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**Inspecting (for) Excellence and Equity
Keynote Address**

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1. Introduction

Good morning to you all. I would like to begin by saying how delighted the Irish Education Ministry and its Inspectorate are to host this year's General Assembly of the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI). As our Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, has just highlighted, it is indeed wonderful to see 85 representatives from 30 member countries here in person this morning in Ireland. Fearaim fíorchaoin fáilte romhaibh go léir – you are all most welcome.

In this address, I will explore, in the context of quality assurance systems and specifically education inspections, the potential role of inspection in promoting equity and excellence in education. To this end, I would like to consider five key aspects, all of which are inter-related and inter-connected:

- Understandings of equity and excellence in education; connectedness with 'inclusion' as a concept
- The COVID context
- The international context
- Ireland: The education context



- Legal underpinnings
- A policy perspective
- The role of the Inspectorate

I will conclude with some observations on the future of education and how, from the perspective of equity and inclusion, quality assurance systems and, specifically, our influence as an international inspectorate body, can be developed further to support the goal of equity and excellence in learning for all.

I strongly believe that our shared commitment to equity and excellence can be realised more fully, and more meaningfully, when we give real voice to children and young people in our evaluation processes.

2. Understandings of equity and excellence

2.1 The SICI theme: Inspecting (for) Equity and Excellence

Just one year ago when we gathered in Stockholm, Sweden, SICI had the privilege of engaging with Professor Jan Vanhoof of Antwerp University, as he launched the SICI theme for 2022 – Inspecting (for) Equity and Excellence. That theme of Equity and Excellence aligns strongly with SICI’s commitment to achieving a better understanding of how inspection can make a strong contribution to improving the quality of the educational experience of all children and young people. As an international Inspectorate body, we want to develop this understanding across our member countries and indeed across the wider political and educational community.

2.2 Towards an understanding of equity and excellence

Let us remind ourselves of how, at the SICI General Assembly in Stockholm in 2021, Professor Vanhoof described the concept of equity. According to Professor Vanhoof, equity in education is about the fair distribution of input, process and output among students; each student receiving what it takes to be successful.¹

¹ Vanhoof, Jan, *Keynote address – SICI General Assembly, (2021)*.



According to Schleicher, “without equity in education opportunities, only some students will be able to progress through school having acquired basic knowledge and skills, only some will be able to fulfil their potential, only some will be able to fully participate in society later on.”²

Research has found that while equity is a central feature and ambition of democratic education policies and the realisation of that goal is strongly asserted, it is not necessarily evident in all education systems.^{3 4}

And, as Van el Branden and others have highlighted, educational policies in many countries have tried to combine a concern for equity in education with a striving for excellence.⁵ In other words, the policies have tried to provide high quality education and learning opportunities for students of different backgrounds and abilities while also striving for outstanding performance and the development of specialist skills.

A key question, therefore, for us as evaluators and educationalists, is how the objective of educational excellence adequately takes account of and promotes an equitable education system and, in turn, how the education system is informed and improved by doing so.

And then, there is the related question of inclusion.

2.3 Inclusion, equity and excellence

Over the years, approaches to education in many jurisdictions have shifted from segregation to integration and now there is much agreement in the literature around inclusiveness and the common principles of effective learning and equity in learning for all.

UNESCO defines inclusive education as “an on-going process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities,

² Schleicher, Andreas, *Equity, excellence and inclusiveness in education: policy lessons from around the world*, (2014)

³ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility*, (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264073234-en>

⁴ World Bank Group, *Learning to realize education's promise*, (2018).

⁵ Van den Branden, Kris, Van Avermaet, Piet, & Van Houtte, Mieke, (Eds.). *Equity and Excellence in Education: Towards Maximal Learning Opportunities for All Students (1st ed.)*. (New York: Routledge, 2010).



characteristics and learning expectations of the students and the communities.”⁶ Equally, the responsibility of the mainstream system to educate all children is highlighted. We see examples of this type of inclusive model in jurisdictions such as Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and, in the SICI context, Portugal.

