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## ***Evaluation and Distributed Evaluation and Planning Strategies (DEAPS) in Irish Schools***

### ***Introduction and Background***

Decentralisation and the subsequent drive to more actively include citizens in decision-making processes have become part of the discourse of public sector reform in most European countries and across various public-sector services such as the healthcare and education sector (Beckmann, Cooper, and Hill 2009, Verger, and Curran 2014). This policy direction can serve a variety of purposes such as reducing state bureaucracy, improvement by both regulation and competition, and 'stakeholder' voice and choice (Brown et al. 2016a). In the education sector, for example, while accountability through the process of school inspection remains central in most OECD countries inspection models have been adapted as education accountability systems mature. As schools and their stakeholders develop evaluation literacy and innovation capacity to improve education in their own organisations, they have less need of being driven by top-down inspections and reform initiatives (Brown et al. 2016b). This has resulted in a dual system of participatory internal/external evaluation that is now being used in most OECD countries (Santiago 2013).

In the case of Ireland, while inspection is a long-established process of evaluation that dates back to the nineteenth century (Brown et al., 2016c); changes to inspection in recent years have led to the introduction of a range of inspection models such as subject and whole school evaluation which aim to provide a more targeted and efficient approach to quality assuring education provision in primary and post-primary schools (Department of Education, 2016). The introduction of mandatory School Self-Evaluation (SSE) in 2012 (Department of Education, 2012) has also provided the education system with a more cost-effective approach to school improvement while simultaneously acting as a critical improvement mechanism for the whole school community. However, as with any new initiative, this dual mandated mode of internal/external evaluation is not without its implementation challenges (O'Brien et al. 2015) particularly when, as with other countries, the role of stakeholders such as parents and students are concerned (Verger, and Curran 2014).

This report firstly describes the nature of compulsory education in Ireland before describing inspection and SSE frameworks that are currently in operation in Irish primary and postprimary schools. Both evaluation processes are described and discussed with reference to the involvement of parents and students. The second part of the report explores the growing emphasis on student and parent voice in compulsory education. Finally, the study concludes with a discussion of key challenges for stakeholder voice in education, a development which in the absence of clearly defined strategies to address the 'stakeholder gap', will arguably remain a stifled educational reform initiative within the future landscape of Irish education.

## *Compulsory level Education in Ireland*

The Irish education system consists of pre-school, primary, post-primary, higher and further education. Education is compulsory for all children in Ireland from the ages of six to 16.

### *Pre-school Education*

Pre-school Education is, in the vast majority of cases, provided by privately funded childcare facilities. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme also provides a free year of early childhood care and education for children of preschool age. Furthermore, some preschool initiatives, focussed on children at risk are also funded by the Department of Education and Skills (DES).

### *Primary Education*

It is not compulsory for children to attend school until the age of six. However, in most cases, children traditionally begin school in the September following their fourth birthday. The curriculum for primary education includes language, mathematics, social-environment and scientific education, arts education, physical education and social personal and health education.

### *Post-primary Education*

Students commence 1st Year of post-primary education (frequently referred to as secondary education in some jurisdictions) after an eight-year cycle of primary schooling. Most students are about twelve years of age when entering post-primary education which consists of a compulsory three years of Junior cycle and a non-compulsory transition year and two years of Senior cycle.

At the end of Junior cycle, students are awarded a Certificate which is equal to level 2 of the European Qualifications Framework. Currently, the Junior Certificate is awarded based on national examinations that are set and administered by the State Examinations Commission.

While not compulsory the majority of students in Ireland remain in school for the Senior Cycle. At the end of the Senior cycle, students are awarded a Leaving Certificate which is considered to be level 3 in the European Qualifications Framework. The Leaving Certificate (followed by the vast majority of students), for which most students study seven subjects, is assessed externally by the State Examinations Commission, mainly with final written examinations.

## *Implementation of mandatory School Evaluation in Ireland*

In Ireland at the primary and post-primary level, a dual mode of evaluation exists whereby the role of the inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) is 'to evaluate the education standards in such schools or centres... to promote excellence in the management of, teaching in and the use of support services by schools' (Education Act, 1998).

