

Senior Managers' Perceptions of the Role of Inspection in College Improvement: a Further Education Case Study

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The candidate conforms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference is made to the work of others.

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Abstract

The research focuses on the impact of inspection on improvements made in a single further education college over a two-year period. This college was deemed 'inadequate' in early 2002 and was therefore subject to termly OfSTED monitoring visits. The college had a full reinspection in March of 2004, which resulted in the removal of the 'inadequate' status and was generally positive about the improvements made. An environment therefore existed that allowed the relationship between inspection and improvement to be studied in some detail. The literature review suggests that it is difficult to establish how the inspection process explicitly brings about improvement. The literature highlights that inspection is important for accountability purposes and supports approaches designed to measure effectiveness in the schools' sector through a form of summative evaluation. The links between inspection and improvement in formative ways are much less clear. The literature identifies that internal, rather than external, change is important in driving improvement and suggests that the role of inspection is legitimisation of these internal changes rather than having a direct influence on improvement.

Qualitative research methods were used, with data coming mainly from the use of semistructured interviews with 13 senior managers. The researcher had an extensive professional involvement with the college, and the implications of this are explored in the methodology, but this allowed access also to supporting documentation and information.

The findings showed that the heavy involvement of the college with the inspectorate over time revealed few of the negative impacts reported in schools' contexts. Certainly the inspection process was perceived to be dominated by the use of performance data and this approach gave little weight to contextual factors. Several senior managers saw inspection as empowering them in making improvements. It helped to inject pace, supported the defining of priorities for colleagues, and, in the context of monitoring visits, confirmed and ratified progress. Most significantly, however, it created a powerful solidarity between the senior managers. They became strong allies in ensuring that the college improved and the research reveals a strong consensus between the senior colleagues as to how this might happen. The research findings suggest that a community of practice created the focus for the organisational improvement. The role of inspection was seen as supporting this change through providing regular feedback on the progress made and contrasts were made between the impact of inspection over time and a snapshot approach.

Although the research findings are based in a single organisation they are significant in the context of recently announced policy changes to the OfSTED inspection methodology. There will be more involvement with the inspectorate over time allowing for regular feedback to support the social learning that supported improvements in the case study college. Greater emphasis will be given to college's own judgements as portrayed in self-assessment reports. The new model of inspection therefore seems to significantly enhance the potential of inspections to drive improvements in the further education sector, but the research findings suggest that inspection needs to link much more closely with improvement agendas generated from within colleges if it is to be truly effective in supporting improvements.

Abbreviations

ALI	Adult Learning Inspectorate
DfES	Department for Education and Science
FE	Further Education
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
LEA	Local Education Authority
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
LSDA	Learning and Skills Development Agency
OfSTED	Office for Standards in Education
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
RQA	Raising Quality and Achievement
SAR	Self Assessment Report

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The aims of the research

The Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED), from its inception, has linked its inspection activity with improvements in the organisations being inspected. This linkage has been explored in the literature relating to school improvement, but little work has been carried out on the impact of OfSTED's inspection methodology in a further education setting. It appeared to the researcher that there were a number of interesting issues that were worthy of further exploration through a post compulsory education case study. As the research was reaching its conclusion these issues took on increased significance as the OfSTED chief inspector recently labelled the further education sector a "national disgrace" (Bell 2004).

It was important to gain an initial understanding of the concept of improvement in educational settings. The literature is dominated by discussion of improvement in schools and it was hoped that the research would help to illuminate the situation in further education colleges where research into improvements has been much more limited. Martinez (2002) indicates that the research supporting school improvement is dominated by a practitioner focus, based on large numbers of case studies of action research that are perceived to have limited potential for generalisation. Many authors, for example Cunningham (1999), draw attention to a lack of research culture in further education and on college improvement specifically. Scott and Hyland (2001) highlight Malcolm Wicks' plea to researchers to investigate further the effectiveness of further education but they are sceptical that there is a dearth of research into further education, instead suggesting that the supposed deficit may have its origin in a definition of research characterised through empirical methodologies rather than the practitioner based research. They highlight that it is this type of research that has potential to extend the boundaries of educational research especially into improvements in teaching and learning and it is hoped that the research described in this thesis will make a small contribution to this process.

OfSTED's claim to support improvement through inspection suggests that inspection will not only measure what is happening in schools and colleges in a summative way, but is also intended to have a fundamental impact on the dynamics that exist within

schools and colleges that will support improvement. It is hoped that the research will provide an insight, from a social science perspective, into the impact that inspection has as an agent of change especially in a formative fashion. It was intended, within the research, to explore this impact at a number of different levels: from an increased awareness of the inspection methodology and associated frameworks to the development of significantly different ways of working amongst senior managers in a further education college.

The initial focus of the research was to explore the impact of inspection on improvements made in a single further education college over time. Perceptions of OfSTED inspection have pervaded the culture of schools and the research was intended to focus on specific elements of this dynamic, especially how the college's senior managers perceived the OfSTED inspection process. Research into links between inspection and improvements in schools has considered the impact at both the headteacher and classroom teacher levels but little work has been undertaken on the impact at senior manager level. An understanding of the influence of inspection at this level was seen as significant because senior managers were heavily engaged with both the inspection process and the work of individual inspectors. It was intended, in the research, to consider the usefulness of any perceived variations in approaches by inspectors as well as the status that 'pre-inspection hypotheses' took on during the inspections themselves.

The second area the research intended to explore was the influence between inspection and the strategies senior managers used to make improvements. The research focussed on the impact of these strategies on teaching and learning, an emphasis that is explicit in the Common Inspection Framework used for inspecting colleges. Also of relevance here was the examination of the impact of different modes of inspection experienced by the college, where it was intended to consider particularly the influence of inspector feedback on improvement.

The final area considered in the research was the exploration of commonalities in priorities for improvement identified from within the college and by the external inspectorate. This allowed for a consideration of the link between inspection and the nature of the college self-assessment process, together with the impact of other quality monitoring methodologies experienced by the senior managers in the case study college.

Other considerations included: the use of performance data, and the grading of teaching and learning and individual curriculum areas.

1.2 The research questions

Three research questions were used to generate data in the broad areas described above.

The questions were:

- *How do senior managers perceive the OfSTED inspection process?*
- *How does inspection impact on senior managers' strategies for improvement?*
- *Does inspection identify similar priorities for improvement to those identified by senior managers?*

Within the first question it was intended to explore how the following elements of the inspection process were perceived: the values, explicit and implicit, within the Common Inspection Framework, the approach(es) used by inspectors in operating the framework, the status of hypotheses generated by inspectors prior to the start of the inspection in the case study college, and how inspectors used grades.

The second research question was intended to illuminate how inspection was perceived as influencing improvement strategies, especially those focussing on improving teaching and learning. This included: the influence of inspection directly on the nature of teaching activities, the impact that feedback from inspectors was having on strategies, and the links between inspection and team working between the principal and her senior managers, and the managers themselves.

The final research question explored the links between inspection and the direction that improvements took, and considered how senior managers felt that inspection influenced the self-assessment process within the case study college.

Through the use of these questions it was hoped that the research would contribute to a better understanding of the neglected area of how inspection affects improvement in a college setting. The following section outlines the nature of this research setting.

1.3 The context of the research

In this section, a brief macrocontextualisation is provided of the further education sector where the influence of the audit culture is discussed and some comparisons made with the situation in the school sector. The environment of the particular college is then outlined and the section concludes with a brief description of how the researcher's own background and professional role were also part of the context to the research.