Dumont, Istance and Benavides believe that the following principles must be present for learning to be deemed effective for all:⁷

- *Learners at the centre*: The learning environment recognises the learners as its core participants
- *The social nature of learning*: The learning environment is founded on the social nature of learning – on well-organised, co-operative learning
- *Emotions are integral to learning*: The learning professionals within the learning environment are highly attuned to the learners’ motivations
- *Recognising individual differences*: The learning environment is acutely sensitive to the individual differences among the learners in it
- *Stretching the students*: The learning environment devises programmes that demand hard work and challenge from all avoiding excessive overload
- *Assessment for learning*: The learning environment operates with clarity of expectations, assessment strategies consistent with expectation and a strong emphasis on formative feedback
- *Building horizontal connections*: The learning environment strongly promotes “horizontal connectedness” across areas of knowledge and to community and the wider world.

Fullan et al. emphasise the importance of focusing on equity and deeper learning competencies such as critical thinking, analytic skills and the ability to investigate. They argue that these deep-learning experiences actually serve those most disengaged from learning, and believe that we should be fighting inequity with excellence.⁸

⁶ UNESCO-IBE, *Glossary of terms*, (2008), p. 3[10] quoted in Education Scotland, *Equality strategy 2017-2019*, (Livingstone: Crown Copyright, 2017).

⁷ Dumont, Hanna, Istance, David & Benavides, Francisco, *The nature of learning: Using research to inspire practice*, (OECD publishing, 2010).

⁸ Fullan, Michael, Quinn, Joanne & McEachen, Joanne, *Deep learning: Engage the world, change the world* (Washington: SAGE Publications, 2017).



Underpinning all of this, of course, is the importance of effective educational leadership; by that I mean educational leadership in which the principles of inclusion are deeply embedded.

3. The COVID context

And, we must, of course, consider the impact of the pandemic on equity and excellence in our education systems.

Indeed, much has been written about equity for learners during the COVID crisis. An Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) report published in July 2020, which drew on both Irish and international research, concluded that the impact of the pandemic would be felt most keenly by children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational needs.⁹ The pandemic and impacts of school closures have shed new light on the important role of schooling in supporting all children to thrive and flourish.

During COVID, the learning environment changed dramatically for students in Ireland, as in other countries, when learning moved online for an extended period of time. Essentially, we had a new mode and a new place of learning – a new education ‘hub’. The findings from parent and student surveys conducted by the Inspectorate in Ireland during this time point to considerable successes for many students in cases where teachers and schools were able to adapt their practices rapidly.¹⁰ However, the surveys also pointed to considerable issues with regard to equity of access to online learning due to socio-economic and other factors. These findings mirrored the research findings of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children.¹¹

The lack of early learning and care provision and in-person schooling during the periods of lockdown demonstrated very visibly how much children and young people can benefit from good publicly provided education.

⁹ Darmody, Merike, Smyth, Emer & Russell, Helen, *The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for policy in relation to children and young people: a research review*. (Dublin: ESRI, 2020) <https://doi.org/10.26504/sustat94>

¹⁰ Department of Education, *Chief Inspector's Report September 2016 – December 2020*, (2022).

¹¹ Ombudsman for Children (OCO), No Filter: OCO Children's Survey Experiences during Covid-19 (Dublin, 2022) <https://www.oco.ie/library/no-filter-a-survey-of-childrens-experiences-of-the-covid-pandemic/>



Of course, all of us here today recognise that early years education and schooling cannot address all inequities in a society. However, the availability of high-quality educational experiences can make an important difference. They provide structure for children and young people; they help to sustain motivation; they encourage social interconnectedness and friendships. They help to provide children and young people, who are less advantaged economically and socially, with opportunities to develop their skills and abilities in ways that enable them to access further learning, secure their economic well-being, and live fuller lives as healthy and active citizens.¹²

4. The international context

Our SICI theme of inspecting (for) equity and excellence reflects the key aims of several international agencies, assemblies and legal provisions. These include:

- The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 and, in particular goal 4 which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.”¹³
- Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which centres on every individual’s right to education.¹⁴
- The key principles of the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹⁵
- The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) which aims to protect and reaffirm the human rights of people with disabilities. Article 5 of this Convention sets out the concepts of equality and non-discrimination.¹⁶
- The vision of the Atlantic Rim Collaboratory (ARC) – a global educational movement of which Ireland is a member; the goal of ARC being to advance equity,

¹² Department of Education, *Chief Inspector’s report*, (2022).