In parallel, primary and post-primary schools are also required to carry out their own internal evaluations of a particular aspect of teaching and learning using, from 2012, evaluation guidelines and criteria developed by the inspectorate of the DES (DES, 2012a and 2012b). Prior to this, DES also published twin documents entitled 'Looking at our School'(LAOS), as aids to School Self-Evaluation (SSE) in primary and post-primary schools (DES, 2003a and 2003b).

The LAOS framework was designed with an emphasis on cooperation and partnership rather than monitoring and accountability. However, given the lack of evaluation capacity among teachers, there was very little, if any evidence to suggest that schools were engaging in any form of systematic evaluations. Rather LAOS, at most, served the purpose of requiring schools to develop internal policies on educational areas such as school behaviour and admissions. In fact, SSE was rarely mentioned if at all in school inspection reports.

Undoubtedly, up to the introduction of SSE guidelines issued in 2012 (DES, 2012a), evaluation of schools was primarily focused on having school inspection accepted as a legitimate nonthreatening mode of evaluation among stakeholders, what McNamara et al. referred to as a light touch evaluation approach (2009). There are other reasons for the introduction of a dual mode of School evaluation in Ireland which will now be discussed.

Against a backdrop of fiscal correction, it became evident that, due to a lack of inspectors, the frequency of school inspections was not sufficient to ensure that regular evaluations were occurring in schools. In fact, according to the Standing Conference of Inspectorates (SICI), 'the frequency of full inspections of schools and institutions is once in seven years' (SICI 2009, p11). In other words, the inspection was viewed as an episodic event for most schools. However from 2012, following Ireland's drop in literacy and numeracy PISA rankings, school self-evaluation came once more to the fore and also took new meaning. According to Kitching (2014), 'supposedly poor PISA results, released in the grip of severe austerity measures in 2010, became part of a mediated panic over teaching and learning standards, which were repeatedly, casually related to future national economic recovery' (p.111). Not only were schools mandated to carry out data-informed school self-evaluation, but they were also to act as agents for economic recovery. As part of Ireland's strategy for PISA recovery, schools were mandated to conduct SSE of literacy, numeracy and another aspect of teaching and learning over a four-year period (DES, 2012a and 2012b).

There are other economic reasons as to why SSE has taken centre stage in government-mandated evaluation policy and practice. On the one hand, although inspectorates throughout Europe view inspection as 'a very cheap and very effective instrument for controlling the budget; looking after students 'safety; improving the quality of teaching and learning' (SICI, 2014). On the other hand, the requirement to reduce the high costs accrued from school inspections is starkly illustrated in the case of Ireland where it was estimated that the cost to the exchequer of 24 whole-school evaluations was €258,000 (Quinn 2011). Indeed, *das Kind mit dem Bade ausschütten*, Santiago in OECD (2013) state that 'one way to control the costs of external-evaluation is to base it increasingly on internal self-evaluation and to make this one of the most important inputs for external evaluation'(Santiago, p.92). These inputs normally take the form of inspection devised SSE frameworks that schools are required- if not expected- to use. In the case of Ireland, from 2016, schools use an inspectorate devised framework called *Looking at Our School 2016* (Department of Education, 2016b). In line with the drive for a genuinely reciprocal evaluation relationship between schools and the inspectorate, schools are also encouraged to use the same inspection standards and quality statements to evaluate teaching, learning and leadership as contained in LAOS 2016 (Department of Education, 2016b). As stated by the chief Inspector, 'These are the first fully comprehensive set of published standards for Irish schools '(Hislop,2017, p.9).

## *Looking at Looking at Our School 2016 – A Participatory approach to School Evaluation*

External evaluation (inspection) in Irish schools is carried out by the Department of Education and Skills' Inspectorate in accordance with the 1998 Education Act. The system, which has developed iteratively over the past twenty years now offers a range of models of inspection, all of which focus on the quality of teaching, learning and leadership in the school but each with a slightly different focus. These models of inspection include Incidental Inspection; Subject Inspection; Programme Evaluation; Evaluation of Action Planning for Improvement in DEIS Schools; Whole-School Management, Leadership and Learning; Whole-School Evaluation as well as follow-through Inspection (DES, 2016a). Inspections are carried out using the evaluation criteria set out in the Looking at Our School 2016 framework (DES, 2016b). The process involves the collection of data from a variety of sources including documents, interviews discussions and observation of teaching. This data provides evidence which informs the judgements and recommendations that arise from the inspection process. The guidelines for inspection in post-primary schools (DES, 2016a) make a number of references to engagement in dialogue with parents and students. In the education sector at the primary and post-primary level, in theory at least therefore, all parents and students have an active role as stakeholders in the inspection process.

