were noted in reports.

### ***Collaboration***

In their research, MacNamara and O'Hara (2006) accept that many writers promoting school self-evaluation emphasise the centrality of the school community to developing capacity in the area. They note the lack of involvement of parents and pupils in the pilot WSE phase and in the *Looking at our School* documents. However, they assert that no issues were raised during interviews in their own research in this regard and that nationally, neither parent nor student representative bodies have expressed criticism about a lack of representation. Developments in involving parents to a greater extent in



school evaluations are presently being undertaken. Questionnaires for parents and pupils, currently used in focused inspections, will also be used in future WSE work.

### ***Feedback***

The WSE process makes provision for teachers and school communities to receive feedback at the in-school evaluation phase and during the post-evaluation phase (Department of Education and Science 2006b, 2006e). Although the WSE process is not designed to evaluate the performance of individual teachers, inspectors give oral feedback to teachers on their professional work after observing teaching and learning in individual classes. After the evaluation, post-evaluation meetings are arranged to provide oral feedback to the principal and teaching staff and the board of management. The main findings and recommendation contained in the draft report are presented orally. The chief inspector's report (Department of Education and Science 2005b) suggests that where possible, inspectors relate their recommendations to the school's internal review and planning systems and to the current priorities of the school. Staff and board members are encouraged to discuss the outcomes of the evaluation and to clarify information with the evaluation team (Department of Education and Science 2006b).

MacNamara and O'Hara (2008) highlight criticism of the feedback provided by inspectors. The criticism is two-fold: the feedback is considered too general or impractical, and the lack of any mechanism or responsibility on the part of the Department to follow up is identified. In their research, principals also complained about the failure of the WSE process to deal with poor or under-performing teachers. The high level of dissatisfaction with the quality of feedback is acknowledged as being at odds with the *Customer Survey* (Department of Education and Science 2005), which found that seventy five per cent of teachers were satisfied with opportunities to discuss inspectors' observations. A further point of criticism about feedback is made in relation to the fact that inspectors were determined to stick to a 'very rigid' approach to their work, which "inhibited any spontaneity which might have helped to improve the quality of advice and support" (p92).

As an outcome of their research, MacNamara and O'Hara (2008) devised a course for teachers to enable them to evaluate their own practice. The design of the course took into account the importance attached to four elements in any approach to developing

self-evaluating professional educators: namely community centred, practice oriented, focused on gathering accurate data, and engendering a sense of ownership. However, since whole-school communities were not likely to be represented among the participants on the course, they redefined community as being made up of teachers from different schools and at different stages of their careers seeking to enhance professional skills. Teachers were trained in self-evaluation techniques; they were encouraged to engage in communications online and the course hoped to develop models of data collection that could be used across a range of educational settings. Participants used the data collection instruments in a variety of educational settings and then reported on their use in a structured online environment and through guided discussion.

### **1.16 Conclusion**

A review of developments in evaluation in the Irish context provides evidence of a move towards increasing the responsibility placed on schools to evaluate the quality of education. Through the support services, notably the School Development Planning Initiative, schools have been encouraged to partake in collaborative internal evaluation. Whole-school planning has been accepted as an ongoing process, with review and prioritising areas for development as component parts. However, in spite of some progress, further challenges remain to ensure that schools build capacity to monitor and evaluate the implementation of improvement plans and to focus school development planning efforts on teaching and learning.

National support for enhancing school self-evaluation has been augmented by participation in European research projects. These projects have facilitated a small number of schools to develop systems of self-evaluation and have identified the needs of Irish schools in the area of self-evaluation. Ongoing support, guidelines, indicators and instruments, advice on use of data, and report writing were regarded as requirements in initial projects. Other projects highlighted the need for: the provision of statistical data and benchmarking, training in self-evaluation methods and independent external evaluation of self-evaluation. As a result of participation in projects and of the publication of *Looking at our School*, some indicators and instruments have been made available to schools. The introduction of WSE as an external model of evaluation has created an impetus to engage in self-evaluation.

WSE as an approach to external inspection has been judged as leaning towards a model of support rather than pressure for change and improvement. Initial research suggests that while this supportive approach may be necessary to embed the process in the school system, it may not be effective in ensuring long-term improvement. Rigid feedback and lack of follow up are criticised and the scant use of data as evidence is considered a serious flaw in the process.

The literature reviewed in the three sections of this chapter provides an overview of a range of concepts on which to base an exploration of evaluation practices in Irish post-primary schools. The purpose of schooling and the context and purpose of evaluation, including accountability and improvement will be investigated. Current approaches to evaluation, both external and internal, and the impact of these on school improvement will be examined. The theory of schools as learning organisations with a focus on continuous learning for all will provide a suitable framework for increasing understanding of how effective system-wide school self-evaluation can be introduced. Figure 1.1 illustrates the themes and concepts related to evaluation that merit investigation.

*Figure 1.1 Concepts related to quality assurance*

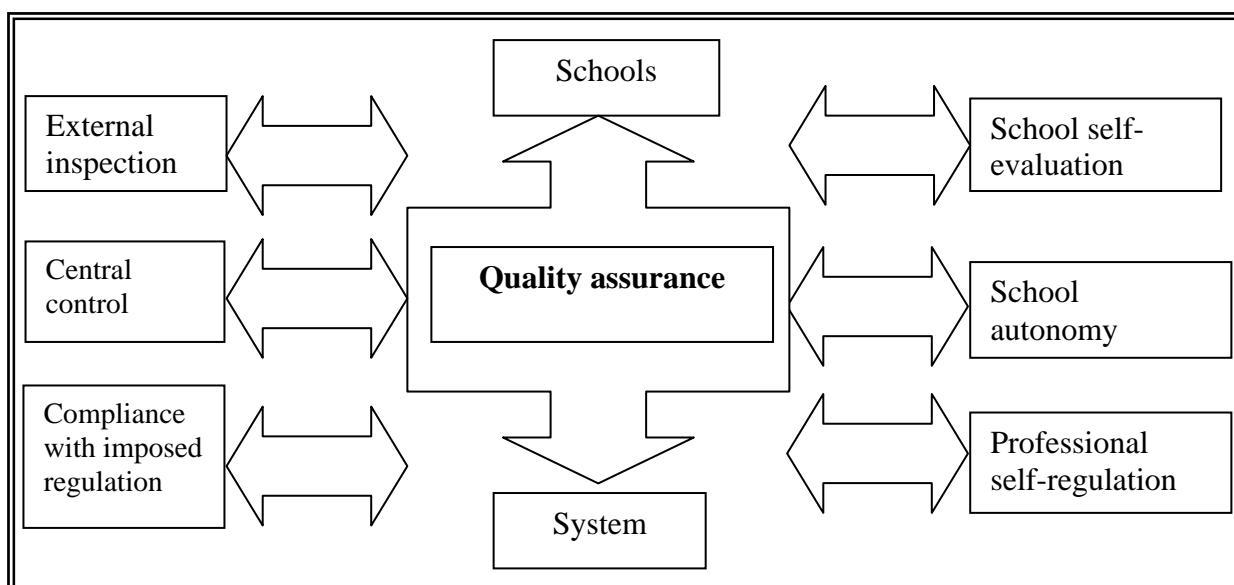
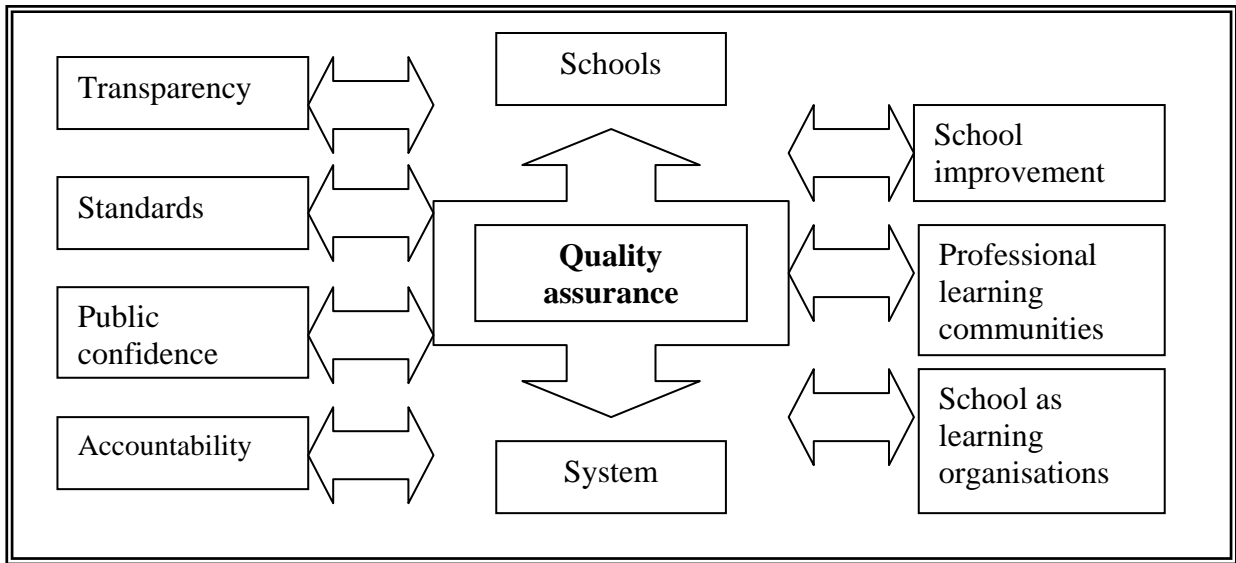


Figure 1.2 provides an overview of the concepts related to the purposes served by evaluation and the impact evaluation practice might have on schools and on the education system. Together these figures present a theoretical framework for the research.

Figure 1.2 Concepts related to the purpose of evaluation



## **Chapter 2 Research design and approach**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This section outlines the design of and approach taken in the research. It provides details of the research questions and the aims of the research. It gives the rationale for the research design and methodology and indicates the opportunities and challenges that the approach presents. It describes the groups involved in the research and the reasons for selecting particular groups. Ethical issues and how these were dealt with are discussed. The types of questions posed and the themes explored are considered. The strategies used to gather data are recorded and the approach taken to the analysis of data is described. Finally the section gives details of the limitations of the research.

### **2.2 Research aims and question**

Little research has been undertaken to date in relation to external and school self-evaluation in post-primary schools in Ireland. Studies conducted have focused on the process and reaction of schools to WSE, as an external inspection model, from the perspective of school principals. The research in this thesis was carried out with a view to strengthening the knowledge base and deepening understanding about evaluation in post-primary schools. It was conducted to gain insights and reflections about the school evaluation experiences encountered by a range of groups, which would be useful to the education system, to schools and to the research community.

The aim of the research derives from the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter. A number of concepts that merit investigation emerged from the literature. Among these were: the purpose of school and of evaluation; accountability systems and school improvement; the nature and impact of external evaluation on schools; and school self-evaluation practices in Irish post-primary schools. Some particular themes surfaced from these concepts including: the role of evaluation in the context of increased autonomy in schools; the issue of maintaining standards in schools to retain public confidence in the education system; the need for leadership in ensuring accountability; and the importance of evaluation if schools are to become professional learning organisations.

Arising from the theoretical framework, the following proposal was made:

*As systems of quality assurance in schools move from centrally controlled models of inspection towards school-based evaluation processes, the purpose of evaluation shifts from compliance to development and from proving to improving. Whole-school evaluation (WSE) is the most recent model of inspection introduced in Irish post-primary schools. Clarity of purpose and knowledge of the impact and effectiveness of this model as a quality assurance practice is necessary to determine how evaluation practices should develop in future.*

Two fundamental research questions therefore emerged.

*How do current inspection models and evaluation practices impact on Irish post-primary schools and how effective are they in achieving their quality assurance purpose?*

*What models, structures, processes and systems need to be put in place to move from a centrally controlled inspection system to a system of school self-evaluation that will lead to school improvement and will ensure that public confidence in the education system is maintained?*

## **2.3 Research design**

### ***Research paradigm and approach***

The purpose of the research was to gain insights into current evaluation practices in Irish post-primary schools. It hoped to understand how these practices impact on schools from the perspectives of a range of those working in and with schools. One possible means of ascertaining a range of views was to engage in quantitative data collection through the use of survey. The use of quantitative research enables the views of large number of participants to be gathered in a relatively short time scale. It also produces concrete numeric results which can be easily analysed and reported. However, the purpose of this research was to probe deeply into a small number of important and complex aspects of practice, specifically current evaluation practice and its impact on the quality of education. In order to investigate the concepts in depth and to deepen understanding of the complexity of issues involved, the research was undertaken from a qualitative perspective. Stake (2005) highlights the fact that taking account of a variety of experiences and contexts in qualitative research optimises understanding. Having reviewed the literature, which emphasised the need for pressure and support to enable schools to engage in effective evaluation for improvement, the views and experiences

of school personnel, and of those involved in exerting pressure on or providing support for schools, were sought.

Initial consideration was given to engaging in case study research. Such research would enable in-depth exploration of current evaluation practice in particular school settings and would have provided insights from the various groups in particular school communities. Such a focus would be useful in terms of gaining knowledge and deepening understanding at local school level. However, since the deepening of knowledge and understanding was sought in order to influence change and development at policy level within the system and nationally, the specific views and insights of a broader range of groups with wider experience of school settings was deemed more valuable. Breen (2006) suggests that when engaging in qualitative data collection and analysis, which is always messy, it is useful to ask the question “What do I ultimately expect to get out of this research?” (p463). She contends that if the research question requires participants to share and compare their experience, to develop and generate ideas or to explore issues of shared importance, focus group research is a useful methodology. In order to gain insights into the research topic, this study required participants to share their experience of external inspection and school self-evaluation, to develop and generate ideas about how evaluation practices should move forward and to explore the supports that needed to be put in place to ensure that evaluation would lead to continuous school improvement. Thus, in order to ascertain the required depth of understanding and knowledge that would be useful in making policy decisions, from a broad range of groups, within a limited timeframe, focus group research was deemed the most suitable research method.

Focus group research is described as “a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” (Morgan 1996 p130). This has three components: it is a research method devoted to data collection; the interaction in group discussion is the source of data; and the researcher’s active role in creating the group discussion for data collection is acknowledged. In this research data related to school evaluation was gathered through enabling participants to engage in group discussion led by the researcher. Focus groups are deemed to have certain characteristics or features: they consist of people who possess certain characteristics; who provide qualitative data; who do so in a focused discussion to help understand the topic of interest (Kreuger and Casey 2009). The groups in this study consisted of

professionals with particular experiences that provided them with valuable information that would assist in enhancing understanding of school evaluation. Focus group research can be used either as a self-contained method or in combination with other methods and while it is similar to interviewing as a methodology, it emphasises the interaction of the group (Morgan 1996). In this research, focus groups were used as the sole method of collecting data. It was expected that through the interaction of the group, participants would both query each other and explain themselves to each other and they would in this way provide insights into the complexities of how evaluation impacts on schools. The use of focus groups would also provide valuable data about the extent of consensus and diversity among participants and between groups about the effectiveness of WSE and of current self-evaluation practices. Thus a range of insights from a variety of experiences would be gained. Focus groups are considered to be time efficient as they can produce a large amount of concentrated data in a short space of time and they provide detailed information on an area of group life (Whitney 2005). By using focus groups, this research hoped to encourage professionals who led busy professional lives to share their reflections and insights in an efficient manner.

### ***Research participants***

Three ingredients are identified that influence decisions about who should be invited to take part in focus group studies: the purpose of the research, the homogeneity of the group and the cost factor (Kreuger and Casey 2009). The purpose of this research was to determine how a centrally controlled school evaluation system impacts on Irish post-primary schools and to gain insights into how the evaluation system could move towards one that would be school-based and developmental. The views of a variety of participants who exert pressure on and provide support for schools engaging in evaluation were sought to enrich understanding. Inspectors who conduct external evaluation and therefore put pressure on schools, support service personnel whose remit is to provide support for school development, and principals who lead school improvement were deemed the most suitable participants for the research. The study used naturally occurring groupings (Barbour 2005) rather than groups representing the diverse participants. Each focus group therefore consisted of participants from a discrete group. Discrete groups were chosen as the most suitable means of enabling participants to share knowledge without being inhibited or deferring to others who might be perceived to be more experienced, knowledgeable or better educated (Kreuger and Casey 2009). Such segmentation within groups, where participants are similar to



each other, was felt to be the best way of capturing particular perspectives about school evaluation and would enable discussion to flow more smoothly (Morgan 1996). The four focus groups invited to take part in the research were: one group of inspectors; one group from each of two support services, Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) and the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI); and one group of post-primary school principals.

The number of focus groups is generally decided by determining when theoretical saturation is expected to be reached (Breen 2006, Morgan 1996) and most projects consist of four to six groups (Morgan 1996). In this research, time constraints and access to professionals resulted in the selection of four groups only. The inclusion of focus groups of teachers, students and parents, which would have further enriched the research, was restricted by constraints of time and this is acknowledged as a limitation of this study. Kreuger and Casey (2009) identify the ideal number of participants in focus groups for non-commercial topics as between five and eight while Breen (2006) considers four to six to be best for homogeneous groups. A group of five participants was sought for each focus group in this study but the final size of each group related directly to the availability and attendance of invited participants. The groups in this research ranged from three to ten participants and were therefore generally outside the ideal size.

A variety of strategies was used to find suitable participants for the focus groups. The professional position of the researcher, being a manager of a regional subdivision of the inspectorate, meant that ethical issues required consideration. A group of inspectors who were not managed by the researcher was sought, to ensure that participants would feel free to engage in honest discussion and disclosure of insights about their experiences. It was therefore decided to enlist the assistance of a manager colleague who would identify a list of suitable inspectors to become part of a focus group. The nominated inspectors were then invited to attend a focus group meeting and three possible dates were suggested. Initial contact was made by phone call to explain the reason for the invitation, the nature of the research and the time and level of commitment that would be required. This was followed up by an email providing similar details. Further phone calls and emails were used to confirm the date, time and venue. Five inspectors, working within a reasonable distance from an appropriate office agreed to take part in the focus group.

In the case of participants from the Leadership Development for Schools, an assistant national co-ordinator of the initiative, with responsibility for post-primary support, was contacted to provide a list of possible participants. The national co-ordinator was then contacted by phone to seek permission to contact those listed and this was followed by an email making the same request in writing. Three of the initiative's eight full time post-primary support personnel were invited to take part in the focus group. Correspondence through a number of emails identified difficulty in finding a suitable date for the focus group. Subsequently the assistant national co-ordinator took on the task and the three members of LDS agreed to attend on a suitable date. An appropriate hotel was chosen as the venue and the three travelled to the venue as agreed. It is worth noting that in inviting members of the LDS team to participate in a focus group, it was hoped to establish their perceptions of how evaluation practices impacted on schools and in particular on principals, through their experience of supporting school principals. By coincidence, all three LDS members involved in the focus group had experienced WSE as principals of their own schools and the exploration of the various themes was influenced both by their role in the support service and by their experience as school principals. It was therefore necessary, in writing up the findings, to make distinctions between opinions expressed as principals and those articulated as support service participants in the study.

The national co-ordinator of the School Development Planning Initiative was contacted by phone to seek a list of names of possible participants to take part in a focus group. After follow up emails, she offered to provide the entire post-primary team, ten in total, to take part in a focus group, as an element of the initiative's annual professional development programme. This offer was gratefully accepted and all further arrangements were made with the national coordinator. The group's professional development programme was held in an education centre and the focus group session was the opening session of a two-day programme.

In seeking a group of post-primary school principals, ethical issues again determined that principals working in schools within the region managed by the researcher were deemed unsuitable, as principals might feel inhibited from partaking in open and honest discussion. It was also felt that inspectors managed by the researcher might view the research as a form of monitoring of their work. The help of the same manager

colleague who assisted with identification of inspectors was enlisted to select principals of post-primary schools as participants. It was necessary to identify principals working within reasonable travelling distance of one another and who had experienced the WSE process as principals in their schools. A list of possible principal participants was compiled and each principal was contacted by phone until five who were willing to partake in a focus group and were available to attend on an agreed date were found. Follow up letters were sent to confirm the date, time and venue and to provide a short written description of expectations from the focus group. The group agreed to meet in the education centre that was most convenient to the location of their schools.

Initial contact between the researcher and members of each participant group led to an agreement that the focus group discussion would be completed within two hours. In the case of all participants except those in the School Development Planning Initiative, a reminder either in the form of a text message or email was sent the day before to ensure that all those who agreed would attend. While randomisation would have been desirable to minimise bias in the research (Kreuger and Casey 2009), availability was the main criterion used to select participants. As a result of the agreements reached, four focus groups, two with five participants, one with three participants and one with ten participants were expected to take part in the research. All participants in three focus groups attended as expected. In the case of the school principals, one contacted the researcher on the morning of the focus group meeting to excuse herself due to illness and a second did not turn up and no further contact was made. Thus on the agreed date, only three post-primary school principals' took part in the focus group. A fourth principal, who was very interested in taking part, was subsequently interviewed, using the same questions as were used with the groups.

### ***Research interview schedule and questions***

As Breen (2006) suggests, an interview schedule was prepared to ensure consistency across all focus groups. Having agreed the research proposal and question with the thesis supervisor, a fruitful discussion of possible themes to be explored with the participants ensued. A small number of broad themes were agreed: participants' reflections on their experiences of WSE; their views about current school self-evaluation practices in post-primary schools; and developments, including structures and supports required to enhance evaluation practices. Having agreed the broad topics to be explored, it was decided that questions on each topic would be devised to ensure

consistency between groups, to enable more efficient analysis and to bring greater precision to the discussion (Kreuger 1998). The number of questions was decided in relation to the time available. Since each interview would be two hours long, a total of sixteen questions related to the topics were composed (appendix 1). This was deemed the maximum number of questions that could be asked to allow sufficient discussion. The focused sequencing of questions for the group interviews received a degree of attention, as Kreuger (1998) considers it important to allow participants to reflect on their experiences with the topic, listen to one another's views and then build on their views. Questions went from general to specific and from positive to negative. Each of the topics was explored using an introductory question followed by three to five key questions. Occasionally probes were used to gain further explanations about experiences or ideas. The final question was posed to enable participants to reflect and clarify what had emerged from previous discussion.

#### **2.4 Data collection**

When the focus group discussion schedule was completed, consideration was given to conducting a pilot focus group to test the topics and questions to ensure that they would provide the required information. However, time constraints and difficulty in identifying suitable participants who were available to meet meant conducting a pilot session was difficult. It was therefore decided that the first focus group would consist of inspectors. As these were colleagues, it was felt that if issues arose, they were the most easily accessible group to return to, either as a group or as individuals, for clarification or re-interviewing. If major issues arose, the group of inspectors could be deemed to be a pilot group and a different group could have been convened. In the event, the focus group discussion with inspectors realised the type of information required and did not reveal any significant difficulties. The recorded discussion was written up as preliminary findings and this was returned to each inspector for comment. Very helpful comments, in written form and orally were provided but no element of the discussion schedule required alteration. However, as a result of the comments, it was decided that the recording of each focus group session would be professionally transcribed prior to analysing and writing up the findings.

At each focus group session and at the beginning of the individual interview, the purpose of the research was explained. The fact that the information was required for personal research leading to a doctoral thesis was reiterated, as it was clear that a

number of participants were willing to take part in the focus groups in order to ensure that their voice would be heard by the system and by policy makers. They were aware of the role of the researcher as a member of the inspectorate and therefore as a representative of the Department of Education and Science. While the primary purpose was explained in terms of academic research, the researcher asserted that the findings would be made available to the inspectorate and that hopefully they would influence the future direction of school evaluation. A diagram based on figures 1.1 and 1.2 (p67/68) was used to help clarify the aim of the research: to gain insights about current evaluation experiences and to elicit views about how evaluation models and practices could develop to ensure that evaluation led to school improvement. Permission was sought from each focus group to use a digital audio recorder to record the session. This was granted in all cases and all sessions were recorded. Notes were also taken as a back up and to identify key points. Participants were given an assurance of confidentiality with regard to the views and reflections they shared. They were informed that the content of focus groups would be attributed to groups rather than individuals. They were further assured that a written version of their contributions would be returned to them for comment prior to it being included in the final thesis. Any changes they requested in the written version would be accommodated. Negotiating and clearing qualitative material in this way is useful where the researcher is interactive and engaged rather than separate from the researched (Walker 2002).