1.3.i. The audit culture and the further education sector.

Prior to the 'incorporation' of further education colleges in 1992 funding was through autonomous local authorities. Government and policy makers gave little attention to the sector. The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 placed considerably more power with the governors, the corporation, of further education colleges. Colleges were funded, and also inspected, by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and were expected to:

“enter a marketplace of education where they could compete with other colleges to attract students. The overall aims were to increase the level of participation in FE, to raise the level of attainment and to do so in a way which encouraged institutional efficiency” (Gray & Griffen 2000 p.157)

Efficiency was defined through the funding methodology putting a particular emphasis on the retention, and to a lesser extent, achievement of students. There was an increased requirement for colleges to collect statistical data with around 1.5 million items being collected for audit purposes (Lucas 1998). The changed environment came to define considerable restrictions on senior managers working in further education colleges. Financial penalties for not hitting performance targets were severe and funding came in terms so colleges were funded only for the students they retained. This situation contrasted significantly with the funding of post 16 students in schools who still remain under LEA control. Those students in the cohort at January are funded for the whole course irrespective of retention. Further education colleges were essentially funded through 'payment by results' where the duration of courses were predetermined and it was important that students were retained and achieve within these timescales. Schools continue to be

largely untouched by the audit culture described above and they represent an environment where many of the issues relating to the incorporation of colleges have little impact. Later in this thesis the influence of inspection on individual teachers is discussed and inspection's considerable impact is highlighted.

However, unlike in further education, Trades Union are still powerful and schools are not subject to the link between results and funding that now characterises an effectiveness model of post compulsory education in colleges.

The emphasis on efficiency and audit in further education resulted in the sector being colonised by the language of business and competitive market forces. This 'new managerialism' (Elliott & Crossley 1997) was characterised by a customer focussed ethos, a drive for efficiency with increased teaching hours, reduction in course hours, extensive job losses within the sector, and deteriorating industrial relations within colleges (Williams 2003). Quality was assumed to be enhanced by increased efficiency and effectiveness, leading to better 'value for money'. Elliott and Crossley (1997) draw attention to the huge contrast with the preincorporation public service ethic of providing quality education without reference to a business ethic and highlight the scepticism that an externally defined model of quality would enhance students' learning. Managers prioritised balanced budgets, student participation and cost effectiveness, at the expense of pedagogy. For Newman and Clarke (1997) it is this emphasis on implementing external initiatives rather than the aims and purposes of education that epitomises managerialism and also draws attention to the degree to which educational leaders are forced to implement the values and priorities of government policy.

Page (1997) also identifies with the notion of contested values but teases out a 'macho' dimension to the new managerialism of further education. Far from being a restriction, he sees this as leading to the empowerment of senior managers which became a significant feature of post incorporation further education. Simkins (1998) and Hewitt and Crawford (1997) describe a considerable distancing between senior managers and lecturers although Witkin (1998) draws attention to a case study when all staff were united against the external, centrally driven, funding changes.

More positive evidence of the impact of incorporation includes significant professional development where staff and managers come to learn how their organisations could change to accommodate the new culture (Cunningham 1999). Watson and Crossley (2001) identify this discourse as having a clear duality where management shape the direction of the college and staff draw on their professional skills to positively develop the organisation. Common ground is found through a total management approach where 'hard' planning is supplemented by consideration of affective aspects of culture, value and identity. This contributes to learning within the organisation where planning becomes the tool for internal collaboration and organisational transition. Watson and Crossley suggest that incorporation impacted on this organisational development and they propose that the communities of practice that existed within further education colleges were being reformed to meet the new cultural demands placed upon them. Watson and Crossley found that working within the new audit culture had therefore become a shared challenge that bought all levels of the organisation together.

The focus of the FEFC was on funding further education provision, with little emphasis on the planning of provision. Colleges were not required to justify their curriculum plans, or to show how their curriculum offer was meeting the needs of learners or employers. The emphasis was on the volume of learning rather than the pattern of provision. Following the Learning and Skills Bill (Lord Chancellor's Office 2000) the Learning and Skills Council replaced the FEFC in 2001. The LSC bought a significant extra dimension to the role of the FEFC in becoming not only a funding organisation but also a planning one. This adds an extra dimension to the thesis of Watson and Crossley (2001) where central control not only impacts on delivery through funding, accompanied by audit, but also through centralised planning and thereby reinforces Newman and Clarke's (1997) definition of managerialism. The LSC will only 'buy' provision that meets the targets outlined in annual 'grant letters' from the Secretary of State for Education. In these letters the Government sets targets for the LSC, which were disaggregated to the level of local LSCs. Further disaggregation to the level of local providers then becomes possible.

Under the LSC there is potential for colleges to be disenfranchised in their own planning activity therefore compromising the facility that Watson's and Crossley

identify for strategic planning to support organisational learning. The centralist approach is now characterised by auditing what is delivered and restricting funding to that activity supporting government objectives as outlined in LSC plans and priorities. This includes improving student performance and raising the standards of teaching and learning, where it is assumed that better teaching results in better learning which is only defined through the achievement of certified qualifications. Alongside the new planning role, the LSC retained many of the key elements of the FEFC funding policy, with its emphasis on retention and achievement. In section 2.5 of the first literature review chapter the implications of this emphasis persisting in the use of the common inspection framework are explored. Thorley (2004) draws attention to the implications of these centralist strategies for the very survival of individual further education colleges as if they fail to meet the government's and LSC priorities their financial stability may be threatened. In this context the outcomes of OfSTED and ALI inspections also become significant in determining the future of the college.

Since the publication of the Government's *Success for All* strategy (DfES 2004) the context of further education has changed again. The focus has shifted from the competitive situation of post incorporation to an expectation that the environment of post 16 education will be determined by increased collaboration and better informed learner choice. The proposals suggest that this will be supported by devolving decision making to individual organisations and focussing on identifying strengths of providers as well as improving areas of weakness in order to drive up success rates. There are a number of challenges for colleges within this model: there is a clear tension between the centralised planning function of the LSC and the development of individual college missions; funding models that patently do not support collaboration as learners have to be attached to an institution to attract funding; an expectation that less funding will come from government and more from learners and employers; and finally, the inequity of measuring the performance of schools in different ways from colleges. In such a context, the impact of how a picture of the quality of provision in a further education college is derived and negative inspection findings are likely to be significant.

The research and the findings described in this thesis therefore have to be seen in the context of tensions that continue to affect further education colleges. These tensions are between collaboration and competition, central control and institutional independence, market forces and the needs of individual learners, and standards (as defined by performance indicators) and organisational development.

1.3.ii The context of the case study college

The case study college is a medium-sized general further education college with about 17,200 enrolments and is the sole college in the large Metropolitan Borough where it is located. It is a significant player in widening participation in the local areas and several wards served by the college are in receipt of support from the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) initiatives aimed at improving economic and community cohesion. The college collaborates with 28 schools and community organisations to offer courses in areas of high social and economic deprivation. Some 18% of students are of Asian heritage, and 45% are drawn from geographical areas identified as having widening participation priorities. The college delivers courses from pre-entry to degree level and has strong links with a local university. Delivery at the main campus is supported by smaller learning centres in local villages enable the college to reach students who have difficulty in accessing FE and training opportunities. The college holds the Investors in People award and its mission is 'working together to achieve success in learning'.