To assist with inspection judgements on the quality of education provided by schools, the Inspectorate also administers a series of questionnaires to a sample of parents and students as well as carrying out a series of focus groups with these groups. They also review student's work and assessment data. Inspectors meet with representatives of the parents' association and the Board of Management. The inspection report is published on the Department of Education and Skills website, making it available to the whole school community. The process outlined above allows the Inspectorate to argue that inspection is a 'collaborative process involving the teaching staff, the management of the school, parents, and students' (DES, 2016b, p.30).

The current SSE process also involves 'reflective enquiry leading to action planning for improvement that is informed by evidence gathered within each school's unique context; (Department of Education and Skills 2016b, p. 6). According to DES, (2016b), under the direction of the Board of Management, SSE should involve various stakeholders such as parents, students and teachers. The SSE cycle involves a process of deciding the focus, gathering evidence, analysing data, writing an SSE report and improvement plan. In the present iteration of SSE, Action plans for improvement are to be implemented over four years and are meant to be monitored at regular intervals (figure 1).

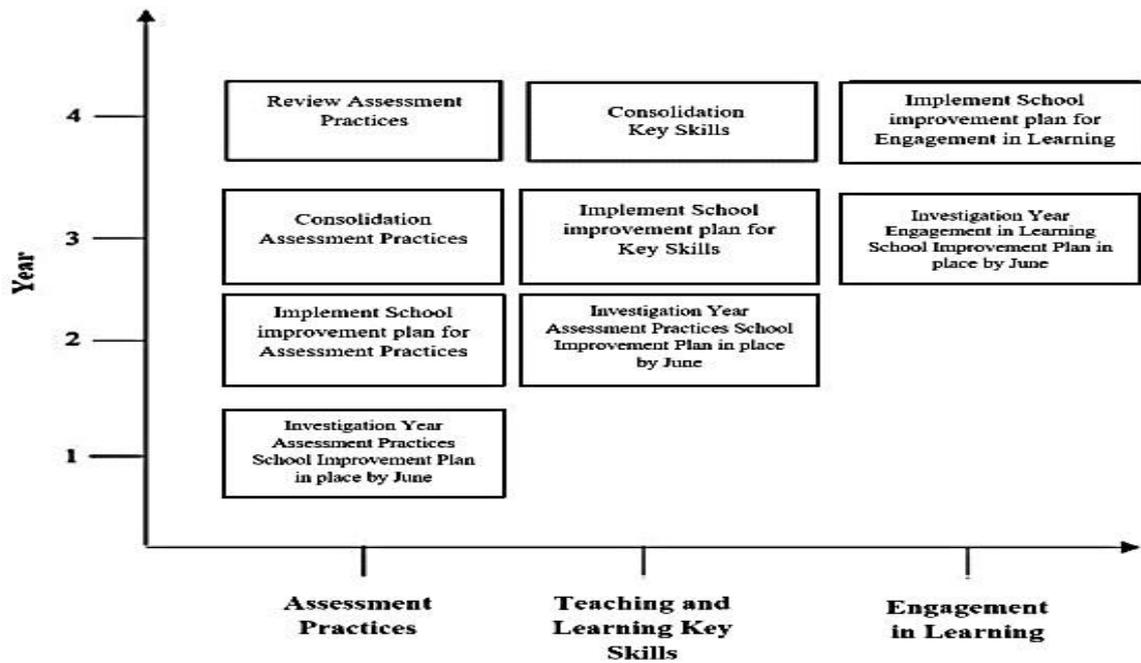


Figure 1: Sample Time Line for school self-evaluation (2016-2012)

Evidence that is analysed may include data on student outcomes (including state examination results) and experience in the school; data on student, teacher and parent perspectives; a review of school policies and school environment; and data from professional collaborative reviews. Apart from any existing print data that is available in the school, data is also gathered through interviews, focus groups, documentary analysis, questionnaires and observation. The full SSE report and an improvement plan are also shared with staff and management, and a summary report is provided to the whole school community.