When the analysis of data was completed and a draft chapter of the findings from each focus group was written, this was returned to each member of the focus group for comment. Members of two focus groups, the inspectors and the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) group provided detailed feedback on the draft chapter. In the case of the views articulated by those in the inspector's focus group, feedback was provided by some individuals. All five members of the group were aware of the feedback being provided and those who did not provide feedback explained that they were aware of the comments made by their colleagues and were therefore happy that it was not necessary to repeat them. Feedback was provided orally, in written form and through the use of the track changes tool in the word processing programme. Members of the School Development Planning Initiative focus group requested that the time scale suggested for feedback be extended as they wished to provide one combined commentary. This was agreed and the draft chapter with a large number of changes and an accompanying explanatory document were returned. Some important issues were

included in the feedback and these were noted in redrafting the chapter. In particular, members wished to clarify that the views expressed were those of individual members of the team and not the official view of SDPI and that this should be clear in the chapter. They also clarified that in the oral setting of a focus group, general statements were made because of knowledge and experience in particular schools. The statements, when read in the draft chapter appeared to apply to all schools or all teachers. This generalisation was not intended and every effort was made to rectify this in the revised version. Finally a clear distinction was made between the School Development Planning Initiative and school development planning as a process within schools and between SDPI, school development planning and WSE with regard to impact on schools. All suggestions and revisions requested were made. The national coordinator was contacted by phone to verify that all requested changes had been made and to offer further reading of the revised chapter prior to using the data. This was deemed to be unnecessary by the coordinator. It was also agreed that the complete transcript of the focus group would not be submitted as part of the thesis and would not be made available in any form to any other parties.

The role of the moderator is deemed to be highly important in focus groups (Kreuger and Casey 2009). Consideration was given to seeking an assistant to undertake the work, to ensure that participants would feel free to reveal their views openly and honestly. However, the need to listen respectfully, to try to understand the themes from the perspective of participants and to hear the topics discussed in a variety of ways while at the same time having a true understanding of the purpose of the study led to the conclusion that the researcher should be the moderator. The need to inhibit the authority of the researcher so that participants could take over and own the interview space was borne in mind (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis 2005). During focus group sessions, the themes and questions were clearly communicated, time was allowed for participants to pause and reflect and care was taken not to impose views and opinions. Probes were sometimes used to gain clearer understandings of the views participants were sharing and in some cases specific clarification was sought. An awareness of the role of the dynamics of the group in accessing new kinds of information was borne in mind (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis 2005). For this reason, while the questions prepared and available on the focus group schedule were used with all groups, in some cases, new avenues were explored when initiated by participants. It should be noted that some questions were of particular interest to the researcher. These stemmed from data

available through informal discussion with school personnel, through small-scale research conducted into evaluation by others and through knowledge acquired through the researcher's role in the inspectorate. The role of inspectors in evaluating school management without having first-hand experience in this area was one such example. The recent introduction of follow through processes in schools that lack capacity to improve practice identified through WSE as weak is another. It was important that greater emphasis than was merited was not given to these lines of discussion.

## **2.5 Analysis of data**

As a result of the focus groups, four sets of distinct data, consisting of recorded sessions, ranging from one hour forty-five minutes to two hours, and field notes of key points were available. Each set of data represented the insights of a particular group. In order to ensure that the analysis was systematic, a deliberate, sequential process was followed (Kreuger and Casey 2009). An abridged transcript of the inspectors' focus group audio recording was made and this was used to write a draft report of the findings. As a result of feedback from the inspector participants, it was felt that full transcripts of all the focus group recordings were required. Accordingly all audio recordings, including the inspectors' group recording, were sent to a professional agency to be transcribed. When the transcripts were returned, the key points from the individual interview with one principal were added to the transcript of the principals' focus group data to be included in the analysis of the reflections and views of school principals. At the initial analysis of data stage therefore, the following records were available: the audio recordings, focus group field notes and individual interview field notes, abridged transcript of inspectors' discussions and full transcripts of each of the four focus group recordings, and returned comments from inspector participants. The range of records was deemed important to enable findings to be verified and to avoid being selective in using participants' reflections.

The analysis hoped to establish the most important themes, noteworthy quotes and any unexpected findings from the research (Breen 2006). In determining how to analyse the data, an analytic framework was used to bring focus to the analysis (Kreuger and Casey 2009). A *key concepts* (Kreuger and Casey p125) framework was used, with the objective of identifying the factors that were of central importance. This was considered the best way to discover the core ideas and to gain an understanding of how participants viewed the topics. As a result, a limited number of ideas, experiences and

preferences would be identified to illuminate the research. It was decided to use a qualitative data-management computer software program, MAX QDA (2001) to assist with the analysis. As soon as the transcripts were available, they were exported into MAX QDA and were saved into individual folders. Each transcript was then subdivided into coded folders representing the main themes and sub-themes that emerged. The collation of comments in this way assisted in deciding how much weighting to give to comments and to themes and sub-themes. The extensiveness, that is how many people referred to a theme, rather than the frequency or the number of times a theme was mentioned, helped in deciding the level of importance attached to the themes. Comments that were specific and provided detail were also given emphasis. When the data from all four groups was exported and coded, it was possible also to compare the level of importance attached to themes and comments by the various groups.

## **2.6 Limits of the research**

The study was undertaken to gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of the experience of evaluation in Irish post-primary schools. In particular, it aimed to identify how the WSE process and school self-evaluation as currently practised, impacted on schools, with a view to revealing how practice could improve and move forward. The views and reflections of four groups, representing those who support schools, who put pressure on schools and who lead school improvement, were sought. While the views held by these groups are essential in informing future policy, the research is greatly limited by the fact that the views of teachers are not included. As teachers play an important role in implementing policy at school level, their input into informing the development of policy is crucial. To a lesser extent, the research is limited by the lack of involvement of students and parents. At a time when partnership consultation plays a vital role in education policy making, the findings of this research could not be considered complete without the inclusion of these groups. While the crucial role played by teachers, and the importance of hearing the voices of parents and students is acknowledged, limits in terms of the size of the study and of the time available did not permit the inclusion of all stakeholders.

The use of focus group research enabled important themes and sub-themes to be explored from the perspectives of each of the four groups. However, no further interrogation of the opinions put forward by the groups occurred. Other methods of



gathering data, such as questionnaires to schools or case studies of particular schools would have enriched the data and could have provided a means of triangulation. Within the time available and the limited scope of the research, it was considered that the most useful insights would be gained through focus group research. However, the use of one form of data gathering only is acknowledged as another limit of the study.

## Chapter 3 Reflections and insights on school evaluation: Inspectors

### 3.1 The focus group

A group of five post-primary inspectors took part in the focus group. They were selected on the basis of convenience of location and therefore availability to meet together. Their range of experience varied in a number of respects. Only one of the inspectors had been a member of the inspectorate prior to and during the pilot phase of WSE (whole-school evaluation). The remaining four joined the inspectorate at various stages since the year 2000. Their subject specialism varied although, by coincidence, all were recruited as language specialists. Their background prior to joining the inspectorate varied from subject teaching to supporting schools through the support services and other agencies. All five currently serve as field inspectors engaged in subject inspection and whole-school evaluation. Besides this core role, they serve on internal committees involved in policy making, devising new models of evaluation and follow-through inspections. Some also serve on external and European committees related to their subject specialism or to evaluation processes.

### 3.2 WSE: the current model

#### *Purpose*

Inspectors displayed a good knowledge of the stated purpose of WSE. They made a clear distinction between the stated purpose and the actual purpose as perceived by schools and as served in practice. They considered that one of the primary purposes of WSE was to get schools thinking about what they were doing. They made a connection between the framework *Looking at our School* and WSE, and expressed a desire that WSE should induce schools to engage in some level of self-evaluation and reflection. They recounted the stated purpose of WSE as facilitating self-evaluation, providing accountability for the system, school improvement and providing affirmation to schools. Their familiarity with these purposes, they reported, stemmed from the presentation they make to schools at pre-evaluation meetings. They hoped that in reality WSE would enable the constructive identification of areas for improvement and that it would be a catalyst for change. They expressed a desire that WSE would encourage schools to start thinking about their school, how they were doing various things and what areas they needed to address at each of the stages in the process: before WSE, during the evaluation process and after the report has been received. Inspectors identified the need for WSE to serve this purpose because of the fact that schools were

*“so busy doing other things and the demands of a school from day to day are such that people don’t have a lot of time for reflection”*. Overall, the process of WSE was judged to be *“fundamentally concerned with an improvement agenda”*.

Inspectors made a number of references to the accountability purpose of evaluation and the true meaning of accountability. It was explained in terms of public accountability, including financial accountability but also in terms of a duty of care. A distinction was made between accountability and responsibility. Accountability referred to fulfilling the duties attached to a role while responsibility entailed having *“a duty of care towards the students”*. Inspectors viewed responsibility as being stronger and more positive than accountability as, *“responsibility is something you take upon yourself, and accountability is something that is demanded of you”*. It was felt that teachers were reluctant to think in terms of accountability as it was seen as something external while in general they accepted that a sense of responsibility entailed elements of affirmation and power. It was agreed that the system had the right to demand accountability from teachers. In some instances, such as the requirement to provide twenty-eight hours tuition for students, WSE had imposed accountability and teachers agreed, sometimes reluctantly, to comply with regulations. In other cases, demanding compliance through WSE was deemed difficult because other sections of the Department might not pursue the issues identified.

### ***Merits of current model***

Positive aspects of the WSE were explored. Inspectors noted particular circumstances where WSE was beneficial to schools. It was suggested that in some cases, WSE affirmed good practice and provided system validation of the good practice in schools. In such schools the WSE was a trigger and *“they will improve themselves because they are good anyway”*. These were schools *“that have the capacity to change and that are able to take on the recommendations”*. This enabled schools to move forward and continue the good practice that had been affirmed. The WSE process sometimes provided a unifying experience for schools, *“where there were divisions on a staff, [it] provided an opportunity for those divisions or difficulties to be aired and that might lead to some form of improvement”*. The WSE was viewed as helpful for newly appointed principals as it was *“very useful for that principal to have an external voice saying we need a review of middle management”*. The WSE was seen as a backup, *“a weapon in the armoury”* for the principal in moving the school forward.

The current framework, with criteria for evaluation in five areas, was deemed helpful by inspectors. In particular, an inspector who had experience of the pilot phase of WSE noted that only three areas, teaching and learning, planning, and management, were included in the initial framework. Additional areas were added as a result of feedback from schools involved in the pilot phase. Schools were worried that curriculum provision and support for students could not be fully captured through the evaluation of teaching and learning, planning, and management. The addition of curriculum provision enabled inspection to focus on timetables. The importance of reading school timetables accurately and commenting critically on them was stressed. This provided opportunities to examine how the curriculum was delivered and whether this aspect of schooling was properly managed. Evaluating curriculum provision was pronounced to be *“really essential [as inspectors] will never get the full picture on teaching and learning to be able to make definitive statements but there are things that are very, very clear in relation to how the school is making provision for the curriculum and the various ways in which it is delivering that”*. As schools do not generally have curriculum advisory groups, inspectors rely on their ability to read timetables, along with the subject inspection reports, to judge the quality of curriculum provision in schools.

The role of inspectors as external and independent evaluators was deemed important by inspectors. They reported that schools value the independent voice and guarantee of confidentiality provided by inspectors who are civil servants external to schools. They suggested that external inspectors approached evaluations objectively where there might be a conflict of interest in evaluating schools without an external perspective. They maintained that the concept of lay inspectors as used in other jurisdictions to provide a balance on inspection teams did not necessarily provide the desired balance as *“they gain a kind of expertise and they bring what they have seen in one school to the next but it’s very limited”*. The importance of providing affirmation from an external perspective was also emphasised. This was particularly so where *“there are teachers who are trying very hard and they need that external affirmation for what they are doing... we can provide that support by saying ‘yes, what you are doing is good’”*. Such practice was seen as an element of professional dialogue and was appreciated in most cases.

Inspectors viewed the week spent in the school and the opportunities to meet the various groups in a school positively. The fact that five or six inspectors were present in the school ensured that the major issues came to light. Organised meetings with groups enabled them to acknowledge the role of the various people in the school. They found attending routine meetings of groups such as the year heads or the transition year team more useful than those arranged specifically for the inspection team. They questioned the current focus on arranging such latter meetings and some expressed the opinion that less meetings and more observation would enable greater access to more staff because at meetings *“you see the same people all the time and they are well versed, they know the questions we are going to ask”*. They felt that *“five minutes to talk to the students or sit at the back of the class [enabled them to] get a real feel for what is going on, and then you know how those students are being managed”*. The space provided for inspectors to meet groups and to examine documents was also deemed important. One inspector cited an experience of spending time between observing lessons and attending meetings in the staff room as she had forgotten to request a room. As a result staff became used to her presence and as time went on opened up more and more. Others recounted experiences of being closeted away from *“all the action”* in a deliberate attempt to prevent them from observing the normal interactions in the school.

Providing oral feedback to the various stakeholders was believed by inspectors to be necessary and only fair to schools. Meeting principals and deputy principals in an informal manner for feedback sessions within the in-school evaluation week was deemed critical for clarification purposes. The practice of providing informal feedback on the final day, while difficult, was expected in schools and consistency on the part of inspectors in providing this was regarded as important. This was particularly so if the report had difficult messages as it gave schools *“a chance to verbalise what they feel about it”*. It also gave inspectors *“a sense of whether this was something the school will be able to run with”*. Post-evaluation meetings with the various groups, board of management, staff and parents, although time consuming and therefore costly, were deemed necessary as different audiences might wish to discuss specific issues. An example of schools’ acknowledging difficulties or weaknesses during feedback meetings was cited, *“a problem that may happen ...in a high functioning school [was that] things may emerge during that feedback meeting which will be quite honest”* but when these weaknesses appeared in written reports, similar acknowledgement was not

always forthcoming and teachers were unhappy with their inclusion in the final report. The human interaction enabled more honesty about the real issues in schools. The importance of the written report and the language used in reports was highlighted. When judging the strengths of a school, inspectors sometimes “*had to affirm something*” and “*are praising things that would be taken as a matter of course in others*”. This related to the context of the school and to ensuring that even where good practice is limited, elements of good practice were affirmed.

Inspectors felt that in general, schools had improved as a result of WSE. It was accepted that “*we are only learning but we have come a long way in a short time*”. It was agreed that “*schools have improved as a result of the inspection process being in place*”. However, this was viewed as “*making a general statement, they have come on in areas. They are fulfilling their obligations in relation to the Education Act better because of it.*” Other areas of improvement were also identified. A discussion between some inspectors and a coordinator of postgraduate studies in education in a particular college was cited. The particular coordinator, in conversation with inspectors, maintained that as a result of WSE, post-primary teachers attending courses had a new awareness “*planning isn’t some alien concept that they never heard of before. They actually know what he is talking about...there is a new kind of awareness of all these things that we have been trying to encourage in schools so it’s good to know that it has had some impact*”. This feedback was deemed useful as knowing whether inspections were succeeding and how this could be measured was problematic in the absence of some form of follow up. Inspectors who had returned to schools after inspections were aware that some recommendations were easier than others for schools to implement. The issue was about building capacity in schools.

It was also agreed that teachers had come a long way in the last five or six years. Inspectors expressed admiration for teachers who were now accountable through inspections and who had embraced this accountability better than one would have ever thought. They had moved from a position of ‘hatred’ to one where they now welcomed inspections “*they put their best foot forward... they have come up to the mark*”. In some respects, the present process was believed to be unfair to individual teachers, “*our system whereby you are evaluating the teaching and learning of a subject...it can be very unfair in the sense of the very good teacher if you are evaluating the overall, they will feel very much undermined by that and others feel that they are getting away*

*with it*". This refers to the fact that subject departments or whole schools rather than individual teachers are evaluated.

### ***Concerns about current model***

Some negative elements of WSE were identified and explored with inspectors. Overall, inspectors expressed the opinion that the present model was cumbersome and too intense. It was regarded as *"a luxury model. We try to find out everything about the school". [While] we do quite well in doing that it's too much"*. It was agreed that a better way of getting to the heart of schools was desirable. This was particularly important at present as *"it's extremely labour intensive and very expensive for the Department to run"*. However, anxiety was articulated about newer, shorter models that might not identify issues that were apparent to all those involved in the school. If, through the process, inspectors *"haven't identified issues [everyone] will know that the process isn't working and there is a major issue for our credibility"*. Some inspectors felt that even with the current model all issues were not being unearthed but there was general agreement that the major issues were identified.

Specific reference was made to the improvement purpose of WSE. It was agreed that schools that did not have the capacity to change needed an external trigger to enable them to move forward. However, schools identified with poor practice and those that did not have the capacity to improve, were not enabled to enhance practice through the WSE process. The importance of leadership was stressed *"if [the school] does not have the leadership it does not move on one bit"*. Some inspectors regretted the fact that while they made certain suggestions to schools, they were not offering support *"because our work is more limited now to the evaluation"*. Others felt that inspectors *"engage in dialogue about best practice when interacting in a school but will walk away because you are not given the time to do anything else"* and *"we point out the deficits then there is no impetus to address the deficits"*. It was agreed however, that teachers had a professional responsibility to engage in professional development *"teachers must recognise that they are doing more than teaching twenty-two hours a week...that they are required ...to engage in CPD"*. It was also suggested that *"they need to use subject associations, Education Centres..."* The difficulty in engaging schools that appeared to be high functioning in conversations about improvement was also articulated. Such schools *"feel they are getting it right and it's not exactly*

*complacency because they are probably having to work hard but they are working hard feeling that what they are doing is right”.*

Inspectors considered that the current model of WSE did not serve the purpose of making a distinction between improvement and outcomes well. It was suggested that looking at school documents that would indicate how schools tracked student progress would provide evidence of the level of reflection on this in the school. It would be interesting to note such tracking in schools that were currently strongly affirmed by the WSE process. It was also suggested that a measure of value-added could be attained by engaging in follow up inspections to determine levels of improvement based on the implementation of WSE recommendations. Inspectors could note schools that were having difficulties or schools that implemented only the recommendations that were easy to implement.

The mountain of paper work required from schools for WSE was another problem associated with current practice. Inspectors stated that *“we need to get rid of the mountain of paper work”* and the preparation of documents specifically for the WSE. They expressed anxiety about the school plans and policies and the manner in which these were prepared. Some felt that there was *“an overkill on policies and planning because of our expectation...SDPI has to be put to bed ... or else reinvent them through self-evaluation”*. Others felt that the SDPI model appeared to make planning more complicated than was necessary, *“it made it much more complicated than it should have been... the SDPI template for teaching and learning, it’s almost as if there is only one way of doing this”*. Finally it was felt that *“it’s planning for somebody else rather than planning for themselves.”* A better way of getting *“to the reality of what is happening”* in schools was required.

Inspectors’ lack of experience at school management level was discussed. Schools that were unhappy with inspectors’ criticism of school timetables *“lash back when you are being critical, when you have not constructed a timetable...”* and *“I have been asked have you ever put together a timetable?”* Inspectors considered that this was associated with their lack of school principalship experience and was a source of criticism two or three years ago. They maintained it was no longer an issue as *“we have proved ourselves out there.”* While accepting that they might be defensive about this they claimed that their experience of evaluating management in a number of schools, of



having access to advice from colleagues who had school management experience, of being trained evaluators and of gaining expertise through continuous professional development qualified them to evaluate the quality of management in schools. Comments such as *“You do not have to do the job to be able to evaluate it”* and *“If there were very strong feelings about this I think our reports would be appealed”* suggest that inspectors did not see a difficulty with this issue.

Lack of consistency in the practice of inspectors in a number of areas was raised as a difficulty. The manner in which particular issues were reported varied. One example given was the use of state examination results as a measure of quality in the provision of education in schools. *“In relation to quality assurance there is a reluctance on the part of some inspectors to discuss exam results”*. While direct reference in written reports to specific results which could lead to the production of league tables was not permitted, they maintained that discussion about national averages, about the availability of choice of levels (foundation, ordinary and higher) and the appropriateness of these to particular student cohorts, *“you have to take context into account”*, provided evidence of quality of provision. Anxiety was expressed about a range of practices in relation to providing informal feedback during meetings held in the in-school week. Inspectors were sometimes subjected to negative reactions when difficult messages were given, but it was deemed important that all schools received informal oral feedback. It was agreed that while structures and guidance in this regard might be consistent, as practice developed inconsistencies materialised. Inconsistency in the use of particular words also caused concern. Inspectors held the view that difficulties arose in their use of words such as excellent, good and satisfactory. These words conveyed particular meaning, which led to reluctance on the part of some inspectors to use them. The word excellent for example was deemed problematic, as some colleagues questioned *“where do you go if you give excellent because there will always be better practice?”* Most importantly, it was considered that honesty was required when using words such as poor and excellent. Lack of consistency in relation to recommendations and the expectation of inspectors were articulated. Questions were posed about whether WSE recommendations should serve the purpose of bringing schools to the ‘very top’ or should attempt to move schools forward from their current stage of development.

The application of ratings to schools' performance, expressed either numerically or in words, caused unease. Although the performance of schools was viewed in terms of a continuum, inspectors were bothered about trying to place their performance on a four-point scale. It was particularly difficult as "*this is not a counsel of perfection ...it (evaluation) is not an exact science*" and the lack of a central point indicated a denial of an average performance. Further, inspectors suggested that schools were not aware of ratings being applied to the quality of their provision. The lack of overt reference to ratings was explained in terms of difficulties with this in the pilot phase of WSE. In the pilot phase, evaluation criteria were shared with teachers and ratings were assigned to each particular lesson observed. Teachers expected to receive individual ratings while inspectors collated ratings for the lessons to provide a composite rating for the subject or the school.

The slow pace of publication of reports, the length of the reports and the deconstruction of published reports, particularly by the media, caused concern for inspectors. As the media continue to take an interest in the published reports inspectors highlighted the danger of accepting the view, put forward in a particular newspaper article, that WSE reports, along with the league tables of feeder schools to third level institutions constructed by the national press, provided parents with all the information they needed to select schools for their children.

### **3.3 School self-evaluation**

#### ***Current practice***

Schools' engagement in school self-evaluation was explored. Inspectors noted developments under the social partnership agreement *Towards 2016* that required teachers to partake in school self-evaluation processes. They also cited the enactment of section 24 of the Education Act, which required boards of management to take responsibility for assessing and supporting under performing teachers. They described some self-evaluation practices they had observed. Good practice was observed when recently qualified teachers engaged in self-evaluation through reflection on individual lessons in an effort to determine the effectiveness of lessons, "*they were actually looking at what they could do better the next time. I think of this as a very simple way [to engage in] teacher self-evaluation.*" The teachers undertook the self-evaluation as part of a project but inspectors wondered if the teachers "*were in a position or had sufficient experience to be able to rate themselves competently*".

Inspectors acknowledged the support provided to schools by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). While they expressed concern about the development of templates by SDPI that enabled schools to gain access to and complete subject plans the night before an inspection, they recognised that over the past ten years schools had developed plans and policies and some had decided on priorities. Inspectors agreed that *“a lot of schools, particularly good schools, have their five year plan and they identify two or three things that they are going to run with”*. They wondered if this was school development planning or school self-evaluation. They suggested that even in the best examples of school self-evaluation, *“it was never a whole-school business”*. If it was accepted that work undertaken in one section of the school or on two or three elements of provision was school self-evaluation, then self-evaluation work was already in progress through school development planning in many schools. Inspectors had seen examples in schools where teachers had attended in-service courses on areas such as assessment for learning, had shared the knowledge gained with colleagues and various members of staff then tried elements of it in classrooms. This was deemed to be self-evaluation provided they were *“not running away from the idea of measurements... the stimulus was for the school to improve itself...[it was] school self-development as opposed to school planning”*. It was agreed that many schools were currently identifying areas needing improvement but that *“it’s impossible to evaluate everything”*.