¹³ United Nations General Assembly, *Transforming our world: the 2030 agenda for sustainable development*, (2015), p. 17.

¹⁴ UN General Assembly, *Universal declaration of human rights*, 217 (III) A (Paris, 1948), <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

¹⁵ UN General Assembly, *Convention on the rights of the child*, (New York, 1989), <https://assets.gov.ie/201322/9a51b8fd-1aec-49b2-a1f8-23f321c48fd4.pdf>

¹⁶ UN General Assembly, *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities*, (New York, 2006), <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>



broad excellence, inclusion, wellbeing, democracy, sustainability and human rights in high quality, professionally run systems.¹⁷

- The forthcoming OECD Ministerial Council and Declaration on Education for Equity and Inclusion, which will take place in December 2022. This will be the first all-Ministerial meeting of Education ministers from OECD countries and it is a strong signal that we chose to make equity and inclusion the topic. While the declaration will be important, it is the work that will follow which should have an impact on asking hard questions in education systems about the actual progress we are making in education systems on advancing equity.

5. Ireland: the education context

5.1 Legal underpinnings

In addition to the international context I have just outlined, there is a strong national legal underpinning for equity and excellence in the Irish education system.

- While in literal terms at least, the *Constitution of Ireland*¹⁸ does not make express provision for the child's right to receive education,¹⁹ it does place an obligation on the State to 'provide for free primary education'.²⁰ This has been interpreted by the courts as obliging the State to provide for such education until the young person reaches the age of 18.
- Under the *Education Act 1998*, one of the functions of the Minister for Education is to ensure that there is available to every person resident in the State, support services and a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and ability of that person.²¹ This includes persons who have a disability or who have special educational needs.²²
- The *Equal Status Acts 2000-2018* prohibit discrimination (along nine grounds) in the provision of education.
- The *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004* provides that children are to be educated in an inclusive setting unless this would not be in the

¹⁷ Atlantic Rim Collaboratory (ARC), *Vision*, <https://atrico.org/vision/>

¹⁸ The Constitution of Ireland – Bunreacht na hÉireann, (1937).

¹⁹ O' Mahony, Conor, *Educational Rights in Irish Law* (Dublin: Thompson Roundhall, 2006)

²⁰ The Constitution of Ireland – Bunreacht na hÉireann, (1937), Article 42.4

²¹ Murdoch, Henry & Hunt, Brian, *Dictionary of Irish Law, Sixth Ed.* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

²² *Ibid.*



best interests of the child or the effective provision of education for other children in mainstream education.

- The *Education (Admissions to School) Act 2018* provides that a school shall not discriminate in its admission of a student except on certain grounds.
- The *Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill* is currently progressing through the legislative process. One of the key concepts of the Bill is the need for a school to consult with students and their parents on individual school plans, policies and activities. This approach will help ensure that the various views of students and parents on issues and policies will be heard and responded to by schools.

5.2 Policy perspective

Statement of Strategy 2021-2023

The **Statement of Strategy 2021-2023** for the Education Ministry²³ in Ireland charts a vision for an education system where every child and young person feels valued and is actively supported and nurtured to reach their full potential. The student is at the centre of education strategy and policy development and learning is valued as a public good, in light of its core role in the development, cohesion and wellbeing of an inclusive society. The three key strategic goals are:

- To support the provision of *high-quality education* and improve the learning experience to meet the needs of all students, in schools and early years settings
- Ensure *equity* of opportunity in education so that all students are supported to fulfil their potential
- Provide *strategic leadership and support* for the delivery of the right systems and infrastructure for the education sector.

The prominent, system-wide focus on high-quality education and school improvement in Ireland today is also reflected in **practical developments** such as:

- Junior Cycle Reform (at second level)

²³ Department of Education, *Statement of Strategy 2021-2023* (2021)
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/56137-department-of-education-statement-of-strategy-2021-2023>



- The commencement of the redevelopment of the Senior Cycle experience of students (at second level)
- Initiatives such as provision for free pre-school care and education, the Creative Ireland Initiative, STEM Education Policy and the Digital Learning Strategy.