On the one hand, while LAOS 2016 has been developed following ‘extensive consultation with students, teachers, parents, school leaders, management bodies and other education professionals and a wide range of other bodies’ (DES 2016b, p.5), there is also an acknowledgement that the role of parents and students in school evaluation is still underdeveloped. As stated by the chief inspector: ‘we believe that the time is right for us to review and improve the ways in which we access, analyse and use the experiences and opinions of parents and learners as we go about our inspection work. This will be an important element in the development of our inspection practice in the next few years’ (Hislop, 2017, p.20). The next section of this report provides an overview of the rise of what is frequently referred to as stakeholder voice in education.

### *The rise of Stakeholder voice in Education*

Ireland, like elsewhere is now aiming to incorporate the voice of both students and parents into discussions surrounding school improvement and evaluation. The educational cliché ‘partnership’ has become the buzzword of the modern educational discourse in Ireland and is mentioned in virtually all policy documents (Mac Giolla Phadraig 2005). For example, to foster and embed such a partnership, policy is recommended to draw on students’ perspectives (Smyth and McCoy 2011), and offer not just choice, but ‘voice’ to parents (see DES 2015) so that all ‘stakeholder views are heard and are factored into plans for improvement’ (DES 2017). As is

reported here, however, the policy of ‘partnership’, with an emphasis on both student and parent voice, is often not reflective of the reality of school discussions.

### *Student voice*

There is a consensus in Ireland that children occupy an ambivalent position in not just Irish society but in Irish schools (Shevlin and Rose 2008). At a societal level, Ireland has previously been criticised by the United Nations (UN) for inadequately reflecting the child rights-based approach expressed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Lodge and Lynch 2000), while at the level of the school the traditional culture of children being ‘seen and not heard’ (Roche 2011, 328) is argued by some to be still present in schools with the suggestion that the prevailing culture of Irish classrooms is one where children are indoctrinated in to accepting and not questioning the teacher (Mooney Simmie et al. 2016). A culture of asking, consulting, or discussing students’ views has been notably absent from Irish schools (Fleming 2011) but the volume of student's voice across Ireland’s education system is now being raised (Fleming 2016a) with children’s rights to have a voice in educational matters being recognised in legislation (Gilleece and Cosgrove 2012) and promoted in both national and educational discourse. For example, since United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified in 1992, there have been many moves to amplify student voice in Ireland

The Education Act in 1998, the foundation of the Irish Second-Level Students’ Union (ISSU) in 2008, and the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People in 2014 are just some examples of the move towards implementing student voice across various sectors of education.

Despite these developments, however, participation in a range of important areas by school children in Ireland, particularly at post-primary level, could be seen as being inadequate (de Roiste et al. 2011) as the opportunities to get involved in decision-making processes are well below the international average (Cosgrove and Gilleece 2012). Stemming from the Education Act in 1998, student councils have been the only formal mechanism for student voice in Irish education with more recently, the inclusion of students as members of the Board of Management of Educate Together post-primary Schools. However, for the vast majority of schools, while the guidelines for schools published by the then Department of Education and Science (2002, 11) assert that a key function of student councils is to contribute ‘to the development of school policy’, student councils do not provide a forum for deeper student voice in schools (Fleming 2011). As they are not required by law, not every school has a student council however (Darmody and Smyth 2013), and in these schools there can be a fear amongst staff that such a development would lead to ‘anarchy’ (Lodge and Lynch 2000). While most schools do have student councils, some teachers in these schools also express concern about ‘losing their authority’ (Smyth 2016, 133) to the students, while for most, their accounts of the role of the student council differ greatly to that of the students. Teachers have varied perceptions of student councils, with some viewing the students as not being willing enough to take on the responsibilities of decision-making, and others seeing the council as being active – although some see this role as only focusing on the ‘little things’ (ibid.). Despite this, the emergence of student councils in most post-primary schools in Ireland in recent years has been positively viewed by principals, teachers, and the boards of management. The problem for students, however, is that the general perception of staff is very much at odds with how they perceive the role and impact of the student council. For students, the reality of the student council, and consequently student voice, is one of ‘tokenistic activity, contrived involvements with decision-making, and a significant focus on school event organisation or charity

fundraising' (Fleming 2015, 235). Despite the growing emphasis on 'student voice' in emerging discourses, the reality is that students in Irish post-primary schools feel voiceless and silenced (Smyth 2016).