The college curriculum is delivered through four faculties under which are located thirteen programme areas. Each faculty is managed by a senior manager supported by a programme area manager. Several of programme managers have an enhanced role through leading on significant cross college areas including Basic Skills, Key Skills and English as a Foreign Language. The executive team is entirely female and made up of the principal, a vice principal for finance and resources, a vice principal for learning and achievement and an assistant principal with responsibility for standards. There is a staff of approximately 120 full time and 275 part time teachers.

The college has begun to embrace the new agenda for collaboration through a 'soft federation' with the local Association of Headteachers and the 13 schools

with sixth forms. The focus has been on developing a strategic approach to providing coherent learner opportunities for 14-19 year olds with an emphasis on widening participation, improving attainment and enhancing guidance.

The research in this thesis focuses on the transition between a poor inspection in 2002 and the 2004 inspection, which showed a much-improved situation. How key elements of these inspections informed the research methodology are described in section 4.3 of the thesis. The 2002 inspection graded the college as 'inadequate' to meet the needs of its learners. Retention and pass rates were poor, as was leadership & management, self assessment, and financial and data management. In 2004 the inspection identified as particular strengths: the open and responsive management style, the strong focus on assuring the quality of teaching and learning and the scale and rapidity of improvements made since the last inspection. The inspectorate identified the self-assessment process as being thorough and that all staff were fully involved.

The case college therefore faced the challenges created by the changing national policy context but was also operating in difficult local environment. The research described in this thesis needs to be seen against this background of change, challenge and tension.

The research was undertaken in a single further education college and the rationale for selecting this college is explored in detail in section 4.5 of the methodology chapter. The college was deemed 'inadequate' by OfSTED in early 2002 and was therefore subject to termly OfSTED monitoring visits. The college had a full re-inspection in March 2004, which resulted in the removal of the 'inadequate' status and was generally positive about the improvements made. An environment therefore existed that allowed the relationship between inspection and improvement to be studied in some detail. Within two years the college had moved from being a very poor teaching and learning organisation to one where the quality of provision was good or better.

1.3.iii The researcher and the research context

This context was most relevant to the professional practice of the researcher who is an employee of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the funding body for the case study college, with particular responsibility for quality improvement. This role requires a

daily engagement with the challenge of understanding what is meant by the concepts of 'quality' and 'improvement' and a continuous struggle to interpret the implications of policy for practice in the local post compulsory education environment. The researcher is also employed as a part time OfSTED inspector of Science and FE Initial Teacher Training in Universities and Colleges. This allowed for the development of a good understanding of the inspection methodology and of how inspectors were centrally directed to employ inspection frameworks and protocols. Shortly before joining the LSC in July 2002 the researcher had experience of an inspection as quality manager in a further education college. It was therefore possible to bring multiple perspectives to the research. The researcher was thus a recent college practitioner at a senior level, an inspector, and a quality improvement manager at the LSC; this combination of roles allowed a rich and possibility unique insight to be brought to bear on reflecting on the research findings and their impact.

The professional relationship between the researcher and the college had a significant influence on the nature of the research. The regular involvement with the case study college resulted in the researcher becoming, to some extent, an 'insider' to the research setting. The nature of the quality improvement role of the researcher also had an influence on the development of an interpretativist research methodology. These factors are described in depth in section 4.2 of the methodology chapter.

The rationale for the research, and the research questions supporting it, therefore had their origin in a desire to gain an insight into what the concept of improvement meant in a further education environment, and more specifically, what links senior managers saw between inspection and improvement. It was hoped that the particular setting of the research, a college that was emerging from being defined as inadequate and undergoing intensive involvement with the inspectorate over time, would be a productive environment for exploring the particular relationship between inspection and improvement. In order to establish the background to this relationship, the following section briefly explores some key elements of the concept of improvement as applied to educational settings.

1.4 An outline of the nature of improvement in school and college contexts

Much has been written about improvement in education, although the bulk of the literature refers to school contexts. The brief discussion below attempts to define the main concepts that have relevance for the current research. The literature related to schools' research suggests that two distinct, but not entirely mutually exclusive, ideas are significant here. These are 'effectiveness' and 'improvement'.

Somekh et al. (1999) introduce a comparative dimension to the notion of educational effectiveness:

“A more effective institution is typically defined as one whose students make greater progress over time than comparable students in comparable institutions.”
Somekh et al. (1999 p.25)

In this definition progress is recognised by the use of quantitative measures linked to academic performance and also related to the measurement of retention and attendance information. The comparative element also implies the use of benchmarks, in clustering similar institutions together. Implied in this definition of effectiveness is the concept of measurement where the achievements of individual students are aggregated to arrive at an indicator of institutional performance, for example, through the use of examination results. This model has an emphasis on outcomes that are easily measured and aggregated and several authors draw attention to the reductionist effect that this might have:

“The widespread use of the word effective, often adds a spurious scientific underpinning suggesting that we have established what an effective school is in all contexts.”

Earley et al. (1997 p.59)

“The teacher's role is to merely deliver curriculum so the impact of its transmission can be measured.”

Wrigley (2003b p.18)

Wrigley (2003a) suggests that effectiveness is defined only through those factors that are amenable to objective measurement. He also argues that it is impossible to separate these factors from cultural and contextual aspects that impact on the school and it is difficult to decide which are significant in defining a school's effectiveness. This debate links closely to how the accountability of schools and teachers is defined and measured through closely defined outcomes that are amenable to publication in performance tables. Martinez (2002) identifies this focus as a dominant indicator of school

effectiveness; however Barber et al. (1995) define an effective school in a more holistic way and include leadership, shared goals, a learning environment and a concentration on teaching and learning as key characteristics. Their emphasis epitomises, for others, important aspects of improvement. For example, Hopkins et al. (1997) define improvement in this context thus:

“School improvement is about raising achievement through focusing on the teaching and learning process and the conditions that support it.”

Hopkins et al. (1997 p.3)

Here improvement is seen as a distinctly organic and dynamic process and this is reinforced by Hopkins’s differentiation between school effectiveness and improvement where the latter is represented by:

“..improvement being owned by an individual school and individual staff, a concern with changing organisational processes rather than outcomes, a concern to treat educational outcomes not as given but as problematic, and a concern to see schools as dynamic institutions requiring extended study rather than ‘snapshot’ cross sectional studies.”

Hopkins (2001 p.56)

The ‘effectiveness v. improvement’ debate suggested several interesting ideas that were likely to be significant in the development of the research. It is clear, for example, that improvement can not only be defined through enhanced educational outcomes but is also underpinned by a developmental process, internal to the school, where the management of change and organisational learning become significant factors. This suggested that factors supporting the development of collaborative activity would be a fruitful area to inform the research. The role of the college’s leadership was also likely to be important, especially when considering how an emphasis on teaching and learning was created and how working to shared values was supported.

There is less clarity in the literature as to establishing the role of inspection in providing the motivation for making improvements. It is possible to suggest two hypotheses: firstly, from the use by the inspectorate of external accountability measures and the risks that could result to an organisation, and the individuals within it, where these measures imply poor performance; and secondly, from an intrinsic professional desire from the individuals within the organisation to improve. Here the role of the inspectorate would be to recognise performance, confirm improvements and possibly to validate

improvement strategies. All of these issues were significant for informing the current research, especially in highlighting the role of external inspection on improvements.