The importance of measurement and of maintaining standards when engaging in self-evaluation was mentioned. This led to discussion on assessment and attainment and on how the effectiveness of school self-evaluation could be measured. Inspectors noted that teachers had, to date, refused to take on school-based assessment. While individual teachers might be willing, agreement had not been reached with representative union bodies. This reluctance on the part of Irish teachers was contrasted with the situation in other systems, where individual teachers accepted responsibility for the assessment of students for their final examinations. Inspectors acknowledged that the main indicator of success in the Irish education system at present was how well students did in state examinations. A distinction between attainment and examination results was made. The prevailing attitude to examinations, it was suggested, was a combative one with students being led ‘to crack the code’ in order to succeed. Such an attitude encouraged teachers to teach to the exam. Inspectors felt it was preferable to measure the quality of

education in relation to a value-added dimension. The value-added dimension might be regarded as the ‘extras’ that are given to students. This was explained as teaching more than the prescribed syllabus or arranging for learning through methods such as field trips. Another view of the value-added dimension discussed was the levelling of the deeply ‘uneven’ playing field. Reference was made in particular to work in schools in disadvantaged areas. An example was used to illustrate the level of value added brought by one school with a particular cohort of students. On arrival at post-primary school, 60% of students had attained reading levels that were four years below their chronological age. The levels of achievement in the Junior Certificate examinations were then used by the school to plot the progress made by the students. Such practice displayed good levels of learning and effective school self-evaluation. In other instances, high grades achieved by students in examination might not reflect high quality learning. The value-added dimension was deemed an important aspect of effective school self-evaluation.

The importance of school self-evaluation was related to some extent to the level of autonomy enjoyed by schools in the Irish system. Inspectors compared the level of autonomy in Irish schools with that in other European education systems and suggested that Irish schools “*probably have too much autonomy*”. Schools make decisions in relation to curriculum and there was a lack of circulars or regulations that determine what best practice is in the delivery of the curriculum. While it was accepted that the NCCA provides guidelines, it was stressed that these were not regulations. Apart from the state examinations and teachers’ pay, schools were deemed to have a great deal of autonomy. The high level of autonomy was viewed positively, “*I think autonomy is good and it can be creative but it needs accountability. With autonomy there should be more accountability. In order to have accountability, you have to have those regulations...*” This referred to the need to update the Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools, specifically stating requirements to provide subjects such as PE, as schools sometimes do not provide these, citing lack of time as the reason.

### **3.4 The way forward**

Inspectors highlighted the fact that a form of inspection other than the current model of WSE was required as the current WSE cycle of twelve years “*was far too long*’. They maintained that schools “*need different forms of inspection. It’s like the exam system. They set out to be strategic about it.*” Current discussion about introducing incidental

inspection was welcomed. The one inspector who had been involved in the pilot WSE phase drew attention to the developmental nature of the current model, “*When we re-launched inspection we did have to visit all types of schools. However, we realised that down the road some schools need more inspection than others...some schools we could validate their own self-evaluation, as they are ready.*” It was felt that the time was now right to pause and “*look at the way we do things...we need to look at practice across regions*”. The fact that the small number of inspectors were organised on a regional basis was causing difficulty, as schools knew what subjects were targeted for evaluation in particular parts of the country: “*we are targeting the same subjects in schools in regions and schools know that*”.

### ***Self-regulation and self-evaluation***

Inspectors drew a distinction between self-regulation and self-evaluation. They felt that a move to self-regulation in Ireland would be ‘dodgy’. They would be very worried about self-regulation as “*we see appalling practice*”. One inspector stated, “*I would be very worried about self-regulation, for example in Canada, where schools do their own regulation, it is worrying*”. They considered that as a starting point the Teaching Council would need to be fully established. However, they agreed that encouraging self-evaluation would be useful. There was agreement that teachers needed to be brought to a certain sense of professional recognition, of skill and perception in order to be able to evaluate themselves. Thus schools needed help in moving towards self-evaluation. At present, some schools were “*only putting up with us [inspectors] because of agreements concluded as part of the benchmarking process*”. They displayed an attitude of putting the best foot forward, although the WSE experience might be painful, but then when the report was received the inspectors were gone. Inspectors felt that while the idea of school self-evaluation was wonderful and that the role of the inspector should be ideally to quality assure the schools’ self-evaluation, some schools were ready for school self-evaluation but some were not.

Inspectors highlighted the fact that under the partnership agreement, *Towards 2016*, schools were required to use *Looking at our School* (LAOS) (Department of Education and Science 2003) as a framework to engage in self-evaluation in the area of teaching and learning at school level. The need to support schools in this regard was noted, “*LAOS was a document that was sent to schools. They need to know how to use it... dust it down and learn what is this all about*”. A view was expressed that engagement

in school self-evaluation might need to be mandatory: “*what will bring about self-evaluation in all schools whether they are ready for it or not is accountability and a requirement that they engage in it...a requirement in legislation is the only way to get them all to do it, do some aspect of it*”. Reflection and discussion on this led to the belief firstly, that if schools engaged in self-evaluation merely for compliance it was not true self-evaluation, and secondly, that some self-evaluation occurred because of external pressure and some because of internal questioning about what schools were doing. It was felt that schools would seek additional funding to engage in school self-evaluation but inspectors maintained that teachers were paid sufficiently and that school self-evaluation was part of what they should be doing. All schools, like everyone else doing a job, had to be accountable.

### ***Revised structures***

It was proposed that the current practice of evaluating school planning, as one aspect of external evaluation, could be replaced by an evaluation of the school’s self-evaluation. Instead of the present criteria for school planning, inspectors would examine practice from the perspective of schools’ self-evaluation. This was deemed possible as schools had ten years’ support for planning and should be in a position to engage in school self-evaluation. It was felt that “*They [schools] should be required to write a self-evaluation report, an annual report and this would be the springboard for our [inspectors] external evaluation*”. This required a huge mindset change for schools, according to inspectors. Attention was drawn to the criteria used by inspectors and outlined in *Looking at our School*. These had been made available to schools, but the inspectorate had further developed them. Since this was part of a continuous process, developments had not been shared with schools. It was also noted that developments in relation to determining ratings for aspects of practice were not yet explicitly shared with schools. Inspectors compared this with teachers not sharing criteria with students. They expressed a desire to develop and test criteria in schools within a specific project.

A number of other suggestions were made to move the self-evaluation agenda forward. Engaging in a pilot project in twenty schools, as was currently being planned, was one possibility. Schools chosen for this pilot should display competence and confidence in engaging in self-evaluation practices. Providing a composite report of an effective leader as a result of the recent leadership evaluation undertaken by the inspectorate was another. It was also suggested that “*schools can learn an awful lot from each*

*other...through the leadership programme, where they mentor each other. There is an awful lot of good that can be learned from somebody who manages to do what has been outlined".* Another possibility proposed was using a model based on the SICI *Effective School Self-Evaluation* (ESSE) project, to identify how schools had gone about self-evaluation. In this project inspectors *"took three audit trails, which differed from school to school depending on what their priorities had been. Something like audit trail meant you did not look at everything. One [trail] had to be teaching and learning."* Schools could then show something that had been identified as needing improvement and what they had done and how they had measured improvement. In this model inspectors would not look at everything but examine the school's own priorities.

The importance of leadership in school self-evaluation and anxiety about principals' workload were articulated. *"Very well informed and good principals have said pretty consistently to me that they are very very bogged down in things they have to do, they have responsibilities for various things".* It was suggested, *"They are in fact things that could be done by someone [else], a good personal assistant in another context."* The difference between a visionary principal and a good administrator was noted in this regard. If principals were expected to deal with *"gaggles of stuff that have to be dealt with in an administrative way, we are really compromising the other element that is necessary"*. The importance of leadership from the principal was stressed with one inspector stating, *"I cannot imagine a school that is doing what we would like them to be doing in terms of reflection and evaluation and taking on the improvement agenda themselves unless they have a principal of a certain kind. Leadership is very, very important. We need to be looking at the way schools are managed, at senior management level and perhaps making some kind of distinction between the administrative role and the other role."* Inspectors were worried about the ability of very young principals or acting principals to move things forward or to change things significantly, although they had witnessed some acting principals bringing about change 'very unobtrusively' and bringing the staff with them. The possibility of having an underperforming or incompetent principal was also mentioned.

The importance attached to the role of the board of management was also acknowledged. *"A lot goes back to the dynamism and the leadership of senior management and also the board of management taking a more proactive role. The composition of boards of management in a lot of cases doesn't support the move*

*towards school improvement ... because they don't have the commitment ... the vision...If there was a more dynamic board of management and senior management together, they can move things forward.”* In the course of WSE, inspectors maintained they frequently discussed policies with boards of management. *“We ask them about reviewing policies or prioritising policies...to look and see is this working, how can we make it better...In that sense are we not promoting a form of school self-evaluation?”* Therefore they felt it was now time for inspectors to validate the work of schools and boards. They expressed a need to communicate with boards about any such changes *“to put it in context so that schools know what we are talking about”*. Inspectors welcomed a new form of inspection currently being developed where *“we might be asking boards of management to make a presentation about where they [schools] are at.”*

The various supports required to establish the practice of school self-evaluation were discussed. The fact that *“there are various organisations which seem to be operating alone”* led inspectors to articulate the need to ‘join the dots’. This referred to inspectors becoming ‘more tied up’ with other sections within the Department, for instance in relation to staffing resources, with the Teaching Council, and with those developing the management skills within schools. Closer lines of communication and becoming aware of *“an awful lot of points where valuable communication could happen”* would build capacity in the system.



## **Chapter 4 Reflections and insights on school evaluation: School Development Planning Initiative personnel**

### **4.1 The focus group**

The School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) takes responsibility for supporting post-primary schools in the area of planning. The national coordinator and ten regional coordinators took part in the focus group. All members of the group are teachers or principals on secondment from post-primary schools. Some had experienced WSE in their schools. The variety of post-primary school sectors is represented in the group and the initiative supports schools from all sectors. Specific support has been provided by the service for schools serving students from socio-economic disadvantaged areas. In particular, the initiative has supported and developed structures for schools partaking in *Developing Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS), which are required to produce a three year action plan for improvement.

### **4.2 WSE: the current model**

#### ***Purpose***

Individual members of the SDPI team identified a number of purposes for the current model of whole-school evaluation. It was suggested that, in theory, it is about “*getting schools to look at what they are doing*” with a view to improvement. In practice, however, the fact that schools tend to see WSE as a compliance model means that they sometimes view it as an event and “*once you have been WSEd that is it and that is the end of the process*”. The introduction of WSE soon after the introduction of support for planning led schools to associate one with the other rather than seeing planning as valuable in its own right. However some participants felt that WSE supported the work of SDPI as it became a stimulus for schools to engage with the service. While a school’s initial motive was sometimes to prepare documentation for external evaluation, WSE has enabled the service to become more focused in terms of schools engaging with self-review, as WSE “*is a reality check*”. A desire to get schools to the stage “*where [they] saw the WSE as the beginning of something rather than the end of something*” was expressed as “*then we would really be making progress*”. It was considered that, increasingly, the developmental purpose of WSE was being seen by schools: “*quite a lot of schools began to see that there was a further benefit*” beyond

getting documentation together. SDPI personnel highlighted the fact that it takes time and structures within schools to move from a compliance purpose to an improvement one. Some identified the importance of an improvement purpose particularly in schools *“where children’s learning needs are not being met”*. This suggested that the improvement purpose should concentrate on the classroom level. Furthermore, the importance of reviewing in-school management, which some maintain figures *“very prominently in WSEs”* is seen as a *“very important developmental process because so much hinges on it indirectly as well as directly”*.

Members of the SDPI team considered that there should be three levels within the purpose of evaluation. At present they maintain that there are only two. The first is *“a very clear focus on the responsibilities of and the accountability of the schools in general, the whole school team, the whole school approach”*. The second is a *“very strong focus on teams within the schools, so the subject departments or the programme team”*. The third and *“really crucial level”* is that of the individual teacher. The current model of WSE, in their view does not focus on the responsibility and accountability of the individual teacher in the classroom. Moreover, they felt there was some anecdotal evidence of cases of individual teachers not taking on board pertinent WSE recommendations focused on the whole school or team level, either because they did not perceive the relevance of the recommendations to their own professional practice or because they felt no sense of obligation to act on them. This concern, noted by participants, arose due to the fact that, in reaching agreement with the partners in relation to the introduction of WSE, it was agreed that the process would focus on the work of schools and of subject departments and not on the work of individual teachers. SDPI personnel were concerned about issues of competence and of effort on the part of individual teachers. Such issues created difficulties for schools as mechanisms for dealing with them did not exist in some sectors and were cumbersome within other sectors. SDPI participants deemed that in the next phase of development of WSE, it would be worth exploring how external evaluation might constructively address issues relating to teacher competence and professional practice.

### ***Impact***

The impact of WSE on schools was explored. The positive impact of WSE, of school development planning and of the work of SDPI on school improvement processes was noted in a number of areas. It was agreed that the WSE process had supported the work

of SDPI as it was a stimulus or spur for schools to engage with the support service. At a minimal level, schools realised they needed to get their planning documentation in order in preparation for the WSE. However, as the schools that were at the minimal level engaged with the support service for this purpose, they saw a further benefit and their motivation changed as they realised that the process of planning was actually very helpful. SDPI personnel maintained that principals in particular *“began to see that there was a change of culture in their schools”* and began to say, *“you made a huge difference in changing the culture in my school and the culture around the way in which the school actually does review itself”*. While many schools were not yet at the stage of engaging in rigorous self-evaluation, it was felt that a significant number were *moving into... school improvement”*. It was considered that school development planning and WSE had been mutually complementary in bringing about this movement. SDPI had promoted school review as a key element of school development planning. Engagement in review had resulted in schools’ identifying good practice and areas for development. WSE had added an external stimulus that strengthened the move towards self-evaluation. Some examples of the change in culture, which occurred in the last five or six years, and therefore attributed to some extent to the WSE, were given. One involved the change at staff meetings from large groups into small groups, sub-committees and subject departments. This had produced *“very active subject departments, it has led to tremendous good practice in teams, programme development teams”*. In the better examples it had led to a focus on school improvement where *“they are all very used to looking at what they are doing, identifying what is working well, identifying what needs to be improved and putting some plans in place around it.”* In some schools *“genuine professional development”* is apparent, as is a focus on teaching and learning. This is evident where subject department planning has led to cooperation among teachers and as a result *“they are sharing resources, they are sharing methodologies, they have moved into team teaching...”*. Definite improved outcomes for some pupils had occurred in some schools.

There was general acceptance that schools need a combination of encouragement and insistence or pressure to move forward as *“there are those who if merely encouraged will remain where they are”*. While SDPI, in its process, is sensitive to the reality and the culture in schools, their thinking has moved and they have become more specific about standards of good practice. The WSE framework, *Looking at our School*, and guidelines and reports have helped enormously in this regard. SDPI personnel asserted

that schools had travelled a long journey because of the combination of WSE and school development planning. Remembering that “*WSE arrived in a vacuum where there was little or no external evaluation*”, the inevitability of a “*phase of eyeing up across the dance floor... before there would be a really healthy engagement*” was articulated. However, this healthy engagement had now happened. A typical example of how things had changed was witnessed in a conversation between a newly appointed planning coordinator in a school and the support service representative. The newly appointed post holder had made presentations on assessment for learning to subject department conveners, had looked up published subject inspection reports and had interrogated the support service representative about the WSE. It gave a certain sense of satisfaction that “*some sort of percolation had taken place*” as such practice and conversation would not have happened three or four years ago. Other experiences in schools led SDPI personnel to believe that when schools “*get over the trauma of a WSE... the remarks that are often made post WSE are that it is not nearly the animal that it is projected to be and a really genuine conversation tends to take place in the aftermath*”.

The view was held that WSE works differently in different types of schools. While caution was expressed about making comparisons, it was felt that “*where a school has reasonable evaluation practices, WSE is hugely helpful. It affirms those practices, it gives affirmation to them, it gives credibility to the conversations that are taking place in the schools.*” An example was given of one school, where self-evaluation practices had reached a level where each time a subject inspection occurred, the particular subject department reported to the rest of the staff and shared the findings across the board. While there had been some resistance to this initially, having a conversation before and after an inspection had now become standard practice in the school. The school was strongly congratulated in the WSE report on their self-evaluation practices. On the other hand, a lack of readiness to benefit from WSE and to follow through on recommendation was underlined. Where schools do not have such processes, “*where people operate very much in isolation, where there is poor collaboration, there isn't any great record of accountability or self-evaluation I am wondering whether the WSE process really gets through to those schools?*” These schools were deemed to treat WSE as an event, something they had to get through. Their planning processes “*are not sufficiently developed to drive meaningful follow up*”.

Both positive and negative views were aired about one aspect of the WSE process. The issue of evaluating in-school management was discussed, and in particular, the frequently articulated view that inspectors without management experience lacked understanding of its complexity. One view expressed was that what was being done through WSE was wholly welcome because it had *“identified a serious gap, which is so disabling because it means there is a dearth of distributed leadership”*. This leadership needs to be exercised by a wider group of people to bring about pedagogical change so WSE and inspectors *“are absolutely spot on about that”*. On the other hand, SDPI personnel were aware that some principals had difficulty accepting the validity of evaluations when an inspector *“who is evaluating them hasn’t walked the talk and therefore probably doesn’t have an understanding of the complexity of their role”*. In examples given by schools where inspectors highlighted deficiencies in timetables regarding their particular subject specialism, principals felt inspectors displayed a lack of understanding of the compromise that was required in schools. One member of the SDPI team, who had encountered such an experience as principal, felt upset *“when somebody who quite obviously had no experience in managing the big picture was nit picking about smaller pictures within that big picture”*. They suggested that the power of principals in schools was exaggerated and that *“there is an assumption that the positional leader is the source of all change and that is just not true”*. Schools had two main concerns, they claimed: one was the expectation that if there was a problem the principal could solve it and the other was that in highlighting management issues, there was a corresponding weakness in identifying difficulties at individual classroom level. Difficulties in management and in particular, relationships between staff and management, which might be an indicator that something was wrong were important, but they did not necessarily indicate problems at classroom level. SDPI members indicated that there was a level of frustration expressed by principals about the fact that WSE did not identify *“weak links on the team in the school”* and they felt that *“every subject department will do their best, the level of collegiality is huge to support or to carry the weaker members”*. This they felt was unacceptable, as the individual students in the class suffer as a result. Concerns in this area stemmed, in their view, from the fact that neither subject inspections nor WSE focused on the work of the individual teacher.

A number of other concerns were expressed about the process of WSE and its impact on schools. Initially schools experience a lot of fear and apprehension regarding WSE.

While occasionally principals look forward to a WSE as a validation of work in the school they are more likely to say, “*we are dreading the call or the letter in the post or the fax or whatever*”. The current lack of follow up was another worry as “*WSE brings the process to a certain point and then it seems as though it almost stops until the next time*”. SDPI personnel regret the fact that the WSE was introduced before schools had sufficient time to “*get their heads around the planning model that we present and take it to a point where they felt comfortable that they were doing this work because it was valuable as opposed to doing this work because there was a WSE coming down the line*”. They felt that the planning structures in some schools “*are not sufficiently developed to drive meaningful follow up. Not all schools have a planning steering committee... their best planning structures are often ad hoc committees, like the committee to review the code of behaviour... [They] put it in place and make the change and then the committee will dissolve...*” If real improvement were to occur, a very definite planning group would be required. A further area of concern was the lack of consistency among inspectors, even within a particular subject specialism. SDPI personnel reported that schools are hearing “*mixed messages coming from inspectors, even inspectors of the same subject when they compare notes*”. This causes frustration when one inspector has a particular expectation and another “*will ask them to do something that seems the opposite*”. An additional aspect in the WSE process causing anxiety was the absence of meaningful consultation with parents. The current practice where “*the inspectors will talk to a selection of parents and ...those parents are not going to let the school down*” was criticised.

Concern about whether WSE reports were identifying and validly reporting the real issues in schools were voiced. It was deemed that reports might not be “*getting to the heart of whether schools are really delivering across the board.*” Attention was drawn to pupil outcomes and expectations and in particular to the lack of comparative data and benchmarks which were sufficiently contextualised to draw conclusions. Specific reference was made to the recommendations contained in reports. These were felt to be too general and too broad and “*maybe a bit toothless*”. While accepting that this may have been wise in the early days of WSE and that the system was not in the business of identifying failing schools, the fact that something needs to be done with schools where students are getting an ‘unjust deal’ was articulated. It was felt that WSE recommendations should be stronger in relation to these schools, “*...It is a very serious matter, schools where children’s learning needs are not being met...*”

The damaging effect of a bad report on a school was articulated. Specifically, the publication of bad reports caused unease. A suggestion was made that reports could be published without ‘too much damning’ of the school, “*you don’t necessarily have to put everything into the published report*”. If this were the case, engaging in discussion during the WSE and providing follow up for the school afterwards would be required. This would enable conversations with principals and boards of management so that they “*can begin to read between the lines of the report...*” and to be specific about issues that were sources of serious concern. This could work only if a facility for some kind of structured follow up was available, involving a combined team from the inspectorate and people from the support services who were committed to working with the school over a period of time. The publication of reports caused particular difficulty when issues were reproduced in the media. The fact that sections from a detailed report were ‘cut and pasted’ and issues such as management difficulties rather than classroom concerns received attention were deemed problematic.

#### **4.3 School self-evaluation**

##### ***Current practice***

SDPI personnel displayed their understanding of self-evaluation in relation to school development planning. They considered that schools had not yet reached a point of being genuinely self-evaluating in the way that they should be. However, they maintained that schools were certainly engaging in review and were identifying and celebrating good practice. While they considered that becoming self-evaluating schools would take time, they believed that good self-evaluation processes would reflect what happens in WSE, “*In other words there needs to be congruence between the kind of planning that is taking place and the kind of things that are being looked at in reports*”.

They reported that there is some resistance to school self-evaluation. “*...It is easy enough to encourage a school to take a soft focus review of their practices, it is easy enough to have that owned by the teachers and they can work hard at it. It is more difficult to move to genuine partnership and consultation with students and parents because it takes times, and can appear to be threatening*. They outlined a number of challenges that exist. The first of these related to the use of data. Schools consider that “*data is meaningless ... The gathering of data is difficult, it takes time, there is no time to do it. The competence of analysing such data, that is not there [in schools], or very*

*rarely there*". The lack of competence in the area of gathering, using and analysing data was seen as a challenge for teachers who always felt the need to be competent and to know all the answers. Many schools therefore walked away from the challenge. While each seminar held by SDPI for the past five years had an element of self-evaluation included, they questioned how many schools had been able to follow through well on it. *"Some have followed through in a patchy way and some have done it very well but we are still sowing that seed and there is a need for the development of skills and increased familiarity and time..."* They compared this with schools they visited in England where self-evaluation forms were accompanied by detailed back-up data, gathered over a period of time, to support self-generated claims and satisfaction ratings. Evidence of consultation with partners was also included.

SDPI introduced two applications of their planning model, incorporating self-evaluation, to schools in recent years. These provided a good structure for moving schools forward towards school self-evaluation. The first was devised for schools being supported through the DEIS programme and was described as a very good model. It *"provided schools with a very clear structure in relation to the areas it covers. ... It has given them a way of identifying in quite a lot of detail, not just what is happening but why it might be happening"*. In this model the use of *"data has been really constructive for the schools, the experience has actually worked well"*. It prompted schools to look at what kinds of issues might be working in a particular area. For example when looking at pupil attendance, schools identified where practice was strong and where it was weak and what types of students were affected. They examined the correlation between attendance and student performance, student groupings or particular family set ups. All such data was available in the schools but it was not sufficiently analysed, it was necessary to show schools how to use the data. The second application of their planning model was developed in relation to teaching methodology and formative assessment. This application started with self-evaluation in terms of assessment practices in the school. It then encouraged schools to move on to what was known to work, from the literature and from school experience. From this schools chose to model different practices for a period of ten to twelve weeks. A menu of criteria, both quantitative and qualitative, was used to prompt schools to move beyond gut response when judging what was working well. A template and a structure for reporting, initially to colleagues within a subject department and subsequently across the school, had also been devised.