Special education

Of course, considerations of equity in education must include the question of how the needs of children and young people with additional learning needs are met.

- The overall policy objective of the Education Ministry in Ireland is to promote inclusive education for children and young people with special educational needs in mainstream settings.²⁴
- Where this is not possible, the policy commitment is to provide for specialised settings through special-class or special-school placements. The vast majority of children and young people with special educational needs attend mainstream schools with additional supports.²⁵
- Within mainstream schools, a *Continuum of Support* framework is used to provide the highest level of support to the children with the greatest level of need.²⁶ Schools are provided with resources, including special education teachers, and special needs assistants for care needs. They can deploy these resources in accordance with the needs of the children and young people without the need for a diagnosis of particular disability.

There are also a number of specific interventions to support excellence and equity in the Irish education system.

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)

- DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) is a national programme aimed at addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities through additional resources with an increased focus

²⁴ Department of Education, *Chief Inspector's report*, (2022).

²⁵ Department of Education, *Review of the pilot of a new Model for Allocating teaching resources to Mainstream Schools to Support pupils with Special Educational needs*, (2016) p.1.
<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/inspectorate-publications-evaluation-reports-guidelines/?referrer=http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports-Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/Review-of-the-Pilot-of-a-New-Model-for-Allocating-Teaching-Resources-for-Pupils-with-Special-Educational-Needs.pdf#special-needs>

²⁶ Department of Education, *Special Educational Needs – A Continuum of support*, (2007)
<https://assets.gov.ie/40642/674c98d5e72d48b7975f60895b4e8c9a.pdf>



on literacy and numeracy. These resources are allocated to schools in areas where there is a high concentration of socio-economic disadvantage.

- Findings from research suggest that the DEIS programme is having a positive impact on achievement in DEIS primary and post-primary schools.²⁷ One of the particularly noteworthy and encouraging findings is the increased retention rates of students in DEIS schools to the end of upper secondary education. In addition, the gap in retention rates between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has narrowed significantly.

National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy

- The National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life 2011-2020 set out a vision for raising standards in schools and early learning and care settings. An interim review²⁸ highlighted significant achievements in literacy. The review also identified a need to improve achievement in numeracy, and to address the gap in achievement between those learners in schools with the highest concentration of disadvantage and other schools.
- One of the very significant outcomes of this report was the change to teacher education programmes and an increased emphasis on literacy and numeracy and how these areas became a critical part of programme accreditation and day-to-day teaching in colleges and universities.²⁹

Anti-bullying

- At the level of the Education Ministry and the Inspectorate, there has been a renewed focus on the implementation of anti-bullying procedures in schools. An updated Action Plan on Bullying is due to be published shortly and the monitoring of anti-bullying measures is being included in all school inspections undertaken by the Inspectorate.

Transition year programme

- This is a one-year programme which is offered by many schools in Ireland to students between the completion of junior cycle and the start of senior cycle. It

²⁷ Weir, Susan. & Kavanagh, Lauren, *The evaluation of DEIS at post-primary level: Closing the achievement and attainment gaps* (2019), <http://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Weir-Kavanagh-2018-DEIS-post-primary.pdf>

²⁸ Department of Education, *National strategy: literacy and numeracy for learning and life 2011-2020 - Interim Review: 2011 – 2016, New Targets: 2017 – 2020*, (2017), <https://assets.gov.ie/24960/93c455d4440246cf8a701b9e0b0a2d65.pdf>

²⁹ The Teaching Council, *Cosán: Framework for Teachers' Learning*, (2016), <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/website/en/teacher-education/teachers-learning-cpd-/cosan/>



promotes a different approach to learning and allows some students to flourish in a way that they may not in a more traditional ‘talk and chalk’ environment.

6. The role of the Inspectorate

6.1 Our vision

The SICI theme of Inspecting (for) Equity and Excellence aligns very well with the vision that the Inspectorate in Ireland strives to achieve through its work. That vision is ‘Excellence in learning for all.’