The above discussion has concentrated on the concept of improvement in a school setting. The literature suggests that many of the definitions are relevant to the further education context of the research described in this thesis. It is possible to identify examples of distinctive themes that are likely to be specific to further education colleges. In colleges, the seven key questions of the 'Common Inspection Framework' (Appendix E) are used to define the quality of college provision. This framework has an explicit learner focus where, for example, the priority of college management is to raise student achievement. This is one reason why colleges spend a significant amount of resources in soliciting the views of students, and those of other 'clients', on the college experience and extrapolating from these data improvement strategies and a wide range of contextual information to support measures used to define effectiveness.

The above discussion has attempted to indicate that the notion of improvement, as applied to schools and colleges, is complex and multi-dimensional. Improvement has a formative aspect that the literature suggests is linked to organisational development, and also a summative element where improvement is defined through quantitative measures that are used for accountability purposes. These formative and summative themes run through the thesis and the following two literature chapters explore research relating to these two areas in some detail.

Within the first literature review chapter there is an emphasis on evaluating the research relating to the OfSTED methodology as a method of summative evaluation. This includes exploring links with accountability, and the impact that the categorisation used by OfSTED has on improvement. In doing so, an attempt will be made to draw attention to the role that 'outsiders', including inspectors, may play in supporting improvement.

In Chapter 3, the second literature review chapter, research related to the influence of OfSTED inspections on improvement, in a formative way is explored. Research related to organisational development is explored with a particular emphasis on collaborative activities, including the development of communities of practice.

Chapter 2: A critical review of the research on OfSTED inspections of schools and further education colleges

2.1 Introduction

This literature review chapter attempts to explore the links between the inspectorate's role in ensuring accountability, measuring effectiveness and supporting improvement. The implications for improvement of OfSTED's use of the descriptor of a school as 'failing', or a college as 'inadequate' are explored. These themes are then taken forward in the context of the limited amount of research on the impact of inspection in a further education setting. The values implicit and explicit in the Common Inspection Framework used for the inspection of colleges are briefly explored and evaluated in terms of their likely impact on improvements.

2.2 OfSTED inspection and accountability

The Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) was set up on 1st September 1992. OfSTED is a non-ministerial government department whose main aim is stated to be to help improve the quality and standards of education and childcare through independent inspection and regulation, and provide advice to the Secretary of State (OfSTED 2002). The National Curriculum, introduced in 1988, together with national tests supported this monitoring.

The system of school inspection was revised in the late 1990s in line with the climate of accountability and measurement that existed at the time. Information on schools' standards was directed more at parents and the creation of auditable standards. The number of inspectors (Her Majesty's Inspectors – HMI) working directly for OfSTED was reduced and the current position is that independent teams now tender for individual school inspections. This increased the capacity for more frequent and longer inspections based on detailed guidance on inspection frameworks and criteria from OfSTED. These inspection arrangements contrasted significantly with the pre OfSTED climate where HMI also had an advisory role.

In the current model of school inspection OfSTED identifies its role as:

“..providing an independent view of the quality of education within a school, providing advice to ministers informed by inspection evidence, producing findings that are valid, reliable and consistent, contributing to improvement, and promoting inclusion.”

OfSTED (2002 p.7)

Here inspection is intended to have a number of purposes: the measurement of standards through an inspectorate that is independent of government and that uses detailed guidance to facilitate consistency, but also secures accountability and supports organisational development. The apparent link between inspection and improvement is made in the OfSTED inspection handbook (OfSTED 2002), not only through identifying what a school's strengths and weaknesses are but also through raising the potential to give credibility to a school's self evaluation and the professionalism of its teachers. It is in the area of teacher competence where the views of the chief inspector of schools have had a prominent impact in the past, especially during the tenure of Chris Woodhead (1994 –2000):

There is a consensus that some form of accountability in education is essential (McLaughlin 2001, Cullingworth 1999), where the role of inspections is to inform parents, and other stakeholders, on standards. Several authors suggest that this emphasis on standards as a way of assuring accountability to parents may be only superficially democratic as the external demands for change reduce the possibility of inspection impacting on improvements:

“Progress is defined in terms of outputs which strip away the sense of improvement of the human condition in favour of material and technical growth.”

Clarke quoted in Wrigley (2003b p.38)

Davis and White (2001) indicate that the accountability of schools can be defined in a much wider context, through schools operating in partnership with government and parents, with parents having shared responsibility for their children's education. The role of inspection, in Davis and White's view, is not appropriate for this 'high stakes accountability' as it places an emphasis on the assumption that pupil and student outcomes are accurate representations of pupil knowledge and understanding. They suggest that school self-review is necessary to complement external inspection as it is

within the internal evaluation process that their broader definitions of accountability can be addressed.

The research will explore the role that performance indicators play in the evaluation of the quality of provision in schools and colleges and in providing accountability. The following section explores this further through examining the impact of specific elements of OfSTED's inspection methodology.

2.3 The impact of OfSTED's inspection methodology on changes in teaching practice

Chapman (2001) argues that it is at the classroom level that improvement will have its greatest impact, and at this level OfSTED (2002a) guidance associated with inspections does define what good teaching might look like without supporting a particular interpretation. For example, good teachers are expected to differentiate activities to take account of individual differences, to have high expectations of learners and plan lessons effectively. However the ex-chief inspector of schools did raise concerns about the ideology of individual inspectors having an impact on the assessment of good teaching and learning, where firmly held models of what represents good practice have been applied to the detriment of organisations using different approaches (Woodhead 2001). Certainly, in the current research, the impact of the subject expertise of individual inspectors will be explored in some depth.

In the writer's experience it is likely in an inspection that about 60% of inspector time will be spent in classrooms observing lessons, talking to students and looking at their work. There would therefore appear to be significant potential within the inspection methodology for clear pointers for improvement in teaching and learning to arise. In practice, however, several difficulties arise: the lesson observation may be short, 30 – 40 minutes, and although inspectors may talk to students, there is very little dialogue with teachers (OfSTED 2002a). Feedback is brief, and gives little room for discussion. The context of the observation in the lesson as a whole may therefore not be clear and the snapshot may be unrepresentative of the full range of teaching and learning activities. This approach to undertaking lesson observations has potential therefore to be perceived by teachers as an unbalanced, and undemocratic, process where they are disempowered and have little opportunity to counter any misconceptions that inspectors might have. In the context of the current research, a more significant weakness emerges from this

approach. The emphasis of the current inspection framework is on teaching and learning, yet there is little scope for the inspector 'experts' to provide feedback on their observations. The lack of opportunity for dialogue suggests that classroom observations may be supporting an effectiveness rather than improvement agenda. Brimblecombe et al. (1966) in one of the few substantial studies into the interaction between inspectors and teachers considered the responses of 850 teachers in 40 secondary and middle schools to the inspection process. Many of the respondents felt that inspection was 'done to them' and this was particularly the case when considering the issue of inspector feedback when the majority of teachers felt "cheated".

The use to which inspection findings have been put – in naming and shaming schools and poor teachers – reinforces the notion that OfSTED inspections have potential to be punitive activities. In this interpretation inspectors are seeking out weak teachers rather than trying to improve teaching and learning and Day et al. (1998) identify that this is an unhelpful emphasis in improving the quality of learning in schools. There is also much anecdotal evidence of the negative impact that this approach has on teachers (Norton Grubb 1999) but it is not clear if this is a function of the lesson observation process and related inspection methodology per se or an individual Chief Inspector's interpretation of the findings of the observations.