### *Supporting the process*

The important point in both applications of the planning models presented by SDPI to schools was that the schools were supported. The support was described as “*a scaffolded process [where] schools know what is expected of them but there is a great deal of flexibility, they are the ones that determine what the issues are... you have to provide these scaffolds if you want to get self-evaluation*”. Simply telling people “*you ought to be doing it is not going to get you anywhere*” and even in good schools resistances surfaced. Any process requiring everyone to engage in some kind of change practices would be resisted and therefore it was necessary to “*walk people through it and then encourage them to do this and keep doing it and reporting on it and extending it to other aspects of school life*”. It is only in this way, when people have been walked through the process, that they can take over and that self-evaluation can become a reality.

Examples of difficulties in encouraging self-evaluation were illustrated. SDPI believed that “*schools will devote time and effort into something they think will make an improvement or even will make a difference in their schools*”. However, they had witnessed schools that attempted to identify areas for development and, without support, had been unable to achieve improvement. A particular example was cited where a school identified an issue, “*they realised that they needed to do something but they felt there wasn't any structure there to help them so they... ran*”. Such an experience only succeeded in raising awareness of the issue but was perceived as being a setback for the school unless they could be supported to bring the process to the next step. Recounting this experience enabled SDPI to highlight the importance of understanding the true meaning of school self-evaluation. In their view, “*If you were to interpret self-evaluation just as reaching some form of evidence-based judgement, that would be insufficient*”. In order to bring about positive improvement, the follow-on stages of the school development planning process, such as action planning to address priorities identified, were also required.

Attention was drawn to the fact that pressure as well as support was needed for schools to engage in self-evaluation. In schools where the **models** were successful, support from school management, within the context of individual schools, was accompanied by pressure in the form of decisions made by management that every department would

undertake the work. SDPI believed that encouragement might move the better schools, those already on the road, but that *“there would also need to be a system expectation.”* An example of such a need was given in relation to requiring schools to engage in meaningful consultation with their partners. SDPI have developed models within their guidelines in relation to *“specific topic areas where there should be consultation”*. However, because there is no requirement, appropriate consultation sometimes does not occur. Overall, SDPI concluded that school self-evaluation would not happen without some external pressure, *“schools that are doing well will definitely engage with self-evaluation but unless you have the external requirement I don’t think it will be successful”*.

#### **4.4 The way forward**

SDPI personnel identified a number of areas, which they deemed significant in the development of an effective school self-evaluation system.

##### ***Leadership and management***

The importance of leadership in enabling school self-evaluation was highlighted. The role of the principal and of other leaders in the school was explored. SDPI believe that the assumption that the principal, as positional leader, can be the source of all change was not well founded and they highlighted the need for leadership to be extended to a wider group of people if pedagogical change was to occur. At the same time they believe that change and improvement cannot happen without the leadership of the principal. The experience of SDPI was that even when planning coordinators were clearly influential and enthusiastic, all issues and decisions were referred to the principal in order to ensure that they would be implemented.

The need to provide training and support in these situations was considered. Members of SDPI expressed an interest in having an opportunity to develop their work to support boards of management to enhance their capacity to discharge their role in relation to self-evaluation. A model that would involve supporting boards through sample evaluations of issues identified in their schools was deemed essential. In order for boards to have an authentic role in school self-evaluation, clarity was needed about what was expected of them and how they will be supported to build the required capacity.

### ***Autonomy, accountability and responsibility***

The relationship between accountability and autonomy of schools was explored. It was felt that while the level of responsibility devolved to schools and boards of management had increased in recent years, the level of autonomy had not increased. Schools did not have autonomy in terms of the curriculum and its mediation, as this was controlled in quite a prescriptive way by the state examination system. At the same time there had been a *“huge increase in terms of responsibility and there is a serious issue around the amount of responsibility that has now been delegated to the board of management and the fact that the board of management are in fact not professionally prepared or trained in order to look after that responsibility, which increases the pressure on the principal”*. The view was expressed that other than a greater degree of financial autonomy available since a block grant as a budget to schools replaced the requirement to apply for specific grants, schools have more or less the same autonomy they always had while *“they have far more responsibility in a far more complex and challenging educational environment”*. It appeared that the Department was distancing itself from schools and was delegating more responsibility onto them, particularly in terms of legal responsibility. Concern was expressed that a proper investment was not made to allow schools to have the resources to carry out that management.

Another aspect of autonomy cited as problematic was *“the power of parents and the market forces around that...that has controlled schools hugely”*. Since the Education Act *“copper fastens this right to choose... we have got chosen schools and the unchosen schools and there is an enormous divide”*. While this was not seen as relating directly to school self-evaluation, giving this level of control to parents was considered to be part of a social agenda. Regardless of the level of autonomy given to schools, *“when parents are controlling and it is so evident through every aspect, through social disadvantage to the special needs agenda, to the international students agenda, there are the chosen and there are the unchosen and you end up with something that is extremely unfair to everybody and demoralising”*. This highlighted the importance of using school self-evaluation to identify and highlight the value-added dimension of schools.

### ***Standards and the value-added dimension***

The difficulty of determining and measuring success in schools was articulated. In particular, the lack of standardised testing in post-primary schools was seen as a serious

drawback in our national system. While it was deemed that schools “*are using a whole variety of standardised testing and using them quite well... they have sought tests that can give them indicators, that they can use as benchmarks for tracking progress over their own schools. But we don’t have comparative data*”. This prevents schools from measuring how well they are serving their intake by achieving what they do. This was considered to be demoralising for schools because, “*they know what they are doing and they are so committed to improving things*” but cannot demonstrate the evidence of the value-added dimension of what they provide. On the other hand, SDPI caution against using standardised tests as an absolute measure and view it as “*just one of the other tools in the whole bank of looking at standards*”. In order to reach a valid judgement about how schools are serving their students, attention was drawn to two benchmarks that apply: “*one is to draw comparisons with other schools in similar positions but that requires that data be available to schools.*” This benchmark would enable schools to have an understanding of comparing their progress with similar schools nationally. It would enable the interpretation of a value-added dimension that the Leaving Certificate results do not provide. The second benchmark is “*how the students do as they progress through the school*”. It was suggested that the current DEIS planning model should prove useful in this regard but that on-going support was also required once awareness of issues was raised.

### ***Future Development***

SDPI personnel considered that the concept of self-regulation was not a desirable one for schools. In exploring the desirability of self-evaluation or self-regulation, one member commented, “*self-regulation on its own must be inherently flawed, there has to be some kind of balance with the internal and the external.* However, they referred to progress already made in relation to self-evaluation, “*in the mix of external evaluation and an internally driven self-evaluation and school planning, significant steps have been made*”, and expressed the need for “*some external system as well, that is a bottom up, top down issue... [because]... we all need the prompt, the stimulus, the push and the carrot, there needs to be a provision of that*”. The need to be part of a community of schools was also articulated. The provision of support, along with external evaluation, is now having a real impact and with ongoing support teachers are envisioning their career as one of continuous learning and development.

SDPI envisaged that a model of school self-evaluation would evolve that would be validated in some way by inspectors. One possibility was that schools might have a *“more ongoing connection with a particular inspector or group of inspectors...even a team, members of the team who had actually been to the school”*. This might involve providing an external validation of the self-evaluation capacity within the school.

A number of difficulties to be surmounted in moving towards self-evaluation were expressed. The first of these was time, *“...of course the big bugbear is time and neither the principal nor the most enthusiastic staff member will get around that”*. Other issues requiring attention included structural issues, alleviating anxiety and enabling the partnership approach, especially consultation with parents. Further issues related to recent economic conditions. The reduced level of substitution cover provided for schools to enable teachers to engage in school business other than teaching and learning would cause difficulty. This was seen as a barrier to schools engaging in planning and evaluation activities as hitherto, accessing substitution cover meant that particular groups of teachers could meet regularly. The reduction in substitution cover was likely to lead to a situation where teachers would concentrate on class contact time as their number one priority while planning and evaluation would be seen as secondary or the luxury, the icing on the cake, that cannot be afforded.

Finally the measurement of success of a system of evaluation embracing internal and external elements was discussed. SDPI felt that *“the ultimate success is impact on the student... the one that is most in need of help... and again it goes back to value-added”*. Measuring the success of the process would entail determining if schools had structures in place to enable them to identify and improve areas in need of development, and to provide evidence that the outcome was of benefit to students.

# Chapter 5 Reflections and insights on school evaluation: Leadership Development for Schools support service personnel

## 5.1 The focus group

Three members of the Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) support service took part in a focus group discussion. All three were principals seconded from their schools to support school leaders in post-primary schools. Each had experienced a WSE when working as principal of a post-primary school, one in the pilot phase of WSE and two in more recent years. Two had taken secondment within six months of the WSE and therefore information about the long-term effect of the WSE on their own school was limited. However, they remained in touch with their schools and with other schools that had experienced a WSE. Although initially requested to discuss issues related to WSE from their perspective as providers of support to schools, their perspective as principals also came to the fore. This further enriched the discussion. In supporting school leaders, LDS personnel base their work on five principles: moral purpose, modelling, situational awareness, courage to act and sustainability. Their multi-model approach aims to build capacity in four domains: personal, transformational, organisational and instructional. While their knowledge of research in some of these areas was apparent, the insights shared were more indicative of their experience.

## 5.2 WSE: the current model

### *Purpose*

All three LDS participants maintained that the WSE had served an affirmative purpose in their schools. This affirmation embraced both accountability and improvement. In their position as principals, the WSE had provided them with opportunities in their schools to focus on responsibility. *“I suppose it was responsible for all of us taking stock of what we were doing because we carry on regardless very often without reflection.”* The WSE was credited with bringing together those responsible in particular areas as it served the purpose of *“bringing groups of people who are responsible in particular areas for particular things and focusing them and that includes senior management right down throughout the school. It reasserts responsibility and commitment and makes people work together as teams, which by and large they don’t do for most of the year. And if it does anything it certainly emphasises*

*that notion of team and team responsibility and then individual leadership within teams*". As a principal it was reported that *"you could easily bring in stuff or you could even have conversations that you couldn't have had ten years ago, there were very few battles over stuff because it was seen as part of your work, so I think it legitimised... a lot of demands you wanted to make as principal and changes you would like to see happening..."* It provided a structure and cause for what the school was doing and located the school in a larger landscape.

LDS participants displayed sound knowledge of the accountability purpose of evaluation. Although not referred to explicitly, the concept of contractual accountability was strongly presupposed in their discussion about the purpose of WSE. They maintained that WSE enabled support services to ask questions related to accountability in schools. Questions such as *"are you allocating your resources the way you should?"* which could not have been easily asked in the past can now be asked categorically. The WSE *"has brought that word, accountability, very much into the centre of schools, be it resources, finances, be it teacher allocation and even in terms of being accountable for your time in school."* Their knowledge of the importance of providing value for money was particularly apparent in their reference to schools serving the needs of educationally disadvantaged students. Issues such as timetabling and deployment of resources, particularly in schools provided with additional resources to deal with disadvantage, can be dealt with by support services because of the possibility of the school having a WSE.

Strong emphasis on the purpose of schooling came to the fore at various stages in the discussion. It was suggested that besides improvement and accountability, the WSE brought transparency to what schools were doing when the word transparency had not existed previously in schools. It has brought to schools *"the vocabulary and imperative around the purpose of learning for children... we have opened up that whole conversation about why schools are there..."*

***Impact: positive aspects***

As principals, LDS participants maintained that WSE offered them leverage to initiate change. They felt they *"could use words and language that you never used before, whether that be accountability or transparency or even documentation of planning..."* without a union representative objecting. This was attributed to the external demand,

which changed the lexicon, and *“suddenly it was ok to initiate conversations on accountability or transparency or even looking at exam results and asking critical questions, it wasn’t a battle zone”*. The acceptance of the language arose as a result of inspectors using this type of language and a move towards reflection was attributed to the combination of inspection and support provided by services such as SDPI. This positive aspect of WSE was also credited with enabling LDS to develop the accountability aspect of school leadership. In their programme for new principals they could now explain what is expected in terms of accountability *“so it is not undesirable anymore”*. They believe that as more principals receive such training and support, the landscape in schools will be very different as leaders will be aware of accountability and of the onus on them in terms of what they should do for their students. Thus in two or three years, if about 40% of leaders have been supported through LDS, participants believe that leaders’ perspectives will be very different as they will have experienced the language of ethics and justice. This critical aspect of leadership development, with a focus on moral purpose, is a key principle on which the work of LDS is based.

Participants reported some unintended consequences of the WSE when they were principals in their schools. One positive outcome was the growth of collegiality. In a school where the staff was long established but a number of younger teachers had been appointed due to increased enrolment, the following was reported: *“we had quite a big group of younger teachers who had come from a lot of different broader experience who were probably not brought on board by some of the more established teachers. WSE came along, those new people had a newfound profile so I suppose by virtue of the WSE being external...we mobilised... you were talking about a team”*. This occurred as some of the more established teachers *“looked to the experience and knowhow of the young teachers with their sophistication of models and skills.”* These teachers were not afraid of group work and alternative methodologies. Both younger and more established teachers gained from the experience, as the sharing of skills gave a higher profile to the young teachers and enhanced the confidence of more established teachers.

LDS participants agreed that the process of WSE initiated improvement. While direct reference was not made to research on school improvement, the importance of the external view and of a reflective approach to broaden the school’s perspective was highlighted. As a result of the findings provided in the WSE report, participants noted



that conversations were opened up about the priorities for planning. The findings were useful in giving “*some kind of benchmark to which you could refer*”. The importance of ensuring corporate responsibility for improvement was stressed. The fact that the findings were fed back to the board gave a responsibility to the board. At present, it was felt that boards provide a ‘glib’ response to WSE reports. LDS participants considered that if inspection were to lead to improvement in teaching and learning, the present structure would need to be enhanced so that when the WSE was completed, schools would use the findings. The conversations schools were having around “*where we’d like to go...*” within the schools’ context was deemed better than using checklists to assess evidence of making a difference.

It was accepted that in general the findings of the WSE were accurate. While this might not always be positive for schools, participants maintained that the reports “*state what was known by an awful lot of people*”. This was particularly the case when reports highlighted the need for major development in key aspects of the work of the school. At the same time it was possible that certain schools could receive very positive reports, as they might appear to be “*a highly successful school*”, when in reality they could be “*a very cautious school [that] has the system cracked*”. Such schools might not be successful in adding value to students’ progress even if students do well in state examinations.

Positive impact made by WSE on schools was believed to be short term. Improvement tended to be a short-term response to an impending WSE and while some areas continued to improve and some people in schools were happy to continue the work with subject departments, the level of energy used prior to the WSE and the stimulus for improvement was not sustainable. LDS participants wondered, but did not suggest solutions regarding how to harness the energy that had been generated through the WSE to enable a more long-term impact.

### ***Impact: negative aspects***

A number of incidents of negative impact of WSE were reported. The effect of subject inspections, as part of the WSE process, on individual teachers was highlighted. The fact that the WSE reported on the work of a school or a subject department and not on the work of individual teachers caused difficulties for some principals. The evaluation report outlined the strengths and areas for development of the combined teaching force

in a department. On occasions when the findings were negative, some teachers “*after 25 or 30 years of an exceptional career were then categorised as being in a failing department when in fact it was not their responsibility at all*”. This type of experience caused “*a huge amount of damage to people who are not responsible for some of the problems in the school but are actually lumped into the problem because of how things are articulated and the way they are represented*”. Similarly, a difference of opinion about the quality of teaching observed and reported by inspectors and the internal view in the school about the quality of teaching in a particular department can cause concern. In one instance, the teacher, who according to the principal, “*was a superb teacher in every respect... [but] the inspector and the teacher probably came from a different herd... it wasn't anyone's fault but it was just one of those things that happened...but the unpacking of that and the remaking of that teacher took a lot of work*”. In both circumstances, it fell to the principal to deal with the aftermath and ensure that teachers' motivation and confidence were not adversely effected.

The language used by inspectors and in particular inconsistencies in this regard was also viewed negatively. The use of the word satisfactory was considered unhelpful in one instance, particularly as practice in the particular context was felt to be ‘fantastic’ within the school. The use of excellent in other published reports highlighted the inconsistency in language used by different inspectors. Inconsistencies in use of language caused schools and teachers to be disheartened and sometimes to become cynical. While human, academic and educational complexities were acknowledged in relation to the use of language, a broadening of the vocabulary used was advised. A move away from “*three degrees of a standard, [as] there is no excellent, good and satisfactory*” was recommended since “*there is a whole range of in between variations on that and that may be harder for an inspector to nail but at least it gives you an option*”. It was felt that having greater variation in levels would make all the difference to a school.

Conflicting views were expressed about the role of the student voice in the WSE process. Participants' expertise in the area of leadership at all levels within the school was apparent in this regard. They were saddened by the fact that structures did not exist within the WSE process to ensure that students were consulted. It was felt that “*it is important to ask the questions of children because they are the people who will absolutely give you the clearest picture of what school is like*”. The fact that “*some of*

*them are approaching inspectors to talk voluntarily to them, they are making appointments with them because they have things to say*” indicated their desire to have a voice. It was suggested that *“their contribution to the school, their involvement in decision making processes, their leadership”* could be identified but that at present *“they were ignored”*. When looking at leadership *“you need to talk about student leadership, you need to identify those young people who step up to the mark on a week like that and actually there is a whole range of charities going on in school, philanthropy, the building of community responsibility, humanitarian organisations, none of this is mentioned”*. It was acknowledged that inspectors want *“to get the parent voice which is not of the parent council, the student voice which is not of the students’ council...but how you get it is [through] observation, through listening and it is the informal”* It is possible to get such views *“wherever the students were congregating...there is an opportunity for observation and picking up on interaction and relationship”*. Some participants felt that inspectors were seeking out such opportunities and commenting on relationships in reports: others expressed disappointment at the lack of reference to students at various stages in the WSE process. While the *“whole thing is around the student learning and teaching, the students themselves aren’t involved in the feedback from the Department point of view... they are not mentioned...there is very little reference to them...”* Lack of reference to students in reports was criticised *“I was most disappointed in the fact that this huge report arrived back in the school and students in our school, like they do in every school, really stepped up to the mark, they were marvellous...and there was very little mention of them...and I think if it is about them then the whole purpose is to see what we are doing for them...So I think it is a massive oversight from an inspectors’ point of view”*. This point of view was contrasted with the view articulated when WSE was in the pilot phase when the process was cited as a great example of including the students during the in-school week of the evaluation. To some extent the framework for WSE was seen as the problem as *“it hasn’t given the latitude; it doesn’t say students in it”*.

Inspectors’ lack of experience of school leadership was criticised. LDS participants were bothered as principals that *“the people who were inspecting me were not principals... there is a lack of understanding, unless you have been there you do not know what it is like and there is no question about that. Even the questions that are being asked of you as a senior leader of this school, ... they are not relevant to the*

*effectiveness of your leadership or how the school is being run. For me it was a tick box exercise that really didn't get to the heart or the core of what a school is about".* In their role of providing support for school leaders, they were concerned about this lack of leadership experience because the principal is the one person immediately recognisable in a report. In particular, they stressed the difficulty for principals when reports contain negative messages, as the dignity of the person is hugely important. The context in which the principal is working is a factor that should be considered. *"The fact that there may be people sitting in front of you with a list of questions and you are maybe having a horrendous time and ...regardless of how capable, competent or able they are, they are having a difficult time in those schools. And sometimes the engagement and the dialogue that happens around a WSE can only make the situation worse"*. At the same time it was acknowledged that the questions were essential but *"if you want answers you have to ask the right questions and I don't think the right questions are being asked, nor are the people who are listening to situations like this ... have they the ear to hear what needs to be heard"*. Since a key issue being addressed in WSE is leadership, an understanding of leadership was thought to be essential and without it the credibility of the inspectorate was at stake.

Allied to the lack of leadership experience, a lack of involvement by inspectors in particular school sectors was seen as a cause of concern. Thus some inspectors were seen to view a school from a particular lens. With a different professional experience, a judgement can be reached which *"can be quite broadly swept... and ...it can be exacerbated by the fact that you may not have been in that leadership position to know all the variables that come to construct, to make the situation right... I found that quite interesting, explaining the reasons why things were the way they were, because you could look at them externally and say 'daft', and yes, many of them were but they come from a long road, they came from a tradition"*.

The criteria used by inspectors were not always seen positively by LDS participants. Specifically, the same criteria used for all schools when *"one size doesn't fit all"* were criticised. It was suggested that relativism should be considered. This was compared with taking responsibility for oral language examinations in schools in different socio-economic areas, where *"you can't use the same scale, you have to use your head"*. However, when they were further questioned about maintaining standards by using standard criteria, it was accepted that *"that is the redeeming feature, I like the notion of*

*a coherence, of standards, ...for the schools... they deserve that, they merit it but what you are talking about ... is having a contextual understanding within the framework...*” rather than damning the school because a standard has not been reached.

The impact of negative findings on schools and the public nature of these findings caused concern for LDS participants. This was particularly apparent in “*tough schools*”. One wondered “*if the difficulties...could ... have been dealt with in somewhat a different way to ensure positive outcome rather than putting it in the public media whereby people still have to go in there next week, children, very marginalized children and they still have to go back into that school in that community*”. In particular, if the “*hoped for outcome is that the teaching and learning will improve and the outcome for the children will improve, there must be another way where the dignity of everyone is preserved*”. The question posed was whether the outcome made the situation in schools better or worse for the children that “*you actually set out to help in the first place*”. The important factor was, that while inspectors were “*in a powerful position to insist on those standards being met*” they should also have “*a contextual understanding and a contextual respect for the community and children and families*”. Aspects of schooling such as children’s enthusiasm, pride in their school, being part of the school community and feeling successful because they “*won the cup, because they have been able to win an art competition*” were missed or were not acknowledged. These can be important for students, as school is sometimes the only place where they belong and the WSE is an opportunity to affirm “*the cohort who need that affirmation for what they do*”. While it was felt that reporting and making negative findings public can have damaging effects, it was also considered to provide opportunities for schools to acknowledge the reality and to start conversations about moving forward.

### ***Recommendations and follow up***

LDS participants identified a number of ways in which follow up action after WSE could be improved. While some of these, such as standards, relationships between schools and inspectors, and networking, are consistent with research in the areas of evaluation and improvement, the suggestions were referenced to experience rather than literature.

Fear was expressed by LDS participants that responsibility for issues highlighted through WSE would be put in the hands of principals. At present, when reports were

issued to boards, responsibility for the recommendations were generally “*handed back to the principal*” and “*nobody is going to follow up, nobody is going to look and see what was done or how it was done, nobody talks about resources to achieve the things you need ... or the problems that have been highlighted through the course of the WSE*”. Responses made by boards and published with reports are not currently followed up, “*it just sits there as a response and the very articulate board can say something fantastic...*” Both boards of management and trustees should be accountable in terms of the post WSE experience and it was proposed that key questions should be addressed such as “*what needs to be done, how can we divide [the work], how can we share [responsibility]*”. In situations where boards were not equipped to address issues, it might be necessary to have them ‘externally constructed’ so that they would have the credibility to take on responsibility.

LDS participants commented on the fact that “*looking at standards of teaching ... is the key thing, that is the centre of it all*”. With this in mind they suggested that the board of management, not the principal, should take responsibility for recommendations that were made by inspectors regarding underperforming or ‘lazy’ teachers. In particular they referred to individual teachers “*not reaching standards and consequently causing children’s lives to be affected in the long term*”. There should be a statutory recommendation made to the board, not in a public forum, but quietly in relation to such cases. The individuals concerned would be obliged to achieve certain standards and would be expected to seek help. “*The board would follow through and give an acknowledgement that they will do this for the sake of the children in the school who suffer under these individuals*”.