The Inspectorate strives to achieve that vision through its statutory role which, under the *Education Act 1998* is, in effect, a blend of improvement and accountability functions. At a practical level, the Inspectorate promotes equity and excellence in a number of ways:

- through the development and dissemination of quality frameworks
- through evaluations that have a particular focus on students at risk of educational disadvantage and students with special educational needs
- through inspection feedback at individual school and setting level that affirms good practice and advises on actions for improvement in a co-professional respectful way, keeping the focus on the education experience of the child or young person
- through publication of inspection findings and contributions of expert advice to education policy development at system level, and
- through giving real voice to students and enabling their meaningful participation in inspection.

I will elaborate on three of these areas, concluding with what I believe to be one of the core challenges for all of us here at SICI – ensuring that children and young people, no matter what their background, their capacities or their needs, can engage meaningfully in inspection processes that will result in better outcomes for them.



The sharing of inspection/quality frameworks with schools/settings

The Inspectorate's publication, from 2016, of quality frameworks for primary schools,³⁰ post-primary schools,³¹ early learning and care settings³² and other education settings was an important step in providing clarity of understanding and expectations about quality in the Irish education system.

As important contributors to the work of SICI such as Professor Melanie Ehren and Professor Jan Vanhoof, have previously indicated, inspectorates that set clear expectations and standards on good education have a distinct impact on the improvement of capacity-building in the school.³³ In Ireland, the published quality frameworks provide a basis for both external inspection and internal self-evaluation by schools and settings.

The quality frameworks for schools have been updated to reflect recent educational thinking and developments in relation to equity themes such as inclusion, student participation, delivering equality of opportunity for all students throughout all aspects of school life. In addition, these frameworks see excellence in teaching as a powerful influence on the quality of student achievement. They also set out exemplars of effective and highly effective practice which schools can use in the context of their own self-evaluation in reflecting on what is working well and the steps they need to take to improve.

And, in an early learning and care context, from the earliest stages of the educational journey our inspection frameworks embody fundamental principles of learner centred pedagogy. The following statement, taken from our Early Years Education Inspection Quality Framework, reflects our belief that all children and young people can be confident and competent learners when provided with the opportunity, support and formative feedback from highly skilled, well-attuned educators:

³⁰ Department of Education, *Looking at our School 2022: A quality framework for primary and special schools*, (2022), <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b1bb3-looking-at-our-school-2022/>

³¹ Department of Education, *Looking at our School 2022: A quality framework for post-primary schools*, (2022), <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b1bb3-looking-at-our-school-2022/>

³² Department of Education, *A guide to early years education inspection*, (2022), <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/68fac2-guide-to-early-years-education-inspections/>

³³ Nelson, R. & Ehren, Melanie Catherina Margarita, *Review and synthesis of evidence on the (mechanisms of) impact of school inspections*, (2014), [https://research.utwente.nl/en/publications/review-and-synthesis-of-evidence-on-the-mechanisms-of-impact-of-school-inspections\(813a956c-5759-4af7-81fc-537044e5af5d\).html](https://research.utwente.nl/en/publications/review-and-synthesis-of-evidence-on-the-mechanisms-of-impact-of-school-inspections(813a956c-5759-4af7-81fc-537044e5af5d).html)



*Provision for children's learning and development is closely aligned to their interests and developing capabilities.*³⁴

I am sure you will agree that this statement is as relevant to learners at all stages of the education system.

Development of evaluations that focus on equity and quality in particular contexts

Turning now to the focus of our inspections in the context of equity and excellence. A wide range of evaluation models has been developed by the Inspectorate in order to be able to focus in a relevant and bespoke way on particular aspects of equity and the quality of education provision. We now use, for example, models of inspection to evaluate and report in a specific and focused way on:

- Education provision in DEIS schools and the action planning processes used in those schools
- The quality of special educational needs provision in schools
- Education provision schools attached to Special Care Units and schools attached to Child Detention Centres
- The quality of teaching and learning in schools attached to Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres
- Education provision in prison settings
- Child protection and safeguarding, and
- Implementation of anti-bullying procedures in schools.

