Editorial

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The five papers in this journal all touch on issues which are instantly recognizable no matter the country in which they apply. There could hardly be greater geographical and cultural differences from Cambodia to Ireland via Singapore or from Ethiopia to Sweden. It is hugely welcome that this journal should enjoy such an international sweep of countries, whose diversity and commonality provide us with such a rich learning resource.

The first contribution in this volume reminds us of an issue of increasing international significance. Countries worldwide continue to work at resolving the relationship between internal school evaluation (self evaluation) and external evaluation (review or inspection). Ireland is no exception. For nearly a decade Whole School Evaluation (WSE) policy has sought to empower schools to embed their own robust evaluation systems while creating an inspection approach which requires of the inspection system the ability to evaluate the quality of school self evaluation. ‘The capacity to generate useful self evaluative data in schools was seen as being at the heart of the model’. That the authors (McNamara and O’Hara) should conclude that this remains aspirational is hardly surprising as no country, including leading edge practice in New Zealand, Hong Kong and Scotland, has succeeded in getting that equation right, at least not across a whole system.

The Irish policy framework *Looking at our Schools (LAOS)*, contains five areas of evaluation: quality of learning and teaching in subjects, quality of support for students, quality of school management, quality of school planning, and quality of curriculum provision, with schools required to seek evidence in these areas and then make judgments about their own performance on a four-part rating scale.

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The intentions are laudable and in line with best practice internationally—‘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’. It is seen as a formative process with the role of the inspection team to affirm good practice and achievement

With reference to international research the paper concludes, however, that the creation and development of effective school self evaluation systems is always problematic if it does not enjoy a strong measure of significant support and resourcing and that suggests that the ‘Irish education system does not have the capacity to generate the type of data necessary to create the robust model of self-evaluation clearly envisaged in the official documentation’. What we have learned from countries which are furthest along the road is that systemic change a) takes a long time and b) is most effective when it works with schools at the leading edge as ambassadors and critical friends to their colleagues.

The use of parent and student surveys is now part of the Irish approach but does feedback to teachers actually improve practice? This is the question posed in the paper from Ethiopia by Zerihun, Beishuizen and Van Os. The context in this case is higher education with student feedback designed to test whether the nature of teaching was moving from a delivery model to a learner-centred approach. The resulting questionnaire that was developed drew on ‘agreed indicators of teaching dimensions identified from interviews own learning experiences in learner centered classes and a hypothesized framework derived from the literature were used to develop the items for the questionnaire’. An exploratory factor analysis produced a 24-item Student Evaluation of Learning and Teaching Questionnaire (SELTQ) comprising four factors: assessment and feedback; course organization and presentation; student self evaluation and student engagement. The SELTQ is contrasted with its predecessor the TEQ or Teacher Evaluation Questionnaire whose focus was on teacher behaviours rather than on students’ engagement and learning. The inclusion of students’ self assessment of their learning was also a new departure, requiring them not only to take a metacognitive view of their own progress but to relate that to the perceived effectiveness of teaching. The article concludes, ‘If the new questionnaire is effectively implemented, not only will it provide teachers with feedback on howthey can promote learning but it will also help students to develop their ability to reflect on their learning’—changing the conception of teaching and learning ‘from transmitting information to facilitating learning’.

The ultimate test of teacher evaluation frameworks, it would be widely agreed, is whether they pay off in raised student achievement measures. In high stakes international comparisons these are the blue chip exchange currency. The paper from Cambodia starts from the premise that these data are become increasingly relevant indicators of systemic progress in the developing world but challenges the assumption that simple comparisons of average achievement levels tell the story. Using data from the CESSP project in Cambodia, Marshall and coleagues’ paper ‘incorporates a standard decomposition framework to go to better understand the underlying dynamics of change’. The results, which ought not to surprise, show that where improvements in student achievement do occur these are often attributable to changes in the composition of student cohorts.