Another suggestion was made about creating a space between the point of offering recommendations and the publication of the report. “*Certain responsibilities [would be] acknowledged and ownership for development acknowledged by the board and by the personnel on the ground*”. Having recognised what needed to be done, a re-evaluation would take place “*and at that point there is some publication of both the initial evaluation and the subsequent exploration of the identified issues.*” This would be a safeguard for schools and “*would force some agreement for schools that are in a dire case*” prior to publication on the web and to the subsequent reporting in the media. This was deemed important as unless a school is provided with a possible ‘escape

route', a way forward, the dignity of the community is at stake, as the media are aware of the situations in schools and are awaiting the reports to highlight the difficulties.

The possibility of conversations between the inspectors who identified the issues through the WSE process and those, such as board members or trustees who could follow through on recommendations was explored. It was agreed that *"somebody needs to sit down with the people who did the inspection and talk to them"* about the things that are prioritised and what needs to be done. The issues that are not revealed in reports could also *"be relayed to somebody who can do something about it"*. This could involve identifying achievements that might be possible in the short-term, medium-term and long-term.

Networking with other teachers in others schools was suggested as another option. *"WSE could do that... .. the teacher of History or the teacher of Mathematics or whoever it might be who spends a little bit of time [in another school]...that idea that schools can be in some way twinned"*. This would be a great affirmation for the school that was doing well and would reveal to teachers from the struggling schools what could be done, *"it is about the possibilities"*.

### **5.3 School self-evaluation**

#### ***Current practice and moving forward***

Exploration of present school self-evaluation practice did not reveal a cohesive or consistent picture. Although discussing issues through the lens of their experience, LDS participants displayed a sound knowledge of and keen interest in reflective practice. They maintained that support provided through SDPI and other services had created a system that assumed that everything could be put in order through the use of a template. However, this was criticised as it had created a means for schools to put everything in order through ticking boxes. This type of development resulted from support services going into schools on a once off basis and doing bits and pieces. The importance of building capacity for schools to sustain themselves and to stand up with confidence and integrity and say *"I chose to do this this year because where we are, at this moment in time, this is what is most appropriate"*. Recent work undertaken by LDS with another support service in terms of assessing evidence of making a difference was considered to be somewhat superficial. A list of items that would indicate good practice was provided and this was judged by LDS as a continuation of the tick box

system. LDS personnel would prefer to promote a system where schools were having conversations about where they would like to go within the specific context and experience of the school.

Individual examples of good practice in school self-evaluation were cited. One principal, who had returned to school after secondment to a support service, moved from working on a school development plan to a school improvement plan. This enabled him to move the school from a focus on ticking boxes to actually focusing on improving practice. Getting rid of the school development planning title was deemed important in bringing about this change. Other examples involved small-scale action research and change by individual teachers related to the provision of feedback to students. One case involved processes that were “*progressive and developmental*” and enabled teachers to report back to parents about the students’ performance, how they might improve and how teachers and parents could help them improve. This was considered a deeper and more profound way for teachers to look at student progress than traditional methods that use ‘graded’ vocabulary such as good and very good. It was compared with assessment for learning and was deemed to enable teachers to look at things differently and “*have a different benchmark of what is successful in a classroom*”. In another case the provision of feedback through positive comments only with no grading was used in a small experimental study and resulted in an average increase of twenty per cent in students’ results. Both instances were cited as ways that teachers could engage in self-evaluation to reflect on their work.

At present, the importance of having conversations about “*what is making a difference and how do you know it is making a difference?*” was highlighted in DEIS schools. Such conversations were deemed necessary to counter the fear schools had of being adventurous and of taking risks with innovations such as assessment for learning. The fear, it was felt, stemmed either from the knowledge that inspectors would object or from the fact that the school could not justify or articulate why they had chosen a particular innovation. Schools needed to have clarity but instead they were struggling to get things moving. Thus the “*luxury of actually sitting down and reflecting on where you’d like to go*” was not done systematically or collectively. Speaking from a principal perspective, it was deemed that clarity would come from “*looking at my own cohort of children, looking at all the gifts and the needs and everything we have, whether it is in the children or in staff or whatever...where we’d like to go within the*



*national framework and what we need to put in place*". The potential in the school could then be realised not just for the students and the school but also for the wider community and for other schools.

### ***Developing a culture of school self-evaluation***

LDS participants felt that school self-evaluation should be about reflective practice and action research including research on teaching and methodology. However, they agreed that schools needed to be trained in how to evaluate and guided to become reflective. *"You need to know how to go through this process. And I think the big part of it is the whole art of reflection"*. It was accepted that this was not currently done in schools and that through the various LDS programmes, principals and deputies were being encouraged and trained *"to stand back and look at themselves as leaders, teachers and people within schools that play a part in a child's life and then to do something about it."* Such a process of reflection, evaluation and planning to change is not standard procedure in schools at present. The notion of reflective teaching and practice and giving ownership of change to teachers themselves and to schools requires training. This training should take place in initial teacher training colleges and in leadership training programmes *"so that schools become reflective entities...that the whole entire school becomes a process of reflection and enquiry...creating their own knowledge, creating their own theories of living, creating their own futures...that whole possibility thing is missing from our schools, schools as learning communities, we just do what we do and we keep doing it and it is not changing from within"*. While it was acknowledged that the issue was being tentatively broached in Ireland, *"it is only new into the curriculum and universities"*.

### ***Maintaining standards***

It was suggested that to maintain a standardised benchmark across all schools and to maintain standards for students, it is necessary to have standards for teachers as *"if you have a standard that teachers must reach and perform to and be obligated to do, you will then have results in children, in how they learn and in their experience of school regardless of context and if we are to move forward there has to be a way of addressing ... those who are not reaching the standards of teaching"*. Standards for leadership would also need to be addressed. It was felt that the Teaching Council would play a significant role in ensuring acceptable standards were met as *"they are the only ones at this moment in time who actually have the leverage and the statutory grip to do*

*something about these situations...you are talking about professional integrity and people having standards that they are going to aspire to*". The Teaching Council was deemed by LDS participants to have a monitoring role in relation to standards in teaching but standards of professional behaviour also required monitoring as "*some of the biggest problems, it is the indignity that children are subjected to*". The Teaching Council Act, 2001, 7.-(2) (b), requires the Council "to establish, publish, review and maintain codes of professional conduct for teachers which shall include standards of teaching, knowledge, skill and competence" (Teaching Council 2001). However it does not require the Council to monitor standards.

In discussing standards, LDS participants suggested that standards embraced expectations. The traditional view of boys' schools needing physical activity and PE but not student support needed to be challenged. It was articulated that some schools "*create their own norms, their own world, their own projections and the parents don't know about it*". A possible solution to this was to enable teachers to experience working in different schools. While it is not always possible for teachers to move from a particular situation on a permanent basis, they should be given "*some opportunity in particular circumstances to get some level of exposure and see the reality of what happens...*" Such possibilities, it was cited, were available on a North/South basis where teachers have been across the boarder and seen 'a different culture in operation'. Similar exchanges could be "*an incredible experience for [teachers] to move and not spend 40 years in one place*". It would challenge their attitudes and their authority and would force them to deal with real, difficult situations. Some opportunities to visit other schools had occurred, in particular when new programmes such as TY were being introduced. The learning that came back to the school because of the experience was viewed as richer and more beneficial than would have been attained through paper work. This idea could be expanded to the "*idea that schools can be in some way twinned, that you would be a mentor, an apprentice type of thing*" in certain specialisms, with teachers rather than principals and deputies opening conversations and embedding the learning. This type of experience would also be an affirmation for schools that were working well. Schools could be selected and teachers could be recommended to visit a comparative school in a similar area as a follow up to WSE.

LDS participants stressed the need for an agreed standard or benchmark against which schools could measure themselves. Their interest in and understanding of the value of

both the moral and instrumental purpose of schools was apparent. They expressed a need to balance academic standards with the overall development of students. They maintained that at present, the standard benchmark is provided through *“the national framework [which] at the moment is the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate, the state exams to some degree”*. Schools’ latitude to explore were somewhat limited by this framework, in their view. As principals, LDS participants believed that while they would like to *“take on mixed ability throughout, I’d love to take on assessment for learning throughout, the teachers are afraid because your results are going to go down in the first year or two”*. It was reported that the use of benchmarks other than the state examinations was not strong in Irish schools. LDS participants remarked on their experience of attending a conference in Germany where schools from all countries present, except Ireland, were referring to PISA and their ratings on the PISA survey. These countries had a benchmark against which to measure themselves while the Irish representative described schools from the point of view of children. The need for an agreed framework, a benchmark against which schools should measure themselves was acknowledged. It was suggested that this could be *“a little bit like a profile of a school leader but if we had the profile of the successful child or the educated child...we then would have an opportunity for conversation among different constituencies”*.

The need for schools to measure both the academic and non-academic aspects of schooling was also agreed. *“I don’t think it is enough to measure PISA because it doesn’t give an indication of a load of other things about children in schools. You could have a brilliant academic school, the children could be miserable, and is that good enough, is that educating them for life?”* Participants felt that schools and teachers in Ireland deal with both aspects of education as *“it is embedded in part of our history and our tradition as educators, we teach beyond the classroom and we teach beyond the superficial facts. But we have not learned as a country to measure that, we have no way of measuring the fact that pastoral care is such a hugely important aspect of all of our schools... we value the extra-curricular, we value goodness and morality and charitability and mercy and all the things we espouse as schools and yet we never measure how much of it we achieve and what impact that has on a child leaving a school”*. The importance of finding a way to measure it was linked to societal, national and parental concerns, which were deemed to be about having good citizens and moral individuals in society rather than about results. Thus, credence should be given to the role of schools in the formation of this aspect of students’ welfare as well as using

surveys such as PISA as a benchmark for the standardisation of learning and teaching. A view was articulated that children learn when the area of support for students was successfully in place in schools and *“they don’t necessarily learn without them”*.

#### **5.4 The way forward**

A number of suggestions were made about how to advance quality assurance from the present WSE model. In discussing the way forward, participants drew to a greater extent on their experience as members of the LDS team than on a research base. LDS participants confirmed that it was necessary to start with the external view *“because definitely speaking as principal, I think there is huge leverage around external, it certainly leads to change and development, for the initial steps, for collegiality in a different way ... but it gives responsibility to the board and it is stated, there is commitment on paper”*. As a follow up to the external, the board could be asked to indicate progress after a certain period of time, to someone in a regional office or to a core or key inspector. An annual report could be part of the evaluation but this would be prompted by the external. However, it was feared that the annual report could become simply a document and that self-evaluation would be reduced to a paper exercise. To counter this fear, the notion of assigning inspectors to particular schools, as was the case in primary schools, was viewed positively. *“A board [could] meet with someone, with the inspector once a year...I think there is a great loss in form filling but when you actually sit down as a group and articulate [what you are doing]...there is something powerful in that”*. The importance of relationships was stressed in that the inspector would be a link person with the school and this would ensure a continuing relationship between schools and inspectors. Meetings once a year or every two years between the board and inspectors would also enable inspectors to use language and make statements that might not be part of written reports to be published. Further, it would allow schools and inspectors to focus on *“looking at the essence of the school, to look at the competencies of people and children, to look at how a school lives out its mission”*.

The concept of a relationship with inspectors was further explored in relation to support services. Participants proposed that support to enable schools to move forward from the external evaluation could be provided through *“very open and honest conversation between support services and the inspectorate around what criteria are used, where they came from and why they are in place. And then to look at possibilities around that*

*broader experience that support services have gleaned from their visits to schools and their interactions, because they are seeing people, the operators of the school, they see them at work without that pressure of the lens of the inspectorate".* They envisaged the inspectorate and the support services working intimately together which would constitute a change from current practice where *"we are working in isolation although the focus of all our work is school and school improvement"*. Difficulties arising from the fact that support services are managed by a number of sections in the Department were highlighted.

Responsibility for evaluation and school improvement within schools was explored. LDS participants maintained that while leadership comes from a variety of people in schools and some schools aspire to the concept of shared leadership, at present it is the principal who is expected to take responsibility for all aspects of school, including school improvement. This was deemed to be unsustainable for one person. The notion of engendering corporate responsibility in schools was presented. Offering opportunities for the board to make presentations would divert responsibility from the principal and this concept could be further developed to include parents and students. At the same time, if the outcome of inspection was intended to improve teaching and learning, *"then you have to look at ways within the framework to allow that to happen when you [inspectors] are gone. So part of that has to be engendering corporate responsibility which remains long after you are gone...what you have at the moment is a particular structure. What within that structure can we take out that we can actually enhance a bit further that will work when you are gone?"* Fundamentally, schools were seen to be somewhat self-absorbing with issues seen within schools from the perspectives of staff and principal and board rather than from that of students. Returning to a focus on the purpose of school and what needs to be put in place to serve this purpose was required.

The necessity of building capacity and of having a suitable framework and structure was stressed. Caution was expressed about the type of framework and criteria that should be used. It should be around qualities and dispositions and commitment and it could be a profile document, what the school is committed to. It should be a framework around which discussion about development could take place rather than a document to tick boxes. It was believed that the solutions were frequently within the schools and that if there was commitment, capacity could be built as *"you find the expertise to do*

*the job if you are committed to it*". This was preferable to the notion of experts coming into the school from outside. However the need for assistance was accepted. It was clear from work undertaken in training for leadership that "*sometimes they need to be shown how*". Experience enabled LDS participants to conclude that some schools and leaders who needed to be challenged, for instance to lead the review of a school policy, could be supported by working in groups with colleagues from other schools. The sharing of knowledge and recounting of experiences resulted in leaders returning to their school with a tool kit of some form and "*rather than knowing it can be done, they said 'yes, now I know how'*".

In conclusion, LDS participants felt that schools in Ireland had come a long way in the process of evaluation. WSE has opened doors but this has only been the beginning. It was now time to change and modify the process. Some schools would continue to need some level of 'surveillance' but the notion of autonomy was viewed as being closely linked to trust. Schools were trusted by parents to cater for the needs of the students they enrolled and therefore had an obligation to deal with all those needs. In accepting the students, schools made a moral statement that they could cater for their needs. Such trust was also necessary between inspectors and schools. If inspectors bring a distrustful attitude to schools, it causes anxiety and annoyance among teachers. For this reason, it was considered desirable that an evaluation of the inspectors and of the inspection process would happen as a matter of course.

## Chapter 6 Reflections and insights on school evaluation: school principals

### 6.1 The focus group

The views and experiences of four principals, currently working in schools were explored. Three of these took part in a focus group discussion and the fourth was interviewed individually. The principals were drawn from the voluntary secondary school sector and the community college vocational sector. All had been principals in their schools when a WSE was undertaken and one had also been a deputy principal in a different school that had experienced a WSE. Two had been newly appointed principals when the WSE occurred and had not worked previously in the schools while two had been long standing members of staff prior to appointment as principals. The WSE in each school had taken place within the past three years. Three of the reports had been published and one was completed in the month prior to agreement about publication. All four principals continued to work in their schools after the WSE.

### 6.2 WSE: the current model

#### *Purpose*

Participants in the principals' focus group summed up the purpose of WSE clearly and succinctly "*Whole school evaluation should be about the quality of teaching and learning in the school and the quality of delivery of service*". Some did not see the necessity of including subject inspections in the process, as "*they are more like an intrusion*". Subject inspections should take place at other times, "*a year in advance of whole school evaluation and then they [inspectors] can come in and discuss that with us.*" Principals did not dismiss the value of subject inspections; rather they felt that when they occurred during WSE they were an intrusion and "*it is chaos in the school*". The results of subject inspections could be used as a benchmark in writing the overall report but the process should be seen as a continuum.

There was general agreement that the WSE served the purpose of affirming good practice in the schools. This was useful in particular when the process of development in a school was at an early stage and the WSE reaffirmed that "*what we were doing was right*". It verified that the SDPI process was moving in the right direction and that areas for development were correctly identified, and set the whole cycle of planning in train. In subject departments that were evaluated during the WSE, teachers were very

apprehensive initially and it was felt that the process was one of inspection rather than evaluation. However, the ‘hype’ before inspection was replaced after feedback by positive feelings, as departments and individuals were affirmed. The feedback and recommendations received enabled the school or the department to move forward.

Principals had differing views about whether WSE should serve the purpose of identifying where the quality of teaching at individual level was not good. One view was that it would be useful to have a focus on particular subject departments or teachers *“it should also be to find out where there isn’t good teaching...with a view to trying to change the scenario”*. This would alleviate the frustration in schools about *“the poor teacher and the complaints we get”*. On the other hand a view was expressed that *“if a teacher is underperforming surely that has nothing to do with the whole school evaluation...that’s a crisis in this person’s professional development and we have to deal with the fall out which is disastrous and very negative for a school. But surely there has got to be a much better response to that than just hounding the person out of the profession”*.

Principals accepted the fact that WSE served a compliance purpose. It was necessary to deal with compliance issues such as curriculum, time in school and timetabling. While management could get annoyed with reference to such issues in reports, it was acknowledged that inspectors had criteria and it was no harm to have them brought to the attention of the school.

***Impact: positive aspects***

Principals recounted a number of positive aspects of WSE. It was especially useful for newly appointed principals. It confirmed to teachers that the expectations of the newly appointed principal were justified. They found that teachers were pleased to have started a process of development planning prior to notification of the WSE rather than doing it for the sake of a whole-school evaluation. They had the evidence on paper, *“there is a paper trail, there is a track of what we are at and where we are going, what our purpose is and what our future is”*. Before the WSE occurred, principals felt it might be difficult to motivate people to continue planning afterwards, but *“it hasn’t been difficult at all... there was more of a need to push, push, push beforehand”*. The school development process was accepted as a long and continuous one and while in the lead up to the WSE *“it was more sharp and focused ... it was very easy to focus... it*



*was very easy to keep deadlines... now we set deadlines but it can be a grey enough area to have the deadlines kept". It was agreed that the WSE built up momentum in the school, which stopped in the immediate aftermath, as the level of engagement was not sustainable. However, planning and self-evaluation were ongoing. After the WSE, planning days continued to be set and schools were moving towards engaging in self-evaluation. Thus the WSE assisted newly appointed principals to change the habits in the school. In schools where principals were long established either as teachers or principal, maintaining the strong culture of whole school development was the challenge. In these cases, the WSE highlighted the good things that were happening but at the same time, it created an avenue to look at other areas. It provided the principal with "a stronger sense of conviction in planning" because "there is a map and that's what WSE gave us...that carried more weight with staff and while there was a tradition there all along, they were even more open to looking at particular ways, be that policy areas or classroom initiatives, classroom management... they were open to moving with them".*

Principals reported that the WSE process was positive for the school. This was particularly the case in schools that were well organised in relation to subject and department planning. *"The planning steering committee were involved in preparation for the WSE but only as part of the normal planning process in the school. No panic or fear was apparent on the part of the management nor was there a feeling of a need to reorganise planning. The school had very good structures in place for planning".* They felt that because the external evaluation was a very positive experience for staff, it generated a willingness to continue the process within the school itself afterwards. It led to a focus on particular policies for development or on some teaching initiative such as formative assessment, at staff meetings. When feedback from WSE was positive it encouraged staff to do more, to get involved in sub committees and to look at areas for improvement. The fact that the feedback and recommendations were coming from outside the school and not from the principal was helpful. Schools that had already established school development planning groups and were in the process of developing policies found that the WSE helped identify areas for improvement. Recommendations published for some schools provided guidance for others, even before they had experienced the WSE. An example was given of a board of management noting from published reports that boards should provide reports on the work of the school to parents and had initiated this as a result. It was acknowledged that all schools needed

recommendations and in one school the heated debate at the post evaluation meeting and the collaborative process engaged in during the factual verification and school response stages were helpful. It provided the school with a broader view and kept its self-evaluation grounded.

A notable positive merit of the WSE process was the involvement of the whole school community. The fact that inspectors met with a range of groups in the school was worthwhile. It was important that all groups were involved so that inspectors would get *“a proper flavour of the whole school”* and because people might feel excluded if their representative group was not interviewed. The present process was considered very thorough, as the views of board of management, staff, student council, parents’ association, senior and middle management and even past pupils were sought. This *“gave a status to them within the school...they all saw that they were being treated equally and that they were being listened to ... that was very valid, that was a positive. It helps build up community”*. It also provided a *“platform where the different partners, be it the parents or even the students, were able to acknowledge the other groups”*. One school found the students’ council comment that the school had a very happy environment and that the relationship between teachers and students was good to be particularly affirmative as *“in the profession you don’t often get people saying extremely positive things. If you are doing a good job, they tend to just accept that that is your job whereas they would be very quick to be critical”*. In another school, the view of middle management that the duties attached to the various posts were inequitable was revealed through the WSE process and this enabled a review to take place. Overall it was agreed that through meeting all the groups in the school, a rounded picture was provided and *“there is no way that something could be hidden”*. It was deemed to be a good way to triangulate evidence and was part of what was good about the WSE. The process was credited with giving teachers *“a different perspective of the school community...out of the egg box and into the community”*. It gave them a chance to step back and have a look at what was happening around them. For senior members of staff, this boosted their self-confidence. It also *“set the atmosphere in the school going forward as being one of collegiality”*.

Overall, principals felt that the publication of reports was positive. Although there was agreement that the publishing of reports was *“a non event”* and reports were not widely read, the fact that they were available was positive. Prospective parents occasionally

read the reports and on one occasion one principal had a query from such a parent in relation to one minor aspect of the report. In small towns where *“it would be well known around the town that it [WSE] was happening”* there tended to be slightly more interest shown in the published reports. One example was cited *“the local papers picked it up and it was very positive altogether”*. This could provide great publicity for the school. If the reports were negative, this would affect applications for enrolment. In urban areas, schools received very little feedback from the people in the community. However, media reaction to published reports was highly criticised. Principals felt the media *“were baying for blood then they didn’t get blood and they dismissed the whole thing as a paper trail, a paper exercise, which was grossly insulting to the whole process because reports actually said that school were doing a good job”*. Reports that received attention in the national media were very negative and *“only the negative parts were taken out”*.

***Impact: negative aspects***

Principals raised a number of concerns about the WSE. The level of pressure and stress placed on the principal was frequently cited. In some cases, teachers were anxious and feeling stressed either because their subject department would be inspected during the process or if it had been inspected previously the progress made with recommendations would be checked. In these situations *“from a principal’s point of view you had to give a lot of support to staff...everybody is still pulling out of you...they needed a massive amount of support to keep them going...the best teachers in the school just went to bits”*. Besides the pressure of supporting staff, the process was draining on principals because *“the rest of the school doesn’t go on hold. Everything else is happening”*. The principal and deputy principal were very busy before the in-school evaluation week. They had many meetings beforehand *“going through the areas that we might be asked about”* and during the in-school evaluation week the inspectors met with principals every day. At the same time principals and deputies were trying to arrange for the various groups to meet with inspectors. *“It was quite difficult to manage allowing all the staff to attend all the meetings...it was a huge amount of work...organising the rota of people to cover”*. Some of the pressure stemmed from the fact that schools *“are under-resourced as a sector”*.

The issue of resources in general was mentioned as a concern. Principals expressed anxiety about the level of delivery expected of their schools versus the level of staffing

provided, even before the cutbacks in resources. This concern came to the fore as inspectors had high expectations of what schools could do. This, they claimed, stemmed from the “*conflict of roles*” between teachers in schools who were the practitioners and inspectors who were the theoretical people “*who are looking at it from afar...and you wonder at times, because they are not there on a day-to-day basis, do they really understand?*” Inspectors regularly criticised timetabling and specific practices in schools. A number of examples were provided: the uneven distribution of subject class periods over the week was one. Principals agreed that they were aware that the distribution of classes was not always ideal but “*there is always compromise, particularly in a timetable...maybe the inspectors don’t realise this*”. Principals spent a long time “*trying to resolve problems... and the problems are actually not possible to resolve and then the whole-school evaluation will come in and pick it up...The bottom line is that if we were properly resourced we wouldn’t have that, so the timetable is over compromised by the lack of resources*”. Another example cited related to providing physical education for all year groups. The report recommended “*that every class, every year in the school have PE. With curriculum overload, with the lack of resources, with the lack of physical resources vis-à-vis the hall, that’s just not practical*”. The relationship between recommendations made in inspection reports and the availability of resources was also criticised by principals. Again in relation to PE but in a different school, the principal reported that the school used a concert hall for PE and that this was causing the concert hall to be damaged. The inspector of PE concluded that he could not recommend that the school should be provided with a new PE hall. A similar issue was described in another school “*Because the whole-school evaluation had no bite in terms of the improvement of facilities whether it be in infrastructure or in software or IT...it lacks momentum moving forward*”. It was felt that inspectors steered away from making recommendations requiring financial resources deliberately when they should be honest about them and the Department should respond to them. Otherwise, “*if it is just a matter of [inspectors] coming in and going through the motion of an external inspection then that will lack credibility on the ground*”. Principals maintained schools would welcome whole-school evaluation if recommendations related to resources had more weight. If sections of the Department such as the building unit took cognisance of the recommendations, this would add value to the process.