There is further evidence that this emphasis on identifying weak teaching in the inspection process has a constrictive effect on the very nature of the teaching styles and approaches used by teachers during inspection. Brimblecombe et al. (1996) report, but without quantifying the size of the response, that teachers were more likely to teach in a more structured and less flexible way during an inspection with a view of leaving "less to chance". This aspect of changing practice for an inspection is significant for the current research and has clear implications for exploring the links between inspection and improvement. If inspectors observe what is perceived by teachers to be conservative and safe teaching, then it is likely that the picture of teaching and learning that emerges from inspection is likely to be distorted and will be less helpful in informing improvements.

Further difficulties are linked to the observation process. Observations are related to three attributes of the lesson: teaching, learning and attainment. A score is awarded, on a seven-point scale, to these attributes and a one to two hundred word commentary used

to support these scores. The rich classroom dynamics are therefore largely reduced to scores with a very limited contextual description. This reductionism continues as further aggregation of the scores takes place within subject departments and at the whole school level. The potential therefore for capturing and retaining information about good practice making an impact on teaching and learning is severely reduced. The earlier discussion on accountability, scores, and performance indicators further underpins this approach. Scores are perceived as objective, and can be aggregated, averaged and used to demonstrate trends. When this happens it is easy to overlook the fact that these partly have their origin in a methodology based on observation.

Wrigley (2003b) expresses disquiet about the impact such reductionism has on improvement. In doing so he echoes the themes of Davis and White (2001) in suggesting that a school's context cannot be defined by an emphasis on quantitative measures:

“... statistical forms of evaluation distort what we mean by a worthwhile form of education. It robs the word's value of its meaning as personal, social or cultural worth, reducing it to a monetary token, the exchange value of measurable outputs.”

Wrigley (2003b p.18)

These authors argue that the use of grades in inspection has the potential to reinforce concerns that exist with the use of performance indicators in achieving accountability. The language of OfSTED reports further reinforces this difficulty. The published reports are heavily edited and standardised and refer to benchmarks and above and below average performance. This bland end product has successfully discarded the bulk of information regarding teaching and learning that would be useful to both individual schools and national organisations in making improvements.

Fitzgibbon et al. (1999) raise fundamental concerns about the reliability of lesson observation grading in the OfSTED methodology. The author's own experience of OfSTED training is that the grades awarded by individual and experienced inspectors are often very variable when watching a video of the same lesson. Fitzgibbon also develops the argument that pupils' value added scores provide a good test of the validity of the inspection methodology. If these 'distance travelled measures' correlate with inspectors' judgements on student progress then the validity of the inspection process is likely to be enhanced. This hypothesis is unlikely to be tested, however, as schools are

required to share value added data with the inspectorate prior to the inspection. The point does raise the notion of the context in which the school is working and hence the measurement of school improvement in wider terms than merely the achievement of national standards. Glover et al. (1996) undertook a large survey of inspection reports and indicated that these were dominated by reference to a narrow range of performance indicators rather than highlighting aspects that are less amenable to measurement, including the subtleties of what constitutes good teaching. Glover et al. (1996) suggest that the political drive of OfSTED is towards achieving national league table norms and this creates expectations that are not compatible with the realities in which many schools operate.

Chapman's (2001) research, based on responses from 119 teachers who had recently experienced an OfSTED inspection, indicated that 22% did intend to change their practice as a result of inspection, although a higher proportion of managers were predicting change. The differential impact of inspections at varying levels within the school is interesting and may imply that OfSTED will be more effective at changing management rather than teaching practice. Scalon (1999) identifies that it is likely that many headteachers were already aware of the school's problems before the inspection but were unable to solve them. In these situations it is likely that inspection will be less helpful as a diagnostic tool. The differential impact of inspection may also be linked to the discussion above, relating to the tendency of teachers to be more conservative during inspection. This variable impact of inspection is significant for the current research, which will consider the impact at the senior manager level.

Other research (Shaw et al. 2003) directly links OfSTED inspections with pupil performance in the National Curriculum, specifically KS4 (GCSE) results. The results are, of course, an important measure of a school's performance. This research used multi-level modelling to discount the effect of the fact that the proportion of A*-C GCSE results have been increasing since 1988, before the creation of OfSTED. In mixed comprehensives, the research found that inspections made little difference to achievements and, in some instances, made them worse. This research returns to the exploration of the proposition that self-evaluation has potential to be a more powerful mechanism for improvement than external inspection.

2.4 The implications of OfSTED's categorisation of 'failing' schools and 'inadequate' colleges

OfSTED (1997) argues that, in the schools' sector, poor learner performance (standards well below national averages for schools of the same type) is linked to inadequate leadership and unsatisfactory teaching. These features define a failing school and place it in 'special measures'. This triggers the preparation of an action plan and termly monitoring visits by OfSTED which define progress as limited, reasonable or good. A two-year timescale is set before a full re-inspection. OfSTED has transferred the concept of 'failing' schools to 'inadequate' colleges also. This judgement is arrived at through the overall grade for leadership and management; if this is unsatisfactory then the college is deemed inadequate. The main, but not the only, determinant of adequacy is student performance: achievement and retention. The discussion below raises concerns of the impact of the dominance given by OfSTED to such measures.

The categorisation of schools as failing generates a great deal of attention, both within the school and externally, within the LEA and the local community. This gives a high profile to the organisation and its failings, but what is less well recognised by OfSTED is the impact on the organisational culture, especially in terms of staff collaboration and solidarity in the face of potentially a high degree of public humiliation. It is difficult to imagine a more unpromising starting point for making improvements, especially in terms of the impact that the OfSTED approach will have on individuals and teams within the 'failing' organisations. This is explored further in section 3.3.

In contrast to the OfSTED position, much of the research on improvements in educational settings is based on defining the characteristics of failing schools in a holistic way. Hargreaves (1994), for example, argues powerfully that a lack of understanding of the importance of culture and its dynamics may limit the impact of improvement efforts in a school setting. Hargreaves also draws attention to the role of "powerful others" in generating a sort of pseudo collegiality where external influences have considerable impact on the dynamics within the school and create an internal solidarity against 'attack'. The OfSTED model has potential to lay the blame for failure at the door of the teachers and managers within a school or college. Hargreaves argues that this, combined with the intensive monitoring that follows a poor inspection, has potential to disempower them from using a wide range of strategies to improvement. In

this scenario, the direction of improvement will not be defined from within the school or college, but instead will be largely externally determined.

2.5 Inspection and improvement in post compulsory education settings

Like school inspections, those operating in further education also have their origin in the HMI system but from 1992 to 2002 colleges were inspected by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) until OfSTED took over in 2002. In the FEFC model of inspection self-assessment had a more significant role than with OfSTED; strengths and weaknesses were articulated, together with plans for improvement and the inspectorate undertook a validation of the quality of the college's self-assessment process. A college 'nominee' was part of the inspection team and the inspection of both curriculum and cross college areas took place. The effect of this approach was to create an organisational emphasis on improving teaching and learning rather than this being the sole responsibility of the teachers. Curriculum specific guidance was published and a college inspector remained in contact with the college after inspections to facilitate making improvements and sharing good practice.

Following the Learning and Skills Act in 2001, the inspection of further education colleges was taken over by OfSTED and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI). There was no longer the same emphasis on self-assessment and the role of the college inspector disappeared. College performance was judged against the seven questions in the Common Inspection Framework (CIF) (Appendix E). This framework did maintain the notion of collegiate responsibility for improving teaching and learning as the key questions are couched in terms of the impact on the learner, and also created a possibility for the inspectorates to give an account of the impact of contextual factors on student performance. The seven key questions are clustered under three 'themes': Achievement and Standards, the Quality of Education and Training and Leadership and Management.