In countries such as Cambodia without a well developed self evaluation or external review indicators there is a reluctance to share or use student attainment data. Assessment systems are often not robust enough to be used for such comparative purposes together with a concern that the use of such scores can create political problems for governments when the results are widely publicized. This can lead to calls by politicians to make quick improvements, deemed by the authors of the paper to be ‘unreasonable’ and resting on shaky assumptions. In addition, it is argued, there are technical challenges in interpreting the results from student achievement surveys, including the measurement of actual skill and proficiency levels as well as the attribution of changes that occur over time.

Marshall and colleagues’ paper offers a contribution to helping Cambodian policy-makers and education stakeholders gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of student achievement and their complex relationship with participation rates. As researchers point to a negative relationship between indicators of participation and student achievement levels, it clearly demands a more nuanced understanding of how and why this takes place and what the implications are for future policy development.

It might be helpful for policy to make the relatively short journey to Singapore where the policy *Teach Less learn More* takes as its centrepiece the nature and quality of assessment. Authentic assessment, the focus of the paper by Kohn, Tan and Ng, refers to the challenging task of identifying ‘deep’ learning—higher-order thinking, critical thinking, creative thinking, innovative thinking, and problem-solving, allied to a lifelong passion for learning. These are ambitious goals in a country which prizes its competitive position in international ‘league tables’ and in which intensive studying for exams, private tutoring, homework and entry to higher education is deeply embedded culturally.

Nearly a decade and half since Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong’s inspirational keynote speech at the Thinking Skills Conference in 1997, which urged schools to think less about instrumental short term goals and more about lighting a passion for learning, what is the evidence of fundamental change?

The conclusion of a 2 year study revealed ‘significant improvement in the quality of student work in response to the high intellectual demands of the assessment tasks’. This has been achieved, the authors conclude, through continuous ongoing and sustained professional development in designing and implementing authentic assessment and attendant rubrics. This proved to be more effective than ad hoc, 1 or 2 day workshops, often the staple recourse when new policies are being introduced.

There is some evidence to mark a shift at school and classroom level but as the authors point out, ‘engaged learning is a mental disposition that has to be nurtured through the entire student life of the young learners’. It will take more than a decade and a half to change an achievement culture which extends well beyond the school walls. ‘Philosophically’, write the authors, ‘under this paradigm, a student who can get a distinction in a subject but who does not appreciate the content or the learning process would mean that the education system has failed, at least for this student. On the other hand, a student who leaves the education system with a passion for learning more and learning continuously would mean that the education system has succeeded for him’. It is a bold philosophy but, as is clearly acknowledged, one that will take more than a decade and a half to turn into conventional practice.

There is little encouragement for such a paradigmatic shift in Lindberg's paper on School Based Management (SBM) Management by Objectives (MBO) and New Public Management (NPM). These are ingredients in the new alphabet soup of leadership. Lindberg writes that the early literature on the subject is dominated by research from the U.S., together with studies from early adopters such as England, New Zealand and Australia but that they all add up to a degree of stress and ambivalence that comes with the role. While Sweden has not come as far as England, for example, it is further along the road than other European countries. Principals report high levels of frustration at the multiplicity of roles they have to perform with management responsibilities as well as responsibility for educational outcomes. This extra pressure, referred to in other contexts as 'intensification' is the focus of this paper.

Examining the implications of the SBM role, the article uses a qualitative method to explore two cases with different characteristics, one centralized and one decentralized. Ways in which these issues play out differently in role overload, role conflict and role ambiguity is explored in this paper, identifying a phenomenon increasingly familiar to leaders in other countries in which total workload and working hours have escalated and the attraction of headship/principalship leads inexorably to what has been termed a 'recruitment and retention crisis'. While the authors express caution about generalisation of findings there are obvious resonances with research in other countries where living with intensification has become an endemic aspect of the leadership role.

This final paper takes us full circle to the issues associated with assessment, self evaluation and inspection, discussed in the first paper in this volume. Assessment (authentic and otherwise), school self evaluation, inspection, external review and appraisal all suffer from the same malaise—driven by policies which have failed to understand or resolve the tensions between summative and formative, professional development and accountability, rhetoric and reality, ownership and prescription. Hopefully these five articles will take us a little further along the path to enlightenment.