We have seen, for example, how such customised evaluations in the context of special education provide meaningful insights into how schools foster inclusion, how they promote equity and student participation in school life, and how they provide for the student's holistic development.

Essentially, such bespoke inspections serve a number of functions:

³⁴ Department of Education, *A guide to early years education inspection*, (2022), p. 28, <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/68fac2-guide-to-early-years-education-inspections/>



- The inspection findings support improvement in the individual setting inspected
- They feed into policy development and implementation at a broader system level, and
- The publication of the findings promotes transparency and accountability in relation to quality and equity at individual setting and system levels.

Facilitating the meaningful participation of children and young people in inspection and education

As I have just said, one of the most important challenges for a quality assurance system if it is to be truly relevant and rights-respecting, is that of ensuring and enabling the meaningful participation of children and young people in the process, no matter what their background, capacities or needs. In that regard, I am delighted to have this opportunity to share with you the work of the Inspectorate here in Ireland on student participation in inspection.

We are very much committed to equity and excellence in how we work with children and young people during and about inspection.

As you are aware, the right of children and young people to participate in decisions on all matters affecting them is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and most specifically in Article 12, which relates to the child's right to express their views freely and to have their views given due weight.³⁵

The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends a broad interpretation of 'matters' affecting children and emphasises that children do not leave their human rights behind when they enter the school gate.³⁶

As the inspection process in Irish schools is a matter that affects children and young people, it is, therefore, a matter about which they are entitled to have their views sought, listened to and taken into account. Indeed, a key principle of the *Code of Practice for the Inspectorate (2022)*³⁷ is that we will 'seek and give due weight to the views and opinions of

³⁵ UN General Assembly, Convention on the rights of the child, (New York, 1989), <https://assets.gov.ie/201322/9a51b8fd-1aec-49b2-a1f8-23f321c48fd4.pdf>

³⁶ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No 1*, (2001) para. 8

³⁷ Department of Education, *Code of Practice for the Inspectorate*, (2022), <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/512fcd-code-of-practice-for-the-inspectorate/>



learners, according to their age and maturity.’ This commitment borrows directly from Article 12.

The approach and methods we employ emphasise children’s agency – thus they are strengths-based and rights-respecting. There are two distinctive elements in our approach:

- We take deliberate strategies to assist children in the formation of their views on issues where this is necessary; and
- We work with advisory groups of children in developing the materials and approaches we use with students during inspection.

A rights-respecting approach acknowledges children’s fundamental right to be part of every decision that affects them as a matter of principle. It takes their views seriously bearing in mind their age and maturity and recognises the unique and invaluable contribution that children can make to the inspection process.³⁸

Our research shows that children and young people have views about inspection and want to express them. Inspectors believe that children and young people offer unique and honest opinions on school and classroom practice.³⁹ These views are of great value to us.

We facilitate them to express their views freely during inspection and to have their views given due weight - not merely as a data source for accountability and performativity - but as part of an empowering, emancipatory process benefitting students, schools and the Inspectorate.

We believe that we have an important role in advocating for students’ rights in schools generally. Child advocacy involves raising the status of children, increasing their self-determination and the responsiveness and accountability of institutions affecting them.⁴⁰

³⁸ Conneely, Suzanne, *Children's right to be heard during whole-school evaluation in Irish primary schools: student's and teachers' perspectives*, Doctoral Thesis, (2015),

<https://pure.qub.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/childrens-right-to-be-heard-duringwhole-school-evaluation-in-iris>

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Smith, A.B. *Links to theory and advocacy: children's rights and early childhood education* in Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 2013, vol. 32(3), pp. 1-8; Melton, G. (2005) *Treating children like people: a framework for research and advocacy* in Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 2005, vol. 34(4), pp. 646-657;



The Inspectorate's discussions with children and young people are influenced by the *Participation Framework; National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making*.⁴¹ This framework is based on the Lundy Model developed by Professor Laura Lundy, Queens University. Lundy proposes a model for conceptualising Article 12 that encompasses space (opportunity to express a view), voice (facilitation to express a view), audience (to be listened to) and influence (views to be acted upon, as appropriate).⁴²

Formal consultation with children and young people during inspection occurs in two main ways: using a survey and through focus group discussions. Our surveys and focus groups take children and young people's interests and skills into account. We work to ensure that involving children and young people is beneficial for the children, as well as schools and the education system as a whole.