As can be expected by the muffled student voice in Irish education, in terms of participatory evaluation, students have a limited level of formal involvement. Whole school evaluation (WSE) evaluates Irish schools through a combination of both external and internal evaluation and in the official discourse, stakeholders such as students play an important role in the process – but that was not always the case. WSE was first piloted in the late 1990s, and the absence of the students' perspective (Dempsey 2001) can be seen as being a sign of things to come over the ensuing years. When WSE was formally introduced in 2004, there was no clearly defined role or structure for students, and how they were to be consulted (McNamara and O'Hara 2005; 2012). Despite students being encouraged to seek a much greater voice in issues concerning their own education (McNamara et al. 2002), there were no formal complaints made by students (or their parents) or any representing bodies in relation to them not being referenced in the department documents (McNamara and O'Hara 2006). In effect, students were spoken to by inspectors on an ad hoc basis (ibid.) during WSE. In the guidelines later published for schools, WSE was promoted as a 'collaborative process' that would include, for example, opportunities for students to speak about their experiences of school life (Department of Education and Science 2006). Inspectors would meet with student council representatives, but the additional presence of a non-participating teacher was likely to inhibit students voice rather than raise it (Dillon 2012). Furthermore, an additional problem for student councils was that they were in danger of becoming a mere showpiece during the evaluations. For example, the newly formed ISSU (2010, 12) contended that

schools are generally viewed more favourably when it comes to a whole school evaluation if there is a student council in place. Therefore, a student council can sometimes be set up in a school shortly before a whole school evaluation is due to take place and so for the wrong reasons. Thus it is unsurprising that many of these student councils become inactive after a short amount of time or are merely tokenistic in existence.

Nonetheless, despite the ambiguities surrounding the role of student voice in WSE, students perceived themselves to be integral to the school improvement process and positioned themselves as sharing responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning in schools, but understandably lacked a thorough knowledge and understanding of the inspection process as no such information was communicated to them by the inspectorate (Dillon 2012). This lack of communication further alienated students from the school evaluation process as they were not provided with a copy of the final WSE reports, meaning their involvement and knowledge of school evaluation ended once their direct encounters with inspectors were conducted (ibid.). Ultimately, student voice did not take hold as an important element of school evaluation during these stages, and students were left feeling sceptical about the value of their contribution, and thus, that there was scope for developing more meaningful opportunities for them to contribute to WSE (ibid).

Dr Harold Hislop, Chief Inspector, stated that there were some 'considerable challenges' in introducing SSE but contended that if schools were willing to collect and analyse evidence from a variety of sources such as student surveys, real learning communities could be fostered (Hislop 2012). An updated version of WSE in 2010 aimed to improve in a number of areas and

further involve student voice through the introduction of standardised questionnaires for student feedback and views. These questionnaires did little to actually give students a say on their school experience however as the questionnaires contained closed-questions (Fleming 2015). When internal evaluation then became compulsory for schools in 2012, more of an emphasis than ever before was placed on student voice, and student voice in a much broader sense than just the student council (Department of Education and Skills 2012a and 2012b). Student voice, through the use of student questionnaires and focus group interviews with students, now forms an important part of Ireland's school inspection policy, and will continue to be developed further over the coming years (Hislop 2017). As positive as these recent developments may be, however, and as big as an improvement as they may be on earlier attempts at recognising student voice in Irish schools, fresh challenges have now also emerged for the voice of students in Ireland:

In moving away from the student council as a representative student voice, arguably, an instrumentalist voice is being encouraged and directed primarily towards the gathering of data to inform and measure school performance and school improvement. Consequently, there is a risk that the opportunity to develop and embed deep student voice, as meaningful consultation, co-construction and the creation of rights-based, dialogic, person-centred democratic and inclusive schools, will be diminished or even lost. Equally, the growing association between student voice, school improvement and performativity, through various forms of evaluation presents a further risk as these imperatives could lose any interactive potential for change at school and classrooms level based on right, trust, relationship and learning (Fleming 2015, 237).