Principals objected to criticism in WSE reports about some aspects of school practice. Although not highlighted by principals, these frequently referred to compliance issues. They considered that problems arose because the inspection team lacked school management experience. Knowledge of the complexities involved in areas such as timetables and the practicality of running a school on a day-to-day basis was deemed lacking. One school had been reprimanded because the students did not receive tuition for the required twenty-eight hours. The principal recounted the complexity of dealing with the issue, as a change in practice could be counter-productive. Ensuring that all students had the required hours' tuition could lead to changes in the length of class periods or a reduction in the number of class periods provided, which would reduce rather than increase the tuition hours provided. Another principal related a suggestion made by the inspection team regarding provision for Traveller students and the teaching of Irish. Expectations in two areas, firstly in relation to dealing with Traveller students, and secondly the influence a principal from a post-primary school could or should have on the practice in primary schools, were deemed impractical and illustrated lack of knowledge of the management of a school. A third example cited involved inspectors commenting critically on a minute detail of school policy in an aspect of classroom management. This led the principal to comment "*one thing we might query as principal is what experience of management have the people who are inspecting you?*" Discussion about the minute detail of policy and practice and its inclusion in the final report "*exercised the staff because it was in many respects 'pernickety'*". It dominated discussion at the feedback meeting because staff felt it was unrealistic and the principal maintained, "*It diverted attention from the real message of the report which was very positive*".

Principals reported a level of frustration in relation to a few aspects of WSE. Examples of messages and suggestions given by support services conflicting with expectations of inspectors were criticised. In one school, various teams and committees included teachers who were not post holders, as this had been encouraged by SDPI but this was criticised during the WSE and the school felt it had to defend its practice. Principals also expressed disapproval of the overall delivery of in-service to schools. They believed in-service was piecemeal and that "*there are days that we might have four different in-service events happening and each of those in-service events haven't been talking to each other*". This was unhelpful as "*whole-school evaluation is only a part of a cycle so the whole cycle needs to be looked at*", and the cycle includes in-service.

Principals were worried about getting negative comments in WSE reports as *“this will lead to a lack of public confidence and that may possibly lead to a fall off in numbers... but on the other side, if the Department is so conscious of that, which I think they are, that they sanitise their report so much, which they do, then it doesn’t have enough bite”*. Because schools worked in a competitive environment, it was possible that they might try to hide the negatives and put forward all the positives. However, principals felt schools were willing to have negative aspects highlighted, provided they could then *“put a plan together and say we acknowledge [the negative aspects]... and move forward”*. In order to do this, schools needed support and if they *“don’t get the support from the Department to move forward then we are in trouble”*.

Principals displayed mixed views about the WSE reports. Initial reaction was that reports were too long and too sanitised. They were considered formulaic in many respects and were described as ‘verbalese’. However, it was suggested that the length was necessary in order to put the school in context for those who were not familiar with it. Some also considered that *“it is such a big process it deserves a decent report...it is a massive process. If you are going to spend three weeks of my life talking to me about the school I would like to see a report at least that justifies that but maybe there should be a shorter version, like an executive summary, that parents could read”*.

### **6.3 School self-evaluation**

Principals maintained that school self-evaluation already existed in their schools. One explained *“we would have set planning days in the year... we are actually doing school self-evaluation within the school...in a way that is teacher centred and it is being delivered from within, not by an external facilitator”*. The principal in this school made a presentation to staff about the professional role of the teacher. Staff then proceeded to share best practice and they were very honest. Another principal explained that ongoing school improvement was a feature of planning in the school. The school had a good structure for planning and school self-evaluation, which drove change. The process normally started with the planning steering committee, which comprised a number of teachers, not all of whom were post holders. Initiatives such as assessment for learning had been introduced and this was currently being expanded to embrace self-directed learning. Problems related to new initiatives were easily resolved due to good relationships between the principal and teachers. Much of the progressive planning and school self-evaluation were attributed to this. Teachers were willing and enthusiastic

about addressing issues related to teaching and learning. The importance of self-directed learning had been highlighted due to the fact that some students dropped out of third level courses when the level of support for learning decreased. Other innovative practices stemmed from the training received by relatively recently appointed teachers. Practices observed and encouraged in the course of initial teacher training were embraced and shared at school level. Overall, principals highlighted the fact that it was important for teachers to see school planning and self-evaluation, not only in terms of policy development but also in terms of curriculum development and the development of their own professional practice. Whole school planning, in their view, needed to centre on the role of the teacher.

Principals also claimed that schools were engaged in self-regulation in many respects. While WSE had been introduced in the past few years and subject inspections were also conducted, these were fairly infrequent. Schools were aware that within the current WSE system, there was an eleven-year gap between whole-school evaluations. Staff could therefore ‘put their feet up’ after a WSE and *“the school could go down the tubes”*. Schools, it was considered, had good reputations because they were getting good results and while it was accepted that *“there is more to education than good results, they are getting good results because there is good teaching going on. There is good teaching going on because by and large staff in different schools have a strong work ethic and they believe in maintaining high standards”*. The fact that teachers worked in teams, planned for the year, and followed a programme to ensure that agreed sections of syllabuses were completed within set timeframes meant they were engaging in a form of self-regulation. They felt the areas of self-evaluation and self-regulation were linked so that *“at every staff meetings...I would have a report back from all the different parties that are working on different things, the school development planning officer, all the year heads, all the different sections of the school that are working. To me that is self-regulation, you are reporting to an open forum of all the staff”*.

Principals emphasised that there were some limits to their school self-evaluation practice. One difficulty arose in relation to principals evaluating teachers. It was deemed *“totally impractical that the principal of a school is in the same union as the teachers...that’s a problem because if, for example, you want to confront the bad teacher, and let’s be honest, every school has the odd bad teacher...from the point of view of self-evaluation...and the principal is very unhappy with that teacher, where do*

*you go from there?"* A change from the present culture in schools was necessary: a move away from the present *"very independent-minded individualistic teacher"* to a culture where staff worked in teams, where there were good middle management structures and promoted post holders worked well together. It was agreed that the culture of a school needed to be built in that direction. The role of the principal was to build a culture of collegiality through subject planning. This would ensure the setting out of clear goals, guidelines and methodologies each year and would include the provision of support rather than criticising a teacher who was under performing.

#### **6.4 Moving forward**

In exploring future models of evaluation, principals suggested a possible solution to the difficulty of evaluating individual teachers and to under performance. They made a distinction between the majority of teachers who could be provided with an incentive to perform to a standard and the minority who were *"square pegs in round holes"*. One principal suggested that for the majority, performance management could be introduced. This entailed the notion of making a fund available to school principals. The fund proposed would need to be substantial *"I am talking about a serious amount of money. If you were giving a teacher five thousand [euro] a year on performance management instead of giving them a degree allowance, these people would produce the goods"*. The concept was viewed as having some merit but a number of concerns were raised. To some extent it was felt that it would change the culture of a school, especially in relation to teachers *"who give way beyond [expectations]"*. It would also place the principal in the role of decision maker. In order to ensure objectivity, specific criteria would need to be established. This would be done by principals as a community, *"we are not talking about you being a subjective person saying 'I am going to give you a bonus this year'. We are talking about ticking boxes and saying... 'You have taught your subject, you have set your homework, you have corrected it, you have set your common exam'"*. While the suggestion was acknowledged as being radical, it was considered by some to be practical to link remuneration with levels of work commitment. Fears about bringing a private enterprise environment into a school were expressed and the importance of community in a school was stressed. However, it was recognised that while *"the whole purpose of a school is community...we also need to incentivise and reward the best people"*. It was accepted that some teachers might be identified as needing retraining. This could occur as *"people can plateau...they can*



*possibly go into a negative decline...or they don't move with the times*". For such teachers refresher courses should be available.

Principals identified crucial elements in progressing to an effective model of school self-evaluation. Whole school development planning, in its widest sense, embraced continuous professional development, subject progression, the planning process, developing a school plan and school self-evaluation. The process would be driven predominantly by principals and would be hugely time consuming. The big resource required therefore was an allowance of time. One principal maintained "*time to do this in school is the crucial thing. If we are going to do self-evaluation properly by implication we have to be doing SDPI properly...this is only one part of the cycle. So therefore we have to be properly resourcing planning and giving that time to staff to work together in a professional way*". While accepting that some time in the school year was available, this was not enough. The issue of time for principals to monitor the work of individual teachers was also considerable. Those already involved in such monitoring admitted it was difficult to find time. One recounted including monthly appointments in diaries but experiencing great difficulty in re-arranging appointments if scheduled meetings did not occur. The VEC sector enabled a slight reduction in teaching time for assistant principals, which was helpful, but this was not the case in voluntary secondary schools.

A second element identified as necessary by principals was a meaningful in-school management structure. One suggested "*what you need from a practical point of view is more people, maybe at senior management level...the key point is that you create more opportunity for a principal not to get bogged down in the day-to-day stuff if you want the principal to be the one who is leading*". As the role of principal was becoming more complex, "*you need to have more middle management personnel*". Another felt that teams of middle management, along with younger teachers who had energy and enthusiasm, should drive school self-evaluation. Teachers in middle management positions required the provision of a time allowance to undertake their duties as otherwise the time is taken from official teaching time. Problems associated with roles and responsibilities also needed to be overcome. This was particularly so in the voluntary secondary school sector. Traditionally teachers in those schools were promoted to middle management on seniority and clearly defined tasks did not always accompany the role. Thus neither time nor responsibility for planning and evaluation

were automatically linked to middle management positions. Some principals reported successfully reviewing responsibilities attached to posts to counter this and in some schools funding was provided to reduce the teaching time for some members of middle management. However, this was not the case in all schools and principals felt that the anomalies that existed between the sectors in relation to time should be eliminated.

Principals regarded the present framework for evaluation, *Looking at our School*, as being difficult to follow. One maintained that it was not user friendly and that a simpler framework was needed. It was suggested that a tick-box type framework was not the type required to engage in effective school self-evaluation, as it did not lead to evaluation that was sufficiently focused. Another proposed that a template could be drawn up which schools would complete annually. This would contain simple questions such as “*Do you have a pastoral care system?*” Such a framework would require some thought in its development so that it would be simple to complete but would provide a standard across all schools. It would need “*to be simple and easy to use for teachers and school management... and ask the right questions, searching questions about your admissions policy for example*”. It was also important that it did not damage public confidence in schools, as this would prevent agreement about completing it. It was envisaged that reports generated by schools using such a framework would be produced annually and published both on the school’s own website and on a national website, to ensure transparency. Reports would be monitored externally and could be checked to ensure accuracy. By using the framework all schools would have to answer the same questions and give information on the same topics for publication. Obliging all schools to engage in such an exercise was believed to be important, as at present, aspects of policies, such as admissions’ policies were enabling some schools, especially fee-paying schools, to restrict or limit enrolment and then provide the media with information for league tables declaring themselves to be very successful schools. Publishing a self-generated report from all schools would ensure that such practices became evident and this would create “*an even playing field and the Department funding should be determined by that*”. Having such information would enable inspectors to undertake an audit rather than a whole school evaluation, as they would not be starting from scratch.

It was acknowledged that, while some schools already engaged in self-evaluation and provided much of the information that could be generated using a template in their

school prospectus, other schools that might not be as progressive would require support. Examples were given of schools that were challenged not only by the concept of planning but even by the concept of teaching. Schools serving the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds were considered to have major challenges, in spite of receiving additional funding. Further funding and additional personnel were required in these schools. The curriculum was reported to be *“totally irrelevant...and in some cases a teacher [had been there] for thirty years and the whole student profile has changed so dramatically”*. The challenge to such schools was seen as introducing and adapting new programmes such as the LCA, LCVP and JSCP. In extreme cases, even these programmes did not serve the purpose of supporting students *“where they are still only really learning to read and write and preparing for jobs”*.

The importance of leadership and of training and support for school leaders was stressed. One principal commented, *“If the principal doesn’t have the capacity, nothing is going to move forward. The principal is key to leading the organisation”*. Two issues were brought to the fore in this regard. Firstly the need for training and support was considered vital. Principals reported that they had found courses such as the higher diploma in school planning, organised by SDPI, quite good. One explained that although it was tedious to fit a yearlong course around the busy life of a principal, it provided a very good, well thought out and developed theoretical framework for planning. The possibility of disseminating the benefits of this course to every principal in the country should be considered. This *“could be delivered as a professional development course for principals, maybe on two levels, one obviously the course as it is, but a simpler one, a couple of in-service days”*. Another suggested *“it should be more of a mandatory requirement on principals and deputy principals to attend LDS courses”*. The reason for this was that sometimes attendance at such courses caused a dilemma for principals who felt they could not leave the school because of their busy schedule, yet attending the course was likely to bring long-term benefits to the school. Management courses provided through support services or third level colleges were regarded as, *“a great lead in to what we did...you would be at sea if you hadn’t [attended]”*. All principal participants in this research had attended courses organised by SDPI, LDS or the VEC. The financial support was provided through school structures or VECs funded the courses in some cases. It was reported that three or four members of the in-school management team had also taken part in such courses in one

school. The sharing of information and the development of a sharing culture in the school assisted in building capacity to improve.

A second point related to leadership involved the busy workload that principals currently carried. Due to the busy schedule, principals had little time to prepare for staff meetings and planning days. In recent years, legislation including the Education Act, The Education (Welfare) Act, the EPSEN Act and others had named the principal as having extra responsibilities while *“in reality in our working day we don’t have the support that we need to do this job properly...everyone is working flat out and overworked and you get stressed”*. Principals wanted this issue to be noted by the Department, as *“the present system is unsustainable into the future”*. It arose, principals suggested, because in the past voluntary secondary schools had support and backing from religious groups. A void now existed where communities once took responsibility. *“The whole structure needs to be looked at properly if you want to really lead communities into the future as learning organisations. You have got to put a top management structure in place”*. Two possible solutions were considered: strengthening the role of middle management or the provision of a school administrator who could relieve the burden from principals who find *“half of my day is spent either telephoning parents to talking to...or writing to...or listening to the Department or opening mail”*. This would give principals time to lead and even to get into classrooms.

### ***Maintaining standards***

The key to maintaining standards in schools, according to principals, was to have good teachers. *“It starts at the beginning that you have proper training and proper probation and monitoring of teachers in the classroom because once you have a teacher in the system and they are a bad teacher, it’s almost impossible to get rid of them... If you had a utopian school where every teacher was a good teacher, to me you have a great school because everything else flows from that”*. Principals wondered how some bad teachers got permanent jobs as they themselves had no difficulty letting teachers on temporary contracts go if they were not good. They considered that part of the role of principal was to recruit the best staff possible and then to monitor them in their first year *“to make sure that they were top quality and if they were not then they need to be told in the nicest possible way...that you won’t keep them beyond the year”*. Such monitoring and making judgements by principals was not a major issue as this practice already existed in the VEC sector in relation to the probation of newly appointed

teachers. One principal cited an example of extending the probationary period when teaching was not satisfactory. While monitoring through classroom observation was not accepted practice in voluntary secondary schools, principals felt they had other opportunities to hear how teachers were performing and examples of interviewing teachers to discuss the quality of their teaching were reported. Principals believed that when they had very good teachers in their schools *“they can carry the boats a little bit higher because they set the bar high”*. Standards were about the *“quality of teaching and learning in the school and the quality of delivery across the staff and the attitude of staff”* and this was easier to reach with younger staff who were much more open. It was suggested that teachers joining school staffs *“over the last two or three years seemed to be people who really want to go into the profession...they really are enthused”*.

Principals also highlighted the need to relate results obtained in state examinations to the clientele of schools, when measuring standards. They accepted that effective self-evaluation required teachers and schools to use the national averages supplied by the State Examination Commission as a benchmark when looking at their own practice. They encouraged this to be done at subject department level in their schools. They also encouraged teachers to monitor, and to increase where possible, the number of students taking subjects at higher level as a means of checking on standards. However, they contended that standards were determined to some extent by the population of students attending particular schools. One principal felt *“it’s the proportion of students that you have in the school that makes the difference. Where ...everyone was of a certain standard and all the students were similar and the outlook was the same, the ambitions were the same”* or when *“the mix is right, the majority of the students were of the calibre that want to learn”* standards could be maintained. On the other hand, where students did not have a culture of learning at home or if the balance of students was tipped *“the wrong way then the school is going to tip the wrong way”* even if teaching was wonderful. Thus measuring success was difficult, as in some schools or with certain individuals, retaining a student to Leaving Certificate was a major achievement. It was suggested therefore that *“there are two ways to measure, one is that the school will measure and the other is that the public will know about it...so the problem is translating the added value as a school and that is what is so hard to measure. Because unless you measure the input, unless you take the quality of the students coming in and unless you insist that all schools have an open admissions policy where everyone had the same quality of students coming in, there is always going to be an uneven playing*

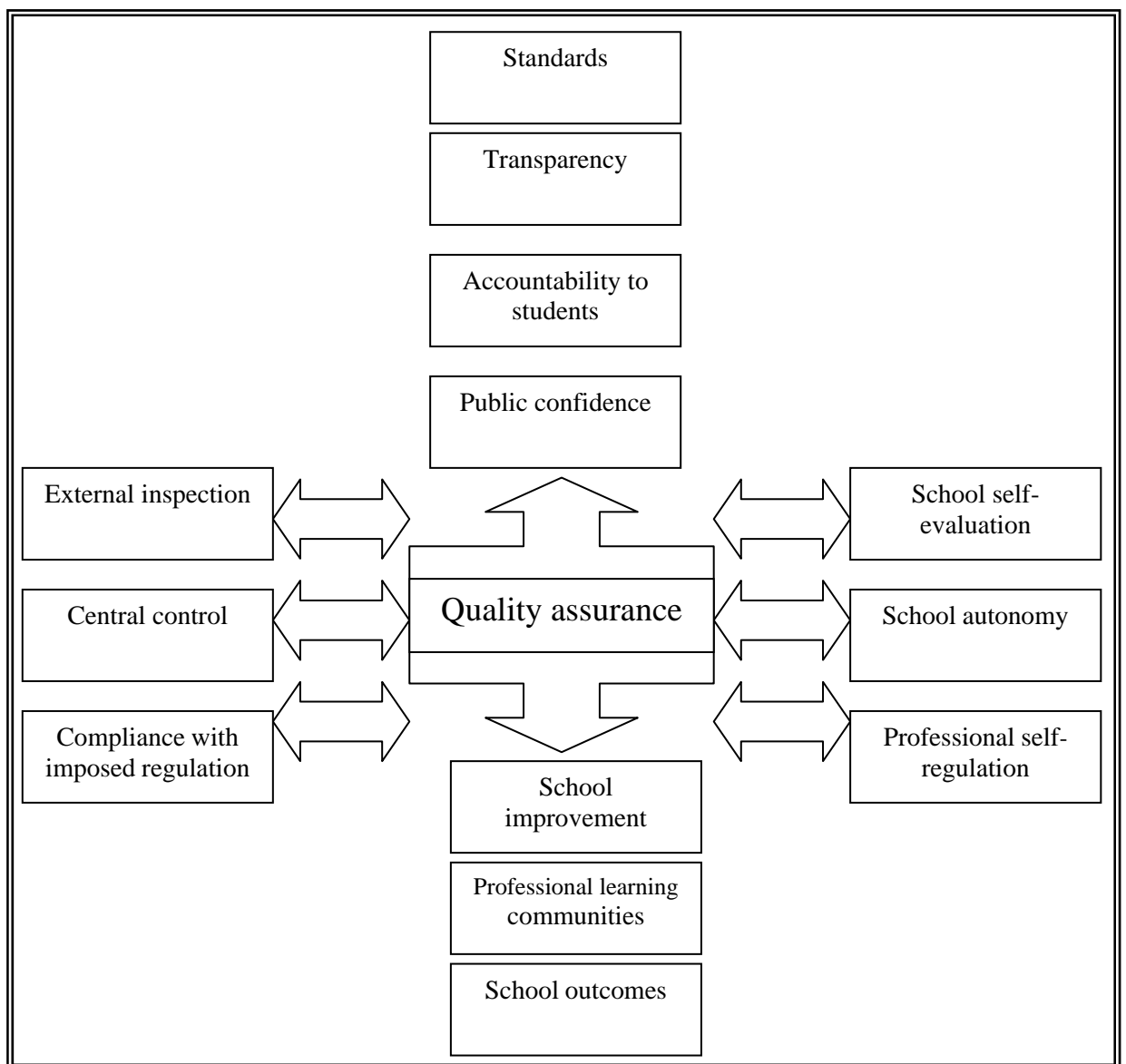
*field*". The present use of state examination results and how the media portrayed these was considered by principals to be an inaccurate measure of the quality of teaching. The importance of comparing state examination results with the results received by students at entrance tests when enrolling in the school was stressed.

# Chapter 7 Discussion and conclusions

## 7.1 Introduction

This research aimed to explore current evaluation practices in Irish post-primary schools to enrich understanding of their effectiveness as a quality assurance measure. It hoped to provide insights into how evaluation practice could move from its present centrally determined focus to a local, school-based focus, while maintaining standards and public confidence in the education system. Through a review of literature, a number of concepts emerged which merited exploration. Figure 7.1 illustrates how these concepts created the framework for investigating the themes.

Figure 7.1 Research themes



The themes were explored with key personnel in the education system at post-primary level to elicit their views and reflections on experiences in a variety of settings. The use

of focus group research enabled participants to engage in in-depth discussion and exploration of fundamental themes. The perceptions of inspectors, principals, and personnel from leadership (LDS) and school development planning (SDPI) support services provided valuable observations about current evaluation practices in post-primary schools. Their views on how evaluation practices could develop should prove valuable in guiding future developments in the system. The findings provide a useful signpost for those involved in maintaining and improving the quality of education provided in Irish post-primary schools.

A number of themes emerge from the findings that are consistent with previous research reported in the literature reviewed in the first chapter of the thesis. A general discussion on these issues will provide an overview of current thinking about evaluation in Irish post-primary schools from which conclusions will be drawn. The conclusions will form the basis of recommendations on how the evaluation system in Irish post-primary schools should move forward.

## **7.2 General discussion and overview**

In discussing the findings from this research, it is important to note that the term whole-school evaluation was perceived by all groups as a model of external inspection and did not include the concept of internal evaluation, which was referred to generally as school self-evaluation.

The findings from the study concur with those reported in literature in relation to the purposes served by school evaluation. They indicate that in practice evaluation serves a range of purposes from providing transparency about education in schools (Webb in SICI 2005) to accountability and improvement (MacBeath 1999, Ehren and Visscher 2006, Ouston and Davies 1998, Earley et al 1996). The view held by some that the current model of external evaluation, WSE, is a compliance model, with schools preparing for an event to get over, along with the belief that improvement occurs mainly in the area of compliance, is consistent with early findings from Ofsted inspections (Wilcox and Gray 1996). It highlights the fact that WSE has enabled questions to be asked that stress compliance, such as how resources are allocated and how teachers account for their time. Richards (2004) considers that this focus on determining compliance with relevant statutory requirements is a defensible purpose for Ofsted inspections. The 'hype' in schools prior to the WSE, reported by principals



in this study, indicates that teachers are motivated to prepare and perform for the external evaluation, suggesting that WSE is seen as emphasising the need to prove rather than to improve, a point also noted by Hopkins et al (1999) in the context of Ofsted. Thus, WSE, like Ofsted inspections in the early years, can be viewed as stressing the accountability purpose of external evaluation and might not be sufficient in itself to lead schools to improve (Hopkins et al 1999). However the findings of this research indicate that WSE assists in initiating improvement in schools. It causes some schools to take time to reflect and take stock, when the day-to-day demands within schools leave little time for reflection. The affirmation teachers receive through external evaluation motivates them to continue their efforts to improve practice, although at a slower pace, after the WSE. This suggests that the process is conceptualised to some extent as being developmental, a view considered necessary by Hopkins et al (1999) if external evaluation is to lead to school improvement. The fact that WSE, along with support for school development planning, is seen as a catalyst for change and as bringing about a change in the culture of some schools is consistent with the view of MacBeath (1999) that pressure and support are required to enable school improvement through evaluation.