The OFSTED/ALI inspectorates use the framework to offer "an account of a provider's provision". A seven-point scale is used to grade the quality of teaching sessions and a five-point scale applied to grades for programme areas and leadership and management. The grades for teaching observations are not shared with the teacher or managers. The

inspectorates indicate that a provider's inspection report is an "independent public account" of performance and allows comparison with others in the sector. The framework is therefore seen as a tool by the inspectorate to address the college's accountability not just to the learner but also to other stakeholders including the Learning and Skills Council, government and employers.

Fielding (2001) suggests that such a framework must have three purposes. It needs to capture what characterises post compulsory education and training, articulate the methodology for accessing providers' interpretation of this, and establish how a dialogue will be created with the communities on whose behalf the inspection has been undertaken. It is likely that a key part of this dialogue links to the role of the framework in informing self-assessment and therefore in improving provision, especially from the learners' perspective.

The Common Inspection Framework is not neutral in any of Fielding's three areas. There is a tension, for example, between the scalar measurement and grading activity, and the qualitative exploration of the educational activity. The former provides an easily accessible overview for some stakeholders, important within Fielding's third theme, but the players within the inspected institutions are likely to form an 'inner readership' and rely more on the richness of qualitative comments. In the context of the current research this interplay will be explored and it is also important to acknowledge the impact of the focus on the learner within the framework. This is a distinctive feature of the post 16 inspection framework compared to that used in schools. It is not appropriate here to consider the pedagogy/andragogy debate; nevertheless the learner centred-ness of the CIF, across the seven aspects covered by the key questions, raises expectations that the inspectorates will draw attention to contextual issues that affect student performance and outcomes.

The first key question in the CIF: *How well do learners achieve?* continues to place a strong emphasis on performance indicators. Inspectors are required to make comparisons with national benchmarks and analyse trends over time. These trends will refer to recruitment, retention, achievement and progression. Within the framework inspectors are also expected to analyse value added data and related information carefully. The continuing emphasis on outcome based performance indicators reflects an assumption within the inspectorates and government that drop out and poor performance

is automatically a reflection of poor provision. It is implied that all students have the aim of completing the course that they have enrolled for. Although the importance of 'value added' is acknowledged, the framework does not contain the facility to recognise the potential for contextual factors to impinge on retention and achievement and ignores the fact that many learners in post compulsory education contrast strongly with the concept of a 'self-directed' learner implied in the framework. Several pieces of research draw attention to the complexity of the issues affecting this concept of 'self-direction' in post compulsory education. Martinez and Munday (1998) highlight the importance that financial influences have on students staying on at college, a fact acknowledged by the Government's introduction of Educational Maintenance Allowances.

Palmer (2001) refers to 'opportunists' and 'unstable choosers' who enrol until a better opportunity presents itself. Bloomer and Hodkinson's (2000) longitudinal study generated a range of learner biographies that highlighted the influence of learner dispositions. These have the capacity to change suddenly or gradually and in unpredictable ways often linked to wider social, economic and cultural contexts. Bloomer and Hodkinson generate the concept of 'learning career' where personal identity, values, appraisal of situations and aspirations all change, often rapidly and sometimes in a polarised manner. It is unlikely that making judgements on the first key question will reflect the complexity of this instability and uncertainty amongst some learners. This tension is reflected in other key questions, for example Question 5 requires programmes to meet the needs and interests of all learners whereas Question 7 allows judgements on the role of leadership and management in raising achievement to be made.

2.6 The findings of previous research into the impact of inspection in post compulsory education

The discussion above included the research into inspection in schools. Limited research has been undertaken in post-16 settings. A recent Learning and Skills Development Agency action research project (Rennie 2003) focussed on the impact of the current OFSTED inspection arrangements on further education teachers in three colleges and raised issues relating to the use, by the inspectorate, of quantitative information, fair grading, feedback to teachers, and colleges preparing specifically for inspection. This research was part of the ESRC funded Transforming Learning Cultures project aimed at improving provision in a further education context. The aims of Rennie's research were

therefore closely related to exploring the links between the impact of inspection on improving the quality of further education provision, and at this superficial level Rennie's research links in many ways with the current research. Rennie considered the impact on classroom practitioners whereas the research described in this thesis examined the senior managers' perceptions of inspection and its impact on their strategies for improvement. Although the impact of inspection is explored at a different level, several of the themes developed by Rennie have considerable relevance for the current research. The teachers in her research kept diaries in the run-up to inspection and the findings reveal that inspection resulted in intensive preparatory activity, the same emotional impact as that reported in school inspections and the generation of a 'battlefield' mentality (Kogan and Madden 1999). Rennie reports that this combative approach did have the effect of creating solidarity between the teachers being inspected but her research findings indicated that this had its origin in loyalty to other team members and the college rather than in a concerted approach to raising the quality of teaching and learning. Where the issue of quality of provision did come through, it was in the context of job security since poor grades might lead to redundancy or poor student recruitment.

Rennie's research findings draw heavily on another analogy: theatrical performance. Intensive rehearsal and the use of 'scripts' lead to the notion of a 'performance' with inspectors as the audience. Considerable scepticism thus arose around the likelihood of inspection findings being realistic and accurate and the research findings are dominated by widespread feelings of disillusionment and a lack of realism. There were however fragmentary insights into a more positive view of the impact of inspection. The implications for the current research are significant here as these perceptions were based on the differing approaches of individual inspectors where some were seen as making a positive contribution through providing "evaluative consultancy". Rennie's research is based on three case study colleges and she does draw attention to the different features of these; however it is not clear if the characteristics of the organisations had a differential impact on how inspection was perceived.

The findings of Rennie's practitioner based research contrast strongly with a recent substantial evaluation of OfSTED's impact on 'improvement through inspection' (Matthews and Sammons 2004). This report was commissioned by OfSTED and presented evidence that OfSTED inspections do contribute significantly to improving

the quality of education in all sectors. This was found to be the case across schools, colleges, local education authorities and initial teacher training. The authors identified that OfSTED has made a substantial contribution to the improvement of the education system and education providers through “fair and accurate reporting, analysis of teaching practice and comparisons between those providing education”. It was reported, however, that OfSTED's current inspection regime does not generally have the direct input that would be provided if inspectors did more follow up or intervention work, a style that some schools in particular would prefer.

The report concludes that OfSTED had met its statutory duties well and provided an important source of independent evidence on the quality of the education service. OfSTED's claim therefore to generate 'Improvement through Inspection' received some limited support from stakeholders, but there was also considerable scepticism that the report was co-authored by the organisation being evaluated and used significant amounts of evidence generated by the inspectorate itself. This included a range of OfSTED produced 'evidence papers', trends in educational performance, some specially commissioned research of an unspecified nature and the views of a variety of (anonymous) stakeholders. Certainly many of the findings of this report contrast with those expressed earlier in this chapter and also with the work of Kogan and Maden (1999). These researchers undertook a literature search of primary and secondary sources, administered questionnaires and interviews in schools, and carried out interviews with professional bodies representing teachers, subject areas, local authorities, governors and inspectors. The findings give a much higher profile to the punitive effect of inspections, which the 2004 evaluation did not identify as being significant. The use of judgemental outcomes was not seen as helpful in promoting reflective development in schools, nor did the methodology recognise and support “alternative approaches to school improvement”.