#### *Parent voice*

A significant feature of Irish education is the deep-rooted respect Irish parents have for education and their commitment to improving their children's access to schooling (Coolahan et al. 2017). Their voice in formal education, however, has often followed the same trajectory to their children's in that there is now a huge emphasis on parent voice in the official discourse but very little actually heard in practice. Similar to the children's, the voice of parents was traditionally ignored, and despite the emphasis that the Irish Constitution places on parental rights in education, the political system has done virtually nothing to include parents in education (Kavanagh 2013). Due to the combined forces of the state, church, and the teaching profession, Irish parents were traditionally denied a formal role in their children's schooling (Daly 2009), and even after the establishment of parent councils, the home-school-community liaison scheme, the improved representation of parents on boards of management, and the emphasis on 'partnership' in policy documents in recent years, there is little evidence to suggest that the situation has changed in any significant way (Fleming 2016b).

The excluded voices of parents of disadvantaged children in Irish schools has previously been highlighted (Hanafin and Lynch 2002; Mulkerrins 2007) but the overall lack of parental involvement in Irish schools, at a formal level at least, in terms of decision-making, has been consistently low. There is a lack of clarity around the role of parents in supporting their children's education, irrespective of social class (Cregan 2008), and the consensus among the general Irish public is that parents have 'too little' influence in Irish education (Kellaghan et al. 2004). The average level of parental participation in Irish schools is actually lower than the international average (Cosgrove and Gilleece 2012), and while Irish parents do have a high level of informal involvement in their child's education, contact is less well developed on a

formal level and typically involves them acting in a more passive or reactive role (Byrne and Smyth 2011).

Mirroring the student experience, although perhaps to a lesser extent, including parents' voice in school evaluation or any decision-making process in Irish schools has been difficult. While students' perspectives were not sought during the WSE pilot project, those of parents were – although their involvement could merely be seen as being a token gesture (McNamara et al. 2002). Despite being included in the early stages of WSE, the resulting framework largely excluded parents with no clearly defined role for them being included (McNamara and O'Hara 2005). Interestingly however, as was the case with students mentioned earlier, no negative comments were made from any parent bodies in relation to the exclusion of parents in the official documents (McNamara and O'Hara 2006), which can be seen as a reflection of the culture of non-interference and non-involvement of parents that the Irish education system has traditionally fostered. Indeed, not only have there been barriers to overcome in terms of embedding a practice of consultation with parents as partners and as key stakeholders, there has been a similar challenge to encouraging parents themselves to participate in consultations.

Notwithstanding the experience to date as outline above parent voice has increasingly been integrated into school evaluations in Ireland in recent years. Confidential questionnaires are now used to seek the opinion of parents during WSE and are an important way of engaging parents in the change and improvement process (Hislop 2013). Similarly, additional focus groups of parents form an important part of Ireland's school inspection policy and will continue to be developed further over the coming years (Hislop 2017). This is not to say, however, that parent voice is now adequately heard. It has been argued for example, that despite the emphasis on parent voice, those that wish to be formally involved through parents' associations or councils tend to be socialised into loyalty to the school board (Mac Giolla Phadraig 2010) and are protective of the school during inspections rather than constructive (Hislop 2012). As with students, most parents also feel disenfranchised during WSE, and there is a perception that the process is insignificant to them (Dillon 2012). The power to harness and develop partnership ultimately rests with individual schools (Higgins 2007), but many parents who wish to be formally involved in decision-making processes feel that schools are not aiming to do so. There are instances, for example, of parents who are not on boards of management or parent associations not being issued with a copy of the WSE report or being informed of the WSE verdict, while many parents are unaware that the WSE report is actually available to view on the Department's website (Dillon 2012). This breakdown in communication is reflective of one particular view of the so-called 'partnership' in Irish education where schools view parents as being disinterested in formal involvement in education and parents view schools as excluding them from formal involvement:

Access to relevant information is controlled by the school. On the other hand, the parents had not actively sought any information on the WSE from their schools and the majority of them did not attend parent association meetings, where some information would have been available to them. They placed the onus firmly on school management to manage communication (Ibid. 104).

The implementation and simple existence of formal structures for parents do not guarantee parent voice (Byrne and Smyth 2011), and many Irish parents have been reluctant to avail of any opportunities provided (Conaty 1999) – although it must be said that these 'opportunities' have not always appeared to have been genuine. There appears to be little enthusiasm in Ireland

among parents to be involved as partners in school policy formation (Mac Giolla Phadraig 2003) with parental attendance at meetings outside of parent-teacher meetings being modest (Darmody and Smyth 2013), possibly after a long tradition in Ireland of parents being socialised as outsiders as opposed to partners. Indeed, the legacy of parents in Ireland leaving education to others, originally to the Church, but now to school management and teachers, continues to persist to a great degree (Fleming 2016b). It is therefore unsurprising that in the new framework for SSE, while parents are given a clearer role in the process so that they can ‘play an active role’, they are also urged to willingly engage more with the process.