The findings reveal a number of systemic issues associated with evaluation which merit discussion in relation to moving from a centrally-controlled to a school-based evaluation system and from a focus on compliance to a focus on improvement. These are discussed within the following themes: school autonomy; maintaining standards in post-primary schools; accountability and responsibility; and evaluation in schools as learning organisations. The final conclusions are framed within the theoretical concept of school improvement and in particular of schools as learning organisations.

### **7.3 Evaluation and school autonomy**

The literature suggests that increased interest in accountability and in particular in school self-evaluation is directly related to decentralisation of school systems and devolution of autonomy to schools (see for example Monsen 2002, Scheerens 2002). In a report published in 2000 (Government of Ireland 2000), following Ireland's participation in a European Commission project *Evaluating Quality in School Education at Second Level*, the degree of school autonomy was included as one factor in determining the success of school self-evaluation. Almost one decade later, this

study investigated the relationship between autonomy and increased focus on evaluation in post-primary schools.

The findings reveal that inconsistent views exist about the degree of autonomy, explained in terms of the distribution of power in decision-making (Sun et al 2007), afforded to Irish post-primary schools. There is no evidence to suggest that increased levels of autonomy accompanied the introduction of external, centrally controlled evaluation in the form of WSE. Levels of autonomy in relation to budget, curriculum and personnel described as desirable in literature (Sun et al 2007, Leithwood 2001) are referred to by participants. Support service participants accept that schools have a slightly greater degree of financial autonomy since the provision of block grants replaced the system of individual schools' application for specific grants. However, they maintain that while the responsibility imposed on schools has increased in recent years, the level of autonomy in terms of curriculum and its mediation has not increased. They believe that the state examinations system controls this in quite a prescriptive way. Inspectors, on the other hand, consider that Irish post-primary schools have more autonomy than their counterparts in other jurisdictions, as they are free to make decisions about the curriculum. They view the role of the NCCA as providing guidelines only and they claim that a lack of regulations or circulars, also cited in literature as enabling school autonomy (Eurydice 2007), permits schools to make decisions about delivery of the curriculum. One negative result of this autonomy in terms of curriculum and its delivery, in their opinion, is a lack of access to some subjects by students. This point is noted but disputed by principals who relate decisions about curriculum to the availability of personnel and other resources. They identify a mismatch between the level of delivery of curriculum expected by inspectors and the provision of resources to schools in terms of both teaching hours and facilities. Principals claim that lack of physical resources coupled with insufficient personnel resources forces schools to compromise when organising timetables.

While the research found no evidence of 'new managerialism', which emphasises decentralisation, deregulation and delegation (Leithwood 2001), it identified elements of a market approach to accountability, in relation to the degree of choice afforded to parents. This market approach increases competition among schools for students, bringing competitiveness into the public sector (Johannesson et al 2002). In the Irish context, the power given to parents to select schools for their children through the

constitution (Government of Ireland 1937) and the Education Act (1998) has had an impact on school enrolment. Both principals and SDPI participants maintain that the copper fastening of parents' right to choose has controlled schools significantly. This right has led to an enormous divide between the 'chosen' schools and the 'unchosen' schools with regard to school population. As a result some schools have a large proportion of students who come from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds or who have language or learning difficulties. Principals believe that a lack of openness and transparency about the admissions policies of some schools enable them to be selective about student intake. This leads to inequity in the proportion of students requiring additional support in schools, which can affect student learning and can result in a lowering of morale in the school. This view is consistent with Winter's (2000) assertion that autonomy as a market place model is not desirable and with emerging evidence that market approaches to school accountability can be, and usually are, highly inequitable (Lee 1993 and Lauder and Hughes 1999 cited in Leithwood 2001).

Maslowski et al (2007) contend that a rigorous external evaluation system, that pays attention to standards, performance and access to innovations by schools, is an essential element of decentralisation. In spite of the view that the level of autonomy afforded to Irish post-primary schools has not increased in recent years, all participants in this study agree that a system of external evaluation is desirable. Previous research into evaluation in Irish schools (McNamara and O'Hara 2008, Reid 2007) suggests that WSE lacks rigour and the 'light touch' and 'softly, softly' approach taken is criticised. Findings in this study suggest that inspectors' approach in WSE is thorough and is becoming more rigorous. Inspectors describe a thorough, time-consuming and expensive approach, where all groups in the school are met, teaching and learning are observed and curriculum provision receives intense attention. Principals acknowledge that the process is very thorough and that inspectors get a proper flavour of the school by meeting all groups. They agree that since inspectors triangulate evidence obtained from all groups, schools cannot hide issues. Participants from support services accept that WSE is a reality check for schools, that difficulties in schools are identified and that negative aspects of practice are increasingly being exposed and reported. They credit WSE with enabling them to use the language of accountability and to become more focused when supporting schools. In some circumstances WSE is deemed to be too harsh, in particular when negative findings are made public, and participants wonder if the difficulties could be dealt with in a different way to preserve the dignity

of all those involved in the schools. On the other hand, support service personnel and principals identify areas of the external evaluation model that lack rigour. They note that recommendations in reports are still too general and a bit toothless and while this gentle approach might have been necessary in the early days of external evaluation, it is not acceptable where students are getting an unjust deal. They contend that reluctance on the part of inspectors to refer in reports to the shortage of resources and facilities to achieve the recommendations and to deliver a comprehensive curriculum means the WSE has 'no bite' and 'lacks momentum moving forward'. This causes credibility issues for the external evaluation system.

Participants' criticism of the WSE process for its lack of meaningful engagement with all the school partners is justified since a central aim of decentralisation of decision-making is to increase the voice of those not heard in typical school governance structures (Leithwood 2001). Support services in particular suggest that the degree of contact by inspectors with parents is insufficient to gain an understanding of the school from their perspective. They also condemn the scant attention paid to the student voice, both in terms of formal meetings to listen to their views and of reporting on all aspects of student involvement in school life. While they accept that some inspectors gain an accurate understanding of students' role in the school through informal observation and communication, they emphasise the need for more formal structures to investigate and publicise the extent of commitment and the levels of achievement of students in aspects of schooling other than academic performance. These findings indicate a need for the system and for inspectors to overcome difficulties in relation to access to the entire parent body of schools. Present agreements, reached with the education partners when WSE was introduced, restrict access to representatives from parents associations affiliated to the national parent body or to parents' representatives on the board of management of schools. However, the possibility of schools themselves providing a forum for listening to the voice of parents through their self-evaluation processes could be explored.

The capacity of schools to pursue and sustain improvement through self-evaluation when decision-making is decentralised is noted in the literature as necessary (Maslovski et al 2007). In this research inspectors and support service personnel accept that as school autonomy increases, schools should engage in self-evaluation but they contend that school self-evaluation is not yet embedded in post-primary schools.

Principals, in some instances, appear to use the terms self-evaluation and self-regulation interchangeably and contend that school self-evaluation already exists in their schools. However, they recognise that further developments are required. Overall, participants note that schools are willing to undertake a soft-focus review of practice, but are not yet willing to move to the more threatening phase of engaging in partnership consultation about school practice. Some participants are unhappy with the use of templates that brings evaluation to a superficial level of ticking boxes rather than identifying issues through reflection. A number of areas for development are suggested: teachers need to be brought to a level of professional recognition, of skill and perception in order to be able to evaluate themselves; the need for reflection to identify and justify goals and to enable schools to be adventurous and to take risks is stressed; a user-friendly and simple framework to provide schools with a clear focus is needed. However, the provision of templates and criteria alone are not sufficient. All participants agree that schools need support and encouragement to build capacity to engage in self-evaluation. A scaffolded process and genuine support in relation to reflective inquiry are required. Some maintain that additional funding and personnel are also necessary to enable effective school self-evaluation to be undertaken.

In summary, it is apparent from this research that principals and members of support services do not feel that post-primary schools have been given increased levels of autonomy. They consider that the level of choice afforded to parents has impacted negatively on some schools and has led to inequities in the challenges facing schools. In spite of limits to levels of autonomy, participants believe that external evaluation is necessary. However, the need to balance rigorous evaluation with the reality of school context is stressed and a focus on enrolment policies and their impact is encouraged. Participants also acknowledge the need for school self-evaluation, which is not yet widely practised in post-primary schools, and indicate the need to build capacity in this regard

#### **7.4 Evaluation and standards**

While the concept of high-stakes testing is widely contested, some literature accepts that student performance testing, along with inspection have been the yardstick of how well schools are doing and provide the basis of a school's worth in Western democracies. The introduction of self-evaluation attempts to broaden such judgements to take account of the complexity of schools and the varied achievements of students

(Simons 2002). However, the importance of standards in education and the role played by evaluation in measuring standards are highlighted by Earley (1998). This research explored the concept of standards and the importance of standards in maintaining public confidence in the education system.

The importance attached to standards and to their measurement is revealed in the findings. The views of participants concur with those of Scott (1997) whose concept of school improvement draws attention to the choice of measures used to evaluate performance. He suggests a need to consider outcomes that measure effect, processes that measure effort and structures that measure capacity to perform. This wider view of measuring standards, accepted by authors such as Scriven (1991), Darling Hammond (2004) and Sirotnik (2002), refutes the use in some jurisdictions of high stakes assessment of pupil outcomes as the main measure of effectiveness of schools. Accepting the broader view of standards, participants in this research consider standards as being the key, the centre of all evaluation. Some highlight the powerful position of inspectors in ensuring overall standards in schools. Inspectors themselves emphasise the need for clear criteria to be provided for schools and they are particularly concerned that schools are aware of the criteria and the means by which a school's performance is rated during external evaluation. Overall the need to evaluate standards of provision, standards of teaching and standards of attainment by students stressed by participants, corresponds with Maslowski et al's (2007) requirement of attention to be paid in external evaluation to standards, performance and access to innovation in decentralised settings.

Principals indicate that the key to standards lies in the quality of teaching and learning and they believe that maintaining standards starts with having good teachers. Thus, they feel that proper teacher training, recruitment of good staff, probation, monitoring teaching in classrooms and providing support for professional development are crucial elements in creating great schools. Some consider that the possibility of engaging in performance management as an incentive and reward for good teaching should be introduced. Support service personnel voice concern about teachers not reaching acceptable standards and thereby negatively affecting students' lives. They indicate the need for standards for teaching to be developed that will enhance learning for students and suggest that the Teaching Council should take responsibility for this. They believe teachers should be required to achieve certain standards and that boards of management should give an undertaking that this would be done. Inspectors agree that the system

has the right to demand accountability from teachers and they feel that high grades achieved by students in state examinations are not necessarily indicative of good standards of teaching. Of particular note in this study is the high level of criticism of the external evaluation system in relation to the absence of evaluation of individual teacher performance. Support service participants articulate frustration at the fact that inspectors do not focus on individual teachers and principals assert that WSE should identify poor teaching with a view to changing the scenario. They are critical of the responsibility placed on schools in this regard when they lack any mechanism to deal effectively with poor teaching or with complaints about teachers. While agreement reached with schools regarding procedures for dealing with teacher competence under section 24 of the Education Act will be implemented from September 2009, inspectors concede that the present evaluation system can be unfair to individual teachers, as performance is judged in terms of overall provision in a subject department or school.

All participants in the research acknowledge, as do Schmoker (1999) and DuFour (2004) among others, that standards of achievement by students, as measured by examination results, are important. They accept that state examinations are the current benchmark by which standards of attainment are assessed. While this benchmark is viewed as limited by some, and is considered to produce a combative approach to exams, which encourages teachers to teach to the exam, they believe that state examinations are one measure of quality assurance. As such, they feel that this benchmark should be used in reviewing the effectiveness of school practice in terms of both uptake of different subjects at various levels and outcomes in terms of results. Inspectors voice concern that this is not always the case in current external evaluation. Principals maintain that results achieved are directly related to the type of students enrolled in schools. They note that schools with a high proportion of students from backgrounds without a culture of learning can have difficulty in reaching acceptable levels of attainment. They see schools' enrolment policies as a critical aspect in maintaining standards.

The distinction made between standards achieved by students and their level of progress, referred to as the value added dimension in some literature (Creemers 1997, Gray et al 1999), is also highlighted in this research. In the first instance, a distinction is made between state examination results and levels of progress. Two aspects of student achievement are highlighted as important: the need to measure value added related to specific baseline data, which Peng et al (2006) note requires longitudinal individual

pupil-level data; and the need to measure both academic and non-academic aspects of schooling. Principals consider that schools need to measure achievement for two purposes: for the school in terms of value added and for the public in terms of transparency. The findings reveal a void in Irish post-primary schools with regard to measuring standards of achievement and progress. LDS personnel refer to the fact that benchmarks other than state examinations are not strong in the Irish education system and that even available measures, such as PISA, are not frequently used. SDPI participants point to the lack of availability of standardised tests in post-primary schools and the lack of comparative data and benchmarks that are sufficiently contextualised to draw conclusions about student outcomes. Their belief that benchmarks for comparison within specific contexts are desirable is consistent with that of Sirotnik (2002) who notes that multiple indicators, including context, are required to make judgements about schools. LDS personnel believe that credence should be given to schools for their role in the formation of students as good citizens and moral individuals as well as for academic work. However, Moore et al (2006) point to the complexity of selecting performance indicators for such social and affective aspects of education. SDPI personnel indicate the difficulties schools have in using data. They point to a lack of competence on the part of teachers who maintain that data is meaningless and difficult to gather and to the fact that the competence to analyse data rarely exists in schools.

The research participants are critical of external evaluation practices regarding standards and measures of student achievement. Inspectors are self-critical in maintaining that a clear distinction between improvement and outcomes is not apparent in WSE reports. They are also concerned about lack of consistency by inspectors regarding how standards achieved by students are reported. They see a role for inspectors in evaluating how schools track student progress, which is not consistently done at present and they express particular interest in noting such tracking in schools that are currently being affirmed by the external evaluation process. Both LDS and SDPI participants express similar concern about lack of consistency among inspectors in relation to standards while principals point to the lack of consistency between messages from support services and inspectors. These inconsistencies refer in the main to general standards of teaching and learning.

SDPI have provided sample applications of self-evaluation for DEIS schools, which involve using data in a constructive way to check on student performance and they



believe these are working well in schools. They also maintain that schools are using a variety of standardised tests but they are prevented from measuring how well they are serving their students because of a lack of national benchmarks. At the same time they caution against using standardised tests as absolute measures and they see these as only one tool in a bank of many.

In summary, participants in this research accept the importance of measuring standards in maintaining public confidence in the quality of education in schools. They view the measurement of standards from a broad perspective, stressing that good teaching is at the heart of maintaining standards in post-primary schools. They are therefore critical of the present lack of focus on individual teacher performance in external evaluation. While acknowledging that results achieved by students in state examinations are important, they believe that measuring the value-added dimension of progress, which requires baseline data and national benchmarks, and measuring progress in areas outside the state examinations' curriculum, are also important. Attention is drawn to a need for: benchmarks to measure standards of teaching; national benchmark data to compare achievement levels of students across schools; standardised tests and criteria for measuring non-examination aspects of education. The need to provide training and support to build the capacity of schools to use and to analyse data is stressed.

### **7.5 Evaluation and responsibility**

In attempting to establish how professionals act responsibly at work, Gardner (2007) contends that if society is to be fair and open, individuals must willingly and energetically be prepared to carry out crucial roles. He maintains that the classical view of a profession entails commitment to act as a responsible worker. Responsibility is therefore conceived as a sense of duty. The concept of responsibility in relation to accountability is important in maintaining quality when moving towards school-based evaluation.

The concept of responsibility and its relationship with evaluation, revealed in this study, is consistent with that found in literature. Inspectors' distinction between accountability and responsibility mirrors the contrast between responsibility as contractual obligation and as a response or an answer to a call described by Csikszentmihalya and Nakamura (2007). Inspectors see accountability as fulfilling duties that are imposed, while they describe responsibility as a duty of care, which is

taken on rather than being imposed. In asserting the traditional vocational nature of teaching in Ireland, they see principals and teachers accepting, in a positive way, their role in providing what is best for students. They further expect that teachers will take responsibility for their own professional development deemed an important aspect of responsibility in the literature (Darling Hammond 2004, Sirotnik 2002). Three aspects of responsibility cause concern for participants in this study: the burden of responsibility placed on principals as school leaders; responsibility given to inspectors to evaluate school leaders; and lack of system responsibility for follow-up activities after WSE.

Sirotnik (2002) notes that a system of responsible accountability envisages schools accepting responsibility for ongoing improvement while political infrastructure invests resources where they are needed. Participants in this research emphasise the importance of the leadership of the principal in changing the culture of the school, moving teachers from being individualistic to being team players, encouraging collegiality and extending leadership and responsibility to a wider group of people in order to bring about pedagogical change. This is in keeping with research findings that point to the fact that inspection, on its own, will only lead to single loop learning while double loop learning is required to envision a better future (Fidler et al 1996). However, principals and support service participants are critical of the high degree of responsibility placed on principals as school leaders by the system and by inspectors. Their criticism arises for a number of reasons: the assumption that the positional authority of principals enables them to influence change to a greater extent than they can; the stress and pressure placed on principals when they are viewed as the most likely person to affect change; the focus on the role of the principal as leader overshadowing the importance of the work of teachers in classrooms; and the mismatch between expectations and levels of resources provided to schools. They feel that at present, principals have responsibility for all aspects of provision in their schools, including leading improvement efforts. They believe that trustees, boards of management and middle management, should take greater responsibility for the operation of the school.

In relating responsibility to external evaluation, a major area of concern emanating from this research is the responsibility given to inspectors to evaluate the leadership and management of schools. Since MacBeath (1999) notes the importance of establishing faith in the credibility and competence of the external evaluation team

among the conditions necessary for external evaluation to lead to improvement, this apparent lack of credibility in the external team is a cause of concern. Support service personnel and principals are highly critical of inspectors' lack of understanding of the complexities and intricacies of aspects of school leadership and management. Their criticism, which is replicated in other research in the Irish post-primary context (Mulkerrins, 2008), derives from inspectors' lack of experience of leading at school level. They believe that lack of experience of being principal causes inspectors to be 'pernickety' in evaluating specific aspects of management. The issues noted relate in the main to compliance and to the delivery of a balanced curriculum as illustrated by school timetables. While further investigation is required to gain deeper understanding of the root cause of the lack of confidence, the findings illustrate difficulty in the area of trust between schools and inspectors, an important starting point for inspections having an impact on school improvement according to Matthews and Sammons (2004) and one of the conditions necessary for the coexistence of internal and external evaluation identified by Nevo (2002).

Of particular note in this study, and consistent with previous research in the Irish context (MacNamara and OHara 2008), is the view of participants about responsibility for follow-up actions after WSE. Concern expressed about responsibility being placed on schools to follow up on recommendations is well founded as evidence from Ofsted inspections indicates that without an expectation of some follow-up activity there is no guarantee of improvement (Matthews and Sammons 2004). Support service participants consider that WSE brings schools to a certain point but it stops as soon as the report is provided. Their view that follow up is deemed particularly important in schools where performance is found to be poor, is borne out by Ehren and Visscher (2006) who maintain that school factors, such as attitude to change and competence in implementing innovation following inspection, influences the impact of inspection on school improvement and by Leung (2005) who notes that evaluation for improvement requires that mechanisms are available to support school improvement after external evaluation. The findings of this research emphasise the fact that although boards of management receive feedback after the WSE, they do not accept ownership of the recommendations of the report. While participants underline the need to engender corporate responsibility for implementing recommendations, they are conscious of the voluntary nature of boards and the difficulty some schools have in attracting suitable board members. They accept that boards might not always have the capacity to

undertake such levels of responsibility. They suggest that boards might need to be externally constructed, and that members need training and support to enable them to take responsibility. The need for greater involvement of inspectors in follow-through activities, identified by participants, is contrary to the expectation articulated in the Chief Inspector's Report (2009 pending) that in most cases schools have the ability, "either through their own resources or with assistance of support services, to address recommendations for change and improvement" (p80). It is only in the case of schools that have very serious weaknesses that engagement between inspectors and school management, trustees and patrons is anticipated. Participants contend that the Department should instigate follow-up activities, such as a requirement to furnish a report on progress, or a follow-up visit or other communication from inspectors. The willingness of SDPI participants and their interest in pursuing training for boards of management, possibly in the form of working through a follow-up process is encouraging, since such support is deemed of paramount importance in ensuring that external evaluation leads to school improvement (Hopkins et al 1999).

It can be concluded from this research that while principals acknowledge responsibility for the crucial role they play in leading change and improvement in schools, they lack the necessary support from middle-management teams and boards of management. The responsibility placed on inspectors and their ability to effectively evaluate leadership and management in schools is questioned. This leads to lack of trust in this aspect of external evaluation and undermines the credibility of the findings of WSE. Responsibility for following up on recommendations made in WSE reports causes concern for principals and support services. Their view that the system should instigate follow-up activities is in contrast to the view which holds that the majority of schools should be capable of implementing recommendations without support from inspectors.

### **7.6 The way forward: evaluation and schools as learning organisations**

In determining how evaluation practices in Irish post-primary schools should be developed, the extent to which WSE and current school self-evaluation practices contribute to school improvement was explored. The key findings are discussed here using the longer, wider and deeper view of school improvement advocated by Lodge and Reed (2003) and the concept of organisational learning espoused by Collinson and Cook (2007). Elements of schools as professional learning communities, where all involved are learning, when there is a culture of collaboration and when there is a focus

on results (Dufour 2004) are considered. The findings are presented within the four dimensions of learning organisations as developed by Silins, Zarins and Mulford (2002): trusting and collaborative climate, shared and monitored mission, taking initiatives and risks and professional development.

Evidence from this research suggests that WSE, combined with support provided for school development planning, has assisted in developing some of the factors associated with schools as learning organisations. Building a trusting and collaborative climate within schools, advocated by Silins et al (2002), is apparent. WSE is recognised as initiating a change in culture in some schools as it encourages teachers to engage in collaborative practices deemed important for school improvement (Lodge and Reed 2003) and in learning organisations and communities (Collinson and Cook 2007, Dufour 2004). All groups involved in the study credit WSE with assisting the growth of collaboration in schools. Its role in enhancing collegiality in schools and in bringing groups with particular responsibility together in teams is noted. Teachers' engagement in committee work, sometimes to devise policies for compliance prior to a WSE but at other times to work together on specific plans and policies, in the school development planning context, has led to very good teamwork in some schools. Team responsibility has enabled team leaders to emerge and in some schools a level of shared leadership within planning groups is reported. This concept of teachers assuming informal rather than formal positional leadership roles is associated with learning organisations (Silins and Mulford 2004, Senge 2006). Affirmation received by planning steering committees through WSE has generated a willingness to continue with the process, encouraging involvement in sub-committees and providing a map for future development. Engendering discussion among colleagues, another aspect of the collaborative dimension of learning organisations (Silins et al 2002), is apparent in the WSE process itself, when schools engage in collaboration to provide an official school response to the report. However, the study also reveals some limits to the level of trust and collaboration reported in Irish post-primary schools. Principals express concern that individualistic cultures still exist in schools, where some very independent-minded teachers continue to work in isolation. Difficulty in encouraging promoted post holders, particularly in the voluntary secondary school sector, to form effective collaborative in-school management teams, is also articulated.