Kogan and Maden also identified several positive features of OfSTED inspections including the process of self evaluation in the preparatory phase, the value of an external perspective on the work of a school; for example, through the increased rigour of self evaluation the development of a greater clarity on roles and responsibilities, and the increase in mutual support amongst staff. The latter point in particular echoes Rennie's findings. However, Kogan and Maden highlight this point specifically in the context of increased self-esteem when an inspection has gone well. Kogan and Maden also

articulate that inspection was seen as a catalyst for change, especially amongst governors.

Published at the same time as the 2004 evaluation of OfSTED's work was a view of the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI)'s impact on improvement (Wallis and Jackson 2004). ALI is OfSTED's partner organisation in the inspection of post 16 provision. OfSTED leads on the inspection of further education colleges but works closely with ALI, which has a remit for the inspection of work based learning and students who are older than 19. Both inspectorates use the Common Inspection Framework when making judgements about the quality of provision. Like Matthew and Sammon's evaluation, but on a much smaller scale, the work of Wallis and Jackson was a joint venture between an inspectorate and a university (Nottingham) that took place in the context of work based learning providers.

The findings of Wallis and Jackson received much less attention than the lengthy OfSTED evaluation, but they do reveal a very important and different perspective on educational inspection. Unlike OfSTED, ALI has a development arm, called the provider development unit (PDU), staffed by inspectors who work closely with providers who have been classified as failing by inspections of the work based learning sector. These PDU staff work independently of other ALI inspectors undertaking (re)inspections. This research was based on twelve semi-structured interviews with staff in work based learning organisations that were undergoing re-inspection and explored the impact that the inspectorate was having during this re-inspection phase. The sample was therefore made up of organisations that had experienced the 'snapshot' of the original inspection and the ongoing involvement with the inspectorate through the monitoring process. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and the resulting qualitative data analysed to identify recurring themes. Wallis and Jackson's research also considered the implications of the involvement of an inspectorate with 'failing' organisations over time and explored the impact of inspection, particularly on the senior staff within the organisation identified as nominees for the inspection process.

There was a consensus amongst the subjects of this research that the longitudinal model was a positive experience. Key to this was the ability of the inspectors involved in the monitoring following a poor inspection to build up an understanding of the organisation and its context. The regular opportunities for feedback were perceived by the subjects in

the research as being important in providing checks on progress, but equally importantly, a view on what further needed to be done. This represented a developmental model of 'inspection with advice' that had the impact of raising confidence within the provider.

The importance of this partnership working on improvement comes through strongly in this research. It is difficult to imagine a stronger contrast here with Rennie's findings in an OfSTED context. The relationship between the providers and the inspectors in Wallis and Jackson's research was marked by mutual respect, and the opportunity to work together was highly valued by the providers. Interestingly, both the providers and inspectors had to work at this but it was found to result in increased openness and honesty. This contrasts strongly with other research findings on the tendency for inspection to create a 'performance' environment and raises questions about whether a snapshot approach to inspection has the potential to support the development of improvements.

Wallis and Jackson's research concludes by looking at the impact of the ALI inspection process on changes that the learners themselves experience. It was found that providers became more focussed and targeted improvements at activities that were to have a high impact on achievements, for example, improved monitoring of assessment and learner feedback and a stronger emphasis on key and basic skills. The organisations also became more strategic with a clear sense of direction to their work.

The research findings of Wallis and Jackson also reveal an interesting insight on the accountability agenda that the discussion in the early part of this chapter revealed as being central to the OfSTED inspection process in schools. All of the subjects in the research acknowledged that accountability was important and that externally imposed requirements came with the ability to draw down public money. Wallis and Jackson's research subjects felt that the ALI inspection model, however, gave them the support to understand and implement these requirements, which, they perceived, led to organisational improvement and better experiences for their learners.

Wallis and Jackson's work took place in a different context from that described in this thesis. They examined the impact of inspection in work based training rather than further education situations. In the former environment the implications of a failed

inspection are even more significant than in a college, as it is likely that the LSC contract for providing the training will be in jeopardy if the inspectorate judges the quality of provision to be poor. There are also significant areas of convergence with the research described in this thesis. The impact of inspection over time has been evaluated in both studies giving an insight into the developmental impact that inspection can have. Wallis and Jackson draw attention to the effect of inspectors operating in two different modes: the snapshot judgmental approach, followed by the monitoring activity where advice was more freely given. They considered the impact of inspection at the level of the organisation's 'nominee', an individual in a senior position within the training company. The impact of inspection at this level is also explored in the research described in this thesis. However, it should be noted that Wallis and Jackson used single research subjects from twelve work based learning organisations whereas the current research explored the impact of inspection with several senior managers in a single college.

The involvement with a single organisation in the current research will allow a more detailed insight into the impact of inspection on organisational development than was possible with the research of Wallis and Jackson. Particular aspects of this development that were explored in the current research include the creation of shared values, improving self-esteem of individuals and the organisation, the ways in which the senior managers worked together, and an emphasis on improving teaching and learning. Research on organisational development and improvement is explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: A critical review of the research on improvement processes in schools and colleges

3.1 Introduction

In section 1.3 of this thesis the concepts of school or college effectiveness and improvement were briefly explored. The emphasis on improvements as having their origin within the school or college was introduced. In taking this internal dimension further, Van Valzen et al. characterise school improvement as:

“...a systematic, sustained effort aimed at change in learning conditions and other related internal conditions in one or more schools, with the aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively.”

Van Velsen et al. (1985 p. 48)

This definition suggests that a number of features are necessary for improvement to take place. It strongly implies that improvement is linked to change which must be organised, planned and orchestrated to a clear agenda. It also emphasises that priority needs to be given to improving teaching and learning and indicates that change, to be effective, needs to be driven internally. These are all features that are important in the context of the current research, but two elements however are most significant. Van Velsen's definition implies that it is the internal control of change, rather than external influences, that will make a difference, and, even more fundamentally, it explicitly links improvement to change. This suggests that improvement will not occur without change and this must have its origin within the school or college rather than with external agencies. Stoll and Fink (1998) take these ideas further in describing school improvement as a series of concurrent and recurring processes which not only have an emphasis on learner outcomes but also enhance the capacity within the organisation to take charge of change. In this model change is supported through the development of positive cultural norms and the regular monitoring and evaluation of the impact of developments.

Despite the multi-dimensional nature of Stoll and Fink's definition they ignore the impact of external influences, especially those brought to bear by the inspectorates, on school improvement. This factor will be explored in depth in the current research and it is this external scrutiny (and subsequent involvement of external players in post

inspection monitoring activities) that may help to define improvement following an inspection. The impact of the effect of poor inspections, introduced in the previous chapter, is taken further through evaluation of the research relating to the capacity to make improvements within schools or colleges defined by the inspectorate as 'failing'. This develops into a discussion of the role that leadership, organisational culture and communities of practice play in making improvements. Again, literature relating to school improvement is heavily drawn on but links with college improvements and developments are described and evaluated.