### *Conclusion*

Inspection and SSE are now established features of Irish compulsory education resulting in the development and redevelopment of various evaluation frameworks in recent years. Accordingly, it has been argued that both processes of evaluation have considerably improved from previous iterations (Brown et al. 2017). In terms of stakeholder involvement, government policy also demonstrates some level of intentionality regarding the further promotion of a partnership approach between the DES, schools, parents and students. Various initiatives have been introduced which promote student and parent voice in schools.

On the other hand, there appears to be limits to stakeholder engagement, beyond which, the education system has yet to venture. By way of explanation, evaluation frameworks do not specify the proportion of parents and students that should be involved in the process, nor do they provide, in comparison to teachers and principals, clearly defined roles for parents and students in the evaluation process. This is unsurprising for a variety of reasons.

For inspection, increasing the frequency of parents consulted as part of an inspection would require more time and money. For SSE, schools that are in the process of implementing relevant DES guidelines are also experiencing many implementation challenges such as lack of time to engage in SSE, as well as competing pressures and poor data literacy (O’Brien et al. 2014, 2015). Considering such challenges and the emergence of what might be described as ‘New School Evaluation’ (Brown et al. 2016b), it is understandable that the role of parent/student voice in evaluation frameworks is not clearly specified in government mandated policy and practice. Indeed, the lack of guidelines regarding for example, the proportion of students and parents who should be consulted during an SSE cycle, together with the lack of accountability to both groups during and after the process would suggest that “partnership”, “student voice” and “parent voice” are at the early stages of implementation in the Irish education system.

This report also raises questions and challenges relating to the appropriate level of stakeholder engagement that is relevant, useful and practically possible in school evaluation and planning. For example, should parents and students be involved not only in consultation but also in decision making and planning? Are parents and students sufficiently informed or even interested in engaging at this level? Is it possible for students and parents to make unbiased decisions for the overall good of the school? What would be the impact of such engagement on teachers and school management, intended and unintended? Should schools be more accountable to parents and students regarding the quality of provision, the progression of targets and the outcomes achieved?

Another unresolved issue relates to the divergent capacity of stakeholders in Irish schools more generally. While it is stated in the Education Act (1998) that the Board of Management (that

consists of parents and other members of the school community) is ultimately responsible for the quality of evaluation, planning and educational provision; In Ireland, there are more than 3,000 primary school Boards of Management and more than 700 post primary school Boards of Management (Department of Education, 20170). It is unlikely, considering the varying school sizes and socio-economic makeup of Boards of Management, that all stakeholders on a Board of Management can equally engage in school evaluation and planning as the constitution of Boards of Management presently exist. A number of principals in Brown (2011) stated that they often deal with issues for which board members are responsible but do not have the capacity or time to address, such as staff appraisals and the evaluation and development of the school plan<sup>1</sup>. As one principal stated: “It’s beyond their area of expertise, but yet they have responsibility for this, so what happens is the school principal has to reluctantly take responsibility for it”. This perspective on the reality and limitations of stakeholder engagement in Irish education also resonates with an inspector participant who stated: “It is difficult for schools to get a correctly constituted board. It is difficult for them to get people, certainly from the locality, who would have the capacity and the willingness on a voluntary basis to do the work that needs to be done. So, there is a building capacity in relation to Boards of Management and volunteers as well”.

By way of final comment and taking the above statements from the field into account, while there appears to be evidence of Distributed Evaluation and Planning in the Irish education system, it is clear that more could be done to ensure that stakeholder participation goes beyond that which presently exists. As a result, this report highlights the importance of the Erasmus+ DEAPS project that seeks to develop strategies to address the ‘capacity gap’ in relation to stakeholder engagement, not only in Ireland but in countries throughout Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘A board shall, as soon as may be after its appointment, make arrangements for the preparation of a plan (in this section referred to as, the school plan) and shall ensure that the plan is regularly reviewed and updated’ (Education Act, 21(1), 1998).

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