We are continually seeking to improve how we seek, listen and take on board the views of children and young people. Currently, we are taking a three-phase approach to increasing the involvement of children before, during and after inspection:

- 'Before' inspection - we sought advice from children and young people on what information is relevant to them before inspection happens and looked for advice from them on the most effective format to share that information with them. As a result, we have created a series of information leaflets, animated videos and e-book for early learning and care settings.
- 'During' inspection - we are continually looking at ways to improve our use of surveys and focus groups. We are working to ensure that our engagement with children and young people is enacted in a rights-respecting way including informed consent and voluntary participation. So far, as part of this work, we have developed information notes and video resources in consultation with children and young people. This has helped to inform children about focus groups. Very soon, we will also launch a webinar for educators about the Inspectorate's approach to strengthening student participation in inspection. All of these resources will be available on www.gov.ie.

⁴¹ Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, *Participation Framework National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making*, (2021) <https://hubnanog.ie/participation-framework/>

⁴² Lundy, Laura, *Voice is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child for education*, in *British Education Research Journal*, 2007, vol. 33(6), pp. 927-942



- ‘After’ inspection – to date, we have shared information about an inspection in a school with school leaders, teachers and parents. In consultation with children and young people, we are looking at what and how we might also communicate with students following an inspection. Research is underway and we look forward to the outcome.

We recognise the unique and valuable contribution that children make to the inspection process. We know that ensuring purposeful participation for our children and young people is a learning journey for the Inspectorate, as for schools. We also know that more needs to be done, but we believe that we are heading in the right direction. We are committed to equity and excellence in how we work with children and young people.

At the end of my presentation I will show you one of the resources prepared for students in primary schools. The resource tells them about the use of focus groups during inspection. It may be accessed at www.gov.ie

7. 7. Conclusion

Our focus, as members of SICI, on advancing goals of equity and excellence is more important today than ever.

We cannot know with any certainty what the future of education will look like. Our children and young people are in preparation for a future they do not know and for work roles that may not have been imagined. The ongoing impact of technology, innovation, new modes of communication and scientific discoveries may be welcome; but equally, the world will throw up new challenges for our societies.

Our young people will need to approach the problems of the world with new mind-sets and we need to equip them with the capacity to problem solve, to think for themselves, to be creative, to collaborate and to network with each other. Our young people will also need great stores of compassion to be truly inclusive in their approaches.

We must then trust them to take charge of our planet – and we should begin in our schools and communities by enabling them to have voice; to express views about their educational experience; to form student councils that can operate with appropriate liberty and with democratic accountability; to have a say about the things that matter to them and to help to shape our education systems so that we are fit for the future.



The challenge for education in the coming years is truly awesome and perhaps somewhat overwhelming – but nonetheless hopeful. So, we need to spend time and resources imagining a new educational paradigm that capitalises on our learning about current educational systems and about the nature of the quality assurance, quality support and quality control measures that will be required in the future. I think SICI is helping here already.

We need to build highly competent education systems that are effective at school or setting level, at local authority level, at regional level and at national system levels. This can be achieved through forging synergies for better learning from classroom to classroom, within schools, reaching out to each school's community and across professional networks for teachers, researchers, higher education academics and Inspectorates.

And, at the core of our systems must be a deeply in-built capacity for excellent responsiveness to the changing needs of our young people. As Inspectorates, we need to assist our schools, settings and other centres to embrace a culture of adaptation to the school's community and environment and to embed responsive mind sets among all participants.

But, and we cannot lose sight of this, educational excellence cannot be considered separately from equity and inclusion.

And, for an inspection or quality assurance system to be truly effective, it too must be inclusive and respectful of different voices. It must seek out, listen to, and take account of the views of all those it serves – the children and young people in our schools and settings. And it must report back to them in a truly rights-respecting way.

Go raibh mile maith agaibh.