The study provides evidence that in some schools, teachers are enabled to take risks and to try new initiatives, a second factor recognised in schools as learning organisations by Silins et al (2002). Examples of innovative practice in particular circumstances are reported. These examples occur in schools where sharing of knowledge is encouraged, and where good school development planning and school self-evaluation structures are in place. In such circumstances, ideas emanating from individual teachers, sometimes those who are recently qualified and at other times through attendance at continuous professional development events, have been instrumental in introducing innovation. Initiatives such as assessment for learning and self-directed learning have been successfully embraced in some schools in this way. In contrast, WSE is deemed by some to have a negative impact on schools taking initiatives and risks. Rather than empowering teachers to experiment and take risks, members of LDS who have worked with DEIS schools draw attention to some schools' caution about taking risks and being adventurous because they fear that inspectors will object to such innovation.

This research reveals that where schools have embraced school development planning, have experienced a WSE and have begun the process of school self-evaluation, some level of inquiry, important in organisational learning (Collinson and Cook 2007, Senge 2006), and of shared and monitored mission, which encourages critical examination of current practice and keeping abreast with external events (Silins et al 2002) are apparent. Such inquiry has enabled some schools to identify and prioritise areas in need of improvement within their own schools. However, the need for greater levels of inquiry and in particular of reflective practice is emphasised by participants if schools are to benefit from continuous learning through evaluation practices.

WSE is credited with promoting professional development, another factor identified in schools as learning organisations (Silins et al 2002). WSE, along with school development planning, is reported as having led to meaningful professional development, with a focus on teaching and learning in some schools. Principals maintain that teachers display willingness and enthusiasm about addressing issues pertaining to teaching and learning. This has led to the sharing of knowledge and of good practice among teachers. Where schools engage in self-evaluation, it is also acknowledged as fostering professional development. SDPI personnel believe that

through school self-evaluation teachers are beginning to envision their careers in terms of continuous learning and development.

The study identified a number of aspects of evaluation practice that require development if evaluation is to lead to school improvement and ongoing learning. While participants agree that collaboration and participation by teachers in policy making is encouraged in preparation for WSE and through school development planning and self-evaluation, alignment to a shared and monitored mission (Silins et al 2002) or the ability to engage in systems thinking (Senge 2006) is not yet obvious. Inspectors note that where they have observed school self-evaluation, it is never a whole-school business but is confined to subject departments or some sections of the school. They identify a need to build capacity within schools to engage in self-evaluation as a whole-school business. This requires learning at individual, group and system level (Collinson and Cook 2007). The need to promote school self-evaluation in terms of reflective practice and action research, articulated by participants, is consistent with the importance of reflection and inquiry, described in terms of mental models by Senge (2006) to enable individuals and schools to test assumptions and challenge their thinking. The importance of developing awareness of and ability to use data and measurement, as highlighted by DuFour's (2004) DRIP syndrome, in order to maintain standards is noted by participants.

As a means of moving forward to ensure that evaluation enables continuous learning in schools, all groups agree that some form of external evaluation should continue and accept the view of Nevo (2002) that internal and external evaluation should coexist. There is also agreement that steps have been taken to initiate school self-evaluation in the context of school development planning in post-primary schools, a valid place to ground such evaluation (Simons 2002). Means of developing the current evaluation system to enhance school self-evaluation were suggested. A range of models for schools at different stages is suggested. The need for external evaluation to be a stimulus and a prompt for internal evaluation is expressed as external evaluation provides the leverage necessary for schools to move forward. All groups consider that external evaluation should validate the internal evaluation of schools, suggesting that some form of interdependent model, as described by Eurydice (2004) be developed. This could involve either the sequential model or the cooperative model described by Alvik in MacBeath (1999). Suggestions that open and honest discussions between

inspectors, support services and schools in relation to the criteria to be used, indicate a preference for a cooperative model. In moving towards a blend of external and school self-evaluation, a number of key components, such as benchmarking data, a set of quality standards, training in self-evaluation, inspection or moderation of self-evaluation and a legislative framework identified in literature (SICI 2004) are also recognised as necessary in this study.

The production of an annual report by schools, reflecting the results of their school self-evaluation, is advocated in this research. Principals consider that the report should be the result of an agreed set of questions that would ensure consistency in the issues being reported. If all schools were obliged to answer the same searching questions, information related to particular policies across all schools would be available to the system and could be used to determine if schools should receive certain funding. Reports, in their view, should be published on school and Department websites for transparency. This is contrary to Leung's (2005) view that schools should have the freedom to decide on the form and distribution of reports from school self-evaluation. LDS are anxious that such reports should not be merely documents to be completed but that they would be prompted by the external evaluation carried out in the school and would reflect real school self-evaluation. Notwithstanding the voluntary nature of boards of management, they suggest that boards should provide an oral progress report to key personnel such as inspectors, within a certain period after external evaluations.

The need for support for school self-evaluation, and for mechanisms to support school improvement after external evaluation, highlighted by MacBeath (1999) and Leung (2005), are strongly endorsed in this research. Building capacity through mentoring programmes such as those currently facilitated by LDS is recommended. A particular need to support schools serving disadvantaged areas as they confront increasing challenges in adapting curricula and programmes to meet the changing needs of their student cohort is expressed. Supports such as networking, advocated by MacBeath (1999), and teachers moving between schools deemed important in strengthening the self-evaluation process by Simons (2002) are suggested. The partnership approach to evaluation for school improvement, advocated by Stoll and Thomson (1996) and maintaining communication and relationships between inspectors and schools, deemed important by Ehren and Visscher (2006) if inspection is to have an impact on school improvement, is considered worthy of merit by participants in this study. Participants



proposed that ongoing links with inspectors, through meetings on an annual or biannual basis would enable continuity in communication and would assist inspectors in becoming familiar with the essence of schools, with the competence of all those within the school, including students, and with how schools live out their mission on an ongoing basis. While inspectors expressed a desire to support schools, they indicated time constraints that inhibited such activities. Partnership and consultation with parents is also recommended

The importance of leadership in changing evaluation practices is highlighted in this study. However, the inability of the school principal, working alone to achieve this, articulated by participants, suggests a need for distributed leadership advocated in schools as learning organisations (Silins and Mulford 2004) and in encouraging school self-evaluation (MacBeath 2006a). While accepting that the leadership of the principal is vital in driving school self-evaluation activities, participants consider that even the most enthusiastic principals will require time and assistance in promoting effective school self-evaluation. Attention was drawn to the reduced availability of substitution cover for teachers engaged in school business, due to recent reductions in government funding. An increase in the senior management team, enhanced roles for promoted post holders at middle management level and resources to manage the additional responsibility placed on boards of managements are all proposed as solutions to the lack of time available for principals to encourage school self-evaluation. The possibility of sharing the administrative responsibilities, perhaps by providing schools with administrative staff was also presented.

It is apparent from this research that WSE has assisted in initiating some practices associated with schools as learning organisations. Collaborative practices, leadership based on tasks rather than position and the promotion of professional development have emerged in some schools. WSE has been instrumental in engaging teachers in inquiry only to some extent and it is perceived by some as hindering rather than encouraging new initiatives and risk-taking by teachers. A balance of external and school self-evaluation, with support and the provision of necessary instruments is suggested as a means of moving evaluation practice forward.

## **7.7 Conclusions**

This research set out to investigate the experience of evaluation in Irish post-primary schools. In particular it hoped to establish the impact of WSE, as an external model of evaluation and of current school self-evaluation practice on school improvement. The possibility of moving towards widespread use of internal evaluation and the approach and structures required so that public confidence in the education system would be maintained was explored. Since such evaluation would expect schools to engage in continuous improvement, the conclusions are discussed within the overall theoretical framework of the learning organisation, as conceptualised by Senge (2006).

It is apparent that school development planning, first introduced into Irish post-primary schools a decade ago as a tool in the school improvement process, is inextricably linked with evaluation. It was anticipated that it would serve as a basis for evaluating and reporting on whole-school progress and development and would stimulate a culture of collaborative planning to promote school improvement. When WSE was introduced five years later as an external model of evaluation, it was expected to complement internal continuous improvement activity in schools. Both school development planning and WSE as an external, centrally controlled evaluation model have become firmly established in post-primary schools. Since the primary accountability system in post-primary schools prior to 2004, when WSE was introduced, was the state examinations system, it is a considerable achievement that it has become embedded in such a short period. While WSE is criticised on a number of grounds by stakeholders, its introduction, along with support provided for school development planning, is credited with initiating improvement in schools. This study has shown that WSE has encouraged schools to examine their practice and has enabled support services to use the language of accountability in schools. It has been instrumental in developing collaborative processes in schools, encouraging learning at an individual level, described in terms of personal mastery by Senge (2006) and at team level. WSE is considered to be a reality check for schools, and as such it confronts teachers with the current reality, which is deemed by Senge to cause the creative tension needed to encourage them to change their practice. Teams and committees have been formed to work on specific policies. The research confirms that the combination of pressure from WSE and support for school development planning has enabled schools to begin to change their culture from one of teacher isolation to collaboration.

Notwithstanding much development, it is also evident from this research that engagement in internal evaluation in post-primary schools is at an early stage of development. Examples of schools where school development planning structures have been established, where areas for improvement have been identified and where the introduction of initiatives has been encouraged are available. These aspects of practice, indicative of the creation of a shared vision where all members of an organisation know what they want to create and have established common goals and where risk-taking is encouraged (Senge 2006), confirm that internal evaluation assists in developing schools as learning organisations. However, this practice is not yet widespread. While there is evidence that particular sections and departments in some schools engage in self-evaluation, a number of areas require development to ensure that all members of the school community are committed to a shared vision. The extension of collaborative practices to include boards of management, the acceptance of greater levels of responsibility by in-school management teams and increased inclusion of parents and students in collaborative processes are required.

As a result of this study, it is apparent that if evaluation is to assist schools in developing as learning organisations with a focus on continuous improvement in teaching and learning, a number of issues need to be addressed. In the first instance, the concept of whole-school evaluation (WSE), currently conceived as an external model of inspection, requires redefining so that the system and schools understand that it embraces both external and internal evaluation. Since all participant groups in this study envisage school evaluation developing in a way that would enable internal and external evaluation to coexist, WSE could become an overarching term. Clarity about the manner of their coexistence and the purpose each will serve is important. Based on the distinction made by Leung (2005) between the requirements of each and on the insights of participants in this research, the matrix in figure 7.2 (p164) provides an overview of the roles internal and external evaluation could play in a broad framework for whole-school evaluation.

Figure 7.2 A model of WSE embracing external and internal evaluation

<b>Whole school evaluation</b>		
	<b>External</b>	<b>Internal</b>
Purpose	Monitoring overall quality of education provision and regulation of standards in schools	Ongoing development and improvement with particular focus on improved learning for all
Underlying principles	Determines the quality of all aspects of education in schools objectively and ensures standards across the education system	Determines the quality of all aspects of education at individual school level, attending to both value-added progress and national standards
Underpinning assumptions	<p>External evaluation, competently undertaken using transparent criteria and benchmarks, creates trust in the system by ensuring that standards are maintained</p> <p>External evaluation assists in identifying resource needs and informs policy on how resources, support and interventions should be allocated</p>	<p>School self-evaluation, appropriately supported, enables boards of management, principals, in-school management and teachers, to accept shared responsibility for continuously improving learning, in consultation with parents and students</p> <p>Schools have the autonomy, capacity, resources and mechanisms to take action to improve practice as required</p>
Processes	<p>Regular external validation of schools' internal evaluation, identifying strengths and weaknesses and making recommendations for improvement</p> <p>Follow-up activity and communication to monitor progress made on recommendations</p> <p>Gathering and collating of national data to ensure standards are maintained and to provide schools with benchmarks and comparative data</p> <p>Consultation with support services and schools to devise suitable reflective framework and questionnaires for internal evaluation</p>	<p>A collaborative process of ongoing reflective inquiry, using appropriate data and measurement, to identify and justify school goals, to determine strengths and weaknesses and to enable innovative practices and sharing of knowledge and ideas to enhance learning.</p> <p>Regular completion of an agreed set of searching questions relating to particular school policies and practice</p> <p>Reflection on and implementation of the recommendations of external evaluation and the completion of a report documenting progress</p> <p>Ongoing oral communication about performance between schools and system</p>
Key outcomes	<p>Transparent publication of reports identifying schools' strengths and recommendations for improvement</p> <p>Support and resources linked to identified school needs</p> <p>National data on the quality of all aspects of educational provision in schools</p>	<p>Schools continuously measuring and improving the quality of provision at local level</p> <p>Annual reports, reflecting the results of schools' self-evaluation, available for all schools and published at local level</p> <p>Data on particular school policies available across the system</p>

By defining WSE in terms of internal and external evaluation as illustrated, the foundations put in place through school development planning support and external whole-school evaluation could be enhanced. Such a model could also provide opportunities to address some of the challenges to and criticisms of WSE, as an external model, outlined in this research. Issues such as enrolment policies, the evaluation of leadership, attention to individual teacher performance and mechanisms for following through on WSE recommendations could be tackled. It would also enable schools to build on their planning and collaborative processes to further expand the disciplines associated with learning organisations. These processes could be enhanced through the development of a suitable, simple-to-use framework and criteria, and through the identification of appropriate tools, in consultation with schools and support services. In particular, the model of school self-evaluation introduced should encourage reflective practice and inquiry, which will enable schools to develop the discipline of mental model (Senge 2006). This will promote the creation of a culture that is conducive to challenging thinking, enable teachers to reflect openly on their work and encourage individual accountability. The introduction of school self-evaluation should also be used to initiate discussion about measuring standards of quality in schools. Means of effectively obtaining and using data would assist in promoting systems thinking, the discipline in learning organisations that links the other four disciplines and creates the ability to see the 'big picture' (Senge 2006). The use of data to look for patterns and trends in a school, along with open and reflective dialogue would enable the school community to build shared meaning and work towards realising common established goals. It would assist schools in engaging in ongoing improvement and would ensure that public confidence in schools and in the education system would be maintained.

In moving towards the model of WSE illustrated (p164), a number of key findings that emerge from this research and that make an important contribution to enhancing knowledge and understanding of quality assurance in Irish post-primary schools will prove useful. In the first instance, an awareness of the necessity for the system to provide clear definitions of concepts, processes and outcomes when introducing new initiatives will require consideration. In this regard, agreement among the education partners about the meaning of and expectations suggested by the terms whole-school evaluation and school self-evaluation is necessary. In developing such clarity, the range of complex variables associated with quality assurance identified in this research and

illustrated in the theoretical framework (p143) should be a useful tool. This will enable discussion among the partners, and particularly between the system and schools about the possibility of moving towards school self-evaluation within current constraints. In particular, the interdependence of these variables, as illustrated in the theoretical framework, will enrich discussion in further developing evaluation models, both internal and external.

The interdependence of the variables will require particular attention. For example, the need to consider standards, including standards of achievement and levels of attainment in individual schools and across the system, will play an important role in enabling schools to engage in rigorous self-evaluation and will ensure that schools can and will measure progress made towards self-determined goals. It will also require the system to provide reliable benchmark data and will enable discussion about how best to develop such data. An awareness of the importance attached to developing standards of teaching that are known and understood by all throughout the system, surfacing from this research, is significant and timely. This, coupled with the concept of responsibility that received much attention in the accountability debate in the research, plays a considerable role in quality assurance in schools. It is also particularly relevant to the current work of the Teaching Council as it builds on the Codes of Professional Practice, develops a continuum of teacher education and promotes teacher self-regulation.

The interplay between external evaluation, school self-evaluation, autonomy and provision of resources is another example of the interdependence of the variables illustrated in the theoretical framework, which could be usefully discussed in moving towards the model illustrated (p164). Reflection within the system and by the inspectorate and discussion with schools will assist in clarifying: how schools can engage in meaningful self-evaluation; what measures can be taken to determine the level of resources required; and how sufficient resources can be made available to enable schools to engage in real school improvement. Findings from this research provide the system with insights into difficulties arising for schools regarding, for example, provision of a broad curriculum for all students. Issues related to teacher allocation and how teachers are deployed, provision of resources and levels of autonomy afforded to schools in these areas can impact on schools' ability to effect improvement through external or self-evaluation.

The findings from this research provide clear evidence to the system that external evaluation will continue to play a role in quality assurance in post-primary schools. In moving towards the model illustrated (p164), the interdependence between external and school self-evaluation cannot be ignored. As schools engage in self-evaluation practices that sustain or improve standards of provision and ensure that public confidence is maintained in the system, levels of imposed external evaluation can be reduced. Models of external evaluation will need to vary depending on the progress towards rigorous self-evaluation made by individual schools. The theoretical framework will be useful in enabling discussion about the aspects of quality assurance served by school self-evaluation and will thus guide the inspectorate towards deciding the level of external evaluation required. A range of external models will therefore be needed. As the process of developing such models is already underway and can be seen in the WSE MLL (management, leadership and learning model of WSE) at present (2009/10) being piloted, the framework could serve as an appropriate check list in determining the purpose and outcomes of school self-evaluation and thus the requirements of external evaluation. For example, a school that has engaged in effective levels of self-evaluation might only require an audit of its evaluation but the result of the external audit will be published on the website of the Department to ensure transparency.

An important contribution of this research to the inspectorate and to the system is the development of an understanding of issues of credibility and trust regarding current external evaluation practice. The perceived lack of knowledge of school leadership, due to lack of experience in this regard on the part of inspectors, poses challenges to the system. The findings uncover two areas of note which require further investigation to ensure the credibility of inspection processes: the first of these is the relationship between the lack of trust and compliance issues which may lie at the heart of the concern. The second is the need for consultation with school leaders and support services about solutions to the perceived problem. In moving towards the model illustrated (p164), issues of trust will continue to be important. It may be pertinent to engage in discussion with experts in school leadership, including school leaders and members of LDS, to determine the true cause of concerns, to review the nature of questions in current WSE schedules and to reach agreement about their revision.

Finally, if the model of whole-school evaluation illustrated (p164) is to become a reality, a number of barriers will need to be overcome. The most important of these is

teacher cooperation. At present, the nature of teachers' contracts, coupled with a reduction in the availability of paid substitution due to current economic constraints, causes difficulty regarding time and willingness to engage in activities beyond agreed teaching duties. This, together with the low level of engagement in leadership and management by in-school management teams in some voluntary secondary schools, noted in this research and exacerbated by the moratorium on promotion in schools at present, could cause difficulty in moving towards the illustrated model. However, findings from this research also indicate that in the Irish context, teachers and schools are influenced by the traditional view of teaching as a vocation. Such a call attaches a duty of care and a level of responsibility beyond contractual accountability to the role of teachers. Bearing this in mind, and following procedures presently used in introducing new forms of evaluation, schools could be invited to engage in self-evaluation and to present the findings from their evaluation efforts to inspectors. They could then be subjected to lighter levels of external evaluation according to the degree of rigor and success of their efforts.

The voluntary nature of boards of management and the consequent nature of membership of boards is another barrier to achieving the model of whole-school evaluation illustrated. The capacity and willingness of boards to take responsibility for ongoing evaluation and school improvement varies according to the capabilities and expertise of their members, who are all voluntary. At its most basic, training and ongoing support for boards to undertake responsibility in the area of self-evaluation is vital. It may be possible for the Department to work with management bodies, trustee groups and the newly appointed national support service (2010) in order to determine a minimum training requirement for boards and to establish the mechanisms to provide such training. An investigation into the difficulties attached to relying on voluntary boards might also be timely.

Concerns regarding data, including the availability of suitable benchmarks other than the state examinations and the capacity within schools to engage in meaningful gathering and analysis of data, are further barriers identified in this research that need to be overcome. To ensure that schools can engage in rigorous self-evaluation and maintain standards, it will be important to determine what information is required at system level and how capacity can be built in schools. The Department could work with agencies such as the Educational Research Centre to investigate current practices,



including involvement in international surveys such as PISA. Data gathering mechanisms could then be developed at national level to enable analysis and comparison at individual school and at national level.

In conclusion, the findings from this research provide the system with a model of whole-school evaluation that embraces external evaluation and school self-evaluation. It identifies a number of interdependent variables associated with quality assurance in schools and presents these in a simple theoretical framework, which should prove useful in determining the level of external evaluation required in individual schools. It highlights particular variables that merit further discussion or investigation and it suggests possible means of overcoming barriers to reaching the proposed model. The additional knowledge and understanding gained through the research should guide further discussion and development of whole-school evaluation policy and processes in Irish post-primary schools.

### **7.8 Recommendations**

In order to take advantage of the progress made in engaging schools in continuous learning and improvement through school development planning and WSE, a number of recommendations are made as a result of this research.

- The inspectorate should engage in dialogue with support service and school personnel to address issues of concern relating to WSE. Aspects of practice such as the evaluation of school leadership and management, individual teacher performance, greater engagement with parents and students and following up on recommendations should be included.
- The system should examine the data available to schools and methods of gathering required data to determine how gaps in data could be addressed. Attention should be paid to the use of data within particular contexts and to the effective use and analysis of data by teachers. It could involve providing training for teachers or providing a central resource for the analysis of individual school data.
- The inspectorate should develop a framework to enable discussion with support service and school personnel with a view to establishing WSE as a model that embraces internal and external evaluation. The relationship between internal and external evaluation and the methodology to be used should be considered.

- The system should give consideration to how schools can be supported to enhance their practice through evaluation. Structures such as frameworks, criteria and instruments, along with training should be considered. This is particularly pertinent in an era of constrained economic circumstances.

### **7.9 Suggestions for further study**

In order to build on the findings in this research, a number of areas requiring further investigation are identified. This study focused on obtaining the views of key personnel associated with evaluating and improving practice in schools and in the education system. Insights from inspectors, from personnel associated with leadership and school development planning support and from school principals, about the role played by evaluation in school improvement were sought. The views of other school personnel, particularly those of teachers and of members of boards of management, would add significantly to further developing an understanding of evaluation in schools. The voice of students and their parents, for whom schools exist, should be elicited in further studies. Their view on the impact of current evaluation practice and on how it could be developed would be most useful. Finally, this research is based on acquiring the views and reflections of participants through focus group sessions only. Further research, using surveys to acquire information from a larger group and case study to obtain deeper knowledge about the practice and impact of evaluation in particular schools would supplement the understanding gained through this study.

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# Appendix 1

## Focus group interview schedule/questions

### **Themes: A Current practice: WSE**

1. *What is the purpose of WSE?*
2. *What elements of the process of WSE, as currently practised, are useful and what elements are problematic? Framework? In-school evaluation? Role of inspectors? Feedback and reporting? Publication?*
3. *Are there other approaches to evaluation that could be used?*
4. *What is the relationship between standards and accountability? What is your understanding of the role of testing in public accountability? Can quality assurance be satisfactory in the absence of testing? Are there better ways than testing of assuring quality?*
5. *Where does the issue of value added come in the process of evaluation? Looking at improvement rather than outcomes, is this issue served in current quality assurance approaches? Is it desirable? How should it be assessed/evaluated?*
6. *To what extent is increased focus on external evaluation linked to school autonomy?*

### **Themes: B School self-evaluation**

7. *Do schools currently engage in internal evaluation or self-review?*
8. *What purpose does internal evaluation serve?*
9. *How is evidence gathered? Used?*
10. *What are the limits and merits of current school self-evaluation practices?*
11. *How could present models be developed or extended? How should the system move forward from current evaluation practice (WSE and school self-evaluation) to the desired end goal (school improvement/development)?*
12. *In view of recent development such as the establishment of the Teaching Council and the proposed enactment of section 24 of the Education Act, should self-regulation be the end goal in the journey from centrally controlled inspection to school self-evaluation? What are the merits and limits of self-regulation?*

**Themes: C Moving forward**

- 13. In moving from a centrally controlled inspection system to a quality assurance system based on decentralised decision-making and school self-evaluation, what would a system look like?*
- 14. What should the relationship be between the key players: inspectors, the Teaching Council, support agencies, schools? Is there a role for the State Examinations Commission?*
- 15. What structures, processes and supports need to be put in place to enable an approach based on school self-evaluation to be successfully implemented?*
- 16. How would the success of such a system be determined?*