

VIEW FROM THE CHAIR

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EAL and inspection has been an issue that has exercised the collective NALDIC mind over the years of its existence. Our second Working Paper (1997) aimed to provide support for both inspectors and staff being inspected. In 2004, our chair Ian Jones wrote to David Bell, the then HMCI, to lobby for: further training for inspectors in EAL issues; greater opportunities for EAL specialists to enrol as inspectors; greater coverage of EAL issues in inspection reports and improved EAL subject guidance. In January 2005, before the introduction of the revised inspection framework (OFSTED, 2005), NALDIC took part in the consultation exercise around the changes. In our response we noted that:

We remain concerned however that a ‘sharper focus on a limited range of topics’ will lead to a minimal focus on issues aside from core curriculum areas. Although we understand that the SSE (schools’ self evaluation) will lead the inspection process, we are not convinced that this will ensure adequate attention to EAL and bilingual issues. Evidence from LEA inspections is that LEA provision for EAL and ethnic minority achievement is consistently not a focus of LEA inspections and no fieldwork is carried out. This appears consistent across both low and high diversity areas. We fear that a similar situation is occurring in school inspections which will be exacerbated by the new framework.

Warming to our theme we argued that:

Knowledge and understanding of EAL issues is not yet fully embedded in the education system in England. For example, recent DfES initiated national specialist courses and training programmes and projects are still at the pilot stage; OFSTED training for inspectors in EAL has been discontinued. Schools still need considerable support and guidance in meeting the needs of not only early stage EAL learners but also the more advanced learners, whose needs are only recently being recognised. In such a context, it is doubtful whether school self-evaluation and the shortened inspection regime, will be able to identify whether schools are adequately meeting the needs of EAL pupils and may lead to the OFSTED inspection process failing in its duty to ensure that school provision meets the needs of all pupils. This is a particular danger in the inspection of schools with only a few EAL learners as unlike SEN, provision for

EAL learners is not assured through the legal framework of a Code of Practice and therefore where EAL needs are less pressing or obvious, they are easily overlooked by both the school and the inspection team.

In August 2008, we again took part in the consultation process regarding new proposals for inspection. In our response, (see page 18) we argued that what is required is a common national framework for the assessment of EAL pupils along with a programme of training for inspectors and a more consistent focus on EAL learners within the inspection process.

In this issue we examine the topic again and the articles suggest that some of the concerns we expressed in 2005 were perhaps well founded. They also suggest a certain ambiguity in the relationship between EAL and inspection. On the one hand, we look to the inspection regime (or the threat of inspection) to ‘sort out’ those schools which are failing to provide well for bilingual learners or failing to promote community cohesion. On the other, we note that there are all sorts of peculiarities relating to EAL and linguistic and ethnic diversity which make inspection of this aspect of schooling particularly complex. Perhaps the time is right for us to recognise this ambiguity. Is it realistic to welcome reports which highlight shortcomings in outcomes for EAL learners whilst at the same time noting that there are difficulties in inspecting EAL which mean that some aspects of the process are flawed? Is it fair to want it both ways? Perhaps it is time for us to be realistic about the limitations of an achievement/outcomes-based inspection process and focus our energies on national developments which will help improve the day-to-day match between what EAL and bilingual pupils and young people experience in schools and what they really need.

References

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