3.2 Research on improvement from being defined as 'failing' or 'inadequate'

In section 2.2 of this thesis the implications of OfSTED's categorisation of 'failing schools' and 'inadequate colleges' were introduced and the impact of this on improvement is taken forward in this section of the thesis. In attempting to characterise the main features of failing schools Nicolaidou and Ainscow (2002) have identified some themes relating to the culture that existed within them. Although this research was based on a small sample, in all the schools, nevertheless, there was an atmosphere of denial and anger following a poor inspection where staff failed to acknowledge the key messages from the inspection. Nicolaidou and Ainscow thus suggest that inspection findings may be actively rejected, others blamed and individual responsibility ignored. The existence of such a climate clearly has potential to delay and hinder the improvement process and runs against the need for consensus and 'positive cultural norms' to support improvements. Atkinson (2002) sees this recognition process as being central to the start of the improvement process in a college context too. This denial of the key issues, following a poor inspection, may be accompanied by a refusal within the organisation to change and adapt. It is useful to consider here the impact that 'outsiders' might have on such changes. These outsiders may be consultants, perhaps even inspectors, or LEA or LSC officers. Nicolaidou and Ainscow's research revealed that such specialists were often perceived as 'saviours', but in an ironic way which just served to reinforce the sense of deficiency that existed among the staff of the failing organisation.

The emotional effect of a poor inspection was also revealed to have a demoralising and de-motivating effect on staff with a corresponding drop in organisational confidence. Drubridge (2003), in a reflective consideration on strategies used to improve her own

'inadequate' college, identifies a teamwork approach as being key to moving on from this position and she suggests that this strategy is combined with rapid action to give a renewed sense of purpose to the organisation. This highlights the need to give attention to organisational culture and ethos and also emphasises that impetus and pace, as well as direction, are necessary to support the improvements that will remove the label of inadequacy.

Nicolaidou (2002) reveals that a poor inspection can have a variable impact on the relationships within a failing school. The intense pressure of repeated scrutiny had potential to create dysfunction. This was not necessarily due to a lack of shared experiences, but these experiences were based on the historical situation that existed before a poor inspection rather than being part of future developments.

Drubridge (2003) suggests that this issue can be addressed through good communication, which she sees as key to recovering from failure. Drubridge argues that the development of communication channels allows senior manager actions to be rationalised to others in the context of the poor inspection. Drubridge acknowledges that this may not necessarily lead to empowerment and full ownership amongst the staff because the pace and direction of change may be defined externally. This is a reminder of one of the factors likely to distinguish 'routine' improvement from improvement that is necessary after a poor inspection, with the use of a formal definition of failure. The implication from Drubridge's account is that the conditions existing within a college following a poor inspection are likely to encourage a contrived cooperative approach where team activity is focussed on a short-term goal of removing the inadequate status. In fact this may even be explicitly encouraged, within the college, as an expedient tactic towards a successful re-inspection within a relatively short period of time. This begins to illuminate some of the links between external involvement and the culture that exists and evolves following a poor inspection in a school or college.

The dynamics relating to the transition from failure to improvement are highlighted by Nicolaidou and Ainscow (2002), quoting Stark (1998), in identifying three crucial phases in making improvements. The initial phase is to *acknowledge failure*. In the context of being judged as 'inadequate' or 'failing' by an inspectorate this means understanding not only the messages from the inspection findings but the underlying reasons for the weaknesses. It is perhaps naive to suggest that this can happen entirely

from within the failing school or college. The very reasons for failure, as defined by OfSTED, may have at their heart a lack of capacity for understanding the key issues and it may be that a considerable amount of external involvement in a diagnostic context is necessary. This may also be important in assisting individuals and teams within a failing school or college to come to terms with their new, externally defined, failing status and therefore help to remove motivational barriers to improvement. Fullen (1991 p. 31) quotes Marris as identifying that “all real change involves, loss, anxiety and struggle”, and these factors are likely to have a greater impact when the need for change is apparently identified by external organisations like the inspectorate. In linking Stark’s first phase to the impact of OfSTED inspections, the barrier to making improvements would not only seem to be, as Stark suggests, the identification of the issues, but the external involvement in this process and the fact that subsequent change may well be imposed from outside.

In the light of the effect of being declared a failure, either at the institutional level or as individuals within a failing organisation, it seems that an incremental leap is necessary to reach Stark’s second stage: *the implementation period*. Here the organisation establishes the capacity for renewal and this links closely with the descriptions of improving schools outlined above. Stark sees this stage being characterised by strong leadership and ownership of the issues. What is less clear from the literature is the nature of the issues affecting transition from Stark’s first to second phase, especially in the light of the loss of self-esteem and motivation, and it is hoped that the current research can make an important contribution here.

The completion of the progression out of special measures or inadequacy is marked by the final phase: *progression towards excellence*. This is characterised by a restoration and rediscovery of the staff’s self-esteem with a corresponding sense of pride in the organisation’s achievements.

This literature therefore reveals that in the early period, following an unsatisfactory inspection, staff motivation and morale are likely to be low and, therefore, the potential for making the changes necessary for improvement is minimal. Stark’s second and third stages suggest that the internal capacity to make improvements will then become established. The following section explores this evolutionary process further in the context of organisational culture and improvement.

3.3 Links between inspection, organisational culture of a school or college and improvement.

The above section briefly considered the influence of the external inspectorate on the internal change necessary to make improvements in a failing school or college. In this context Tosey and Nicholls (1999) clearly see the OfSTED inspection process as a form of imposed change but offer a counter-argument to the literature described in the first literature chapter that suggests that the impact of OfSTED is largely negative. Instead they suggest that inspection does not have the direct impact described in the section above but is an example of:

“..an intervention in a human system that catalyses various outcomes. Such intervention creates a context of choice and learning in which actors shape the nature and meaning of the school improvement system.”

Tosey and Nicholls (1999 p.5)

This position superficially appears to contrast strongly with much of the criticism, outlined earlier, of the OfSTED inspection process and develops the discussion relating to the link between inspection and improvements. Tosey and Nicholls suggest that inspection is, in fact, a process from which teachers and schools learn a great deal, but their position begins to converge with that of other authors when they imply that this learning is ‘incidental’ and may be a result of ‘unintended outcomes’ from the inspection process. This highlights another potential difficulty with the OfSTED strategy to make improvements by inspection, which assumes that improvements have a linear, predefined structure to them, reinforced by intensive monitoring after a poor inspection. It has already been highlighted above that the literature suggests that effective school improvement strategies are those that are self-directed. The work of Tosey and Nicholls suggests that the impact of OfSTED inspections is not through supporting a rational and planned approach to improvement but rather as influencing a series of serendipitous events that may have a subtle but significant impact on organisational development. Ferguson et al. (2000) go further:

“OfSTED’s effects on schools extends far beyond its auditing and action planning processes and include some long term and pervasive influences on the way that teachers reflect on their own teaching and on the quality of education provided by the school.”

Ferguson et al. (2000 p.13)

To explore the suggestion that OfSTED can in fact influence organisational culture and improvement it may be helpful to consider a definition of school culture that highlights the importance of people and their interactions and also acknowledges the influence of those in power and authority.

“School cultures are dynamic and created through the interactions of people. They are a nexus of shared norms and values that express how people make sense of the organisation in which they work and the other people with whom they work. Although powerfully visible through various symbolic processes, organisational culture is often taken for granted by current participants in an organisation who may be unaware how a particular culture has been constructed, how it might be changed or how it is sustained by those people of power and authority.”

Buscher (2001 p.13)

In the context of improvement the concept of ‘shared norms’ relates to an understanding of the organisation’s current position and an appreciation of where the organisation might be going in terms of improvement. The latter position might be partially determined externally, by the inspectorates for example, and is likely to be defined mainly through the narrow contexts of improving performance indicators and the on-going link to funding in a further education setting. It is a lack of correspondence between the externally defined norms and values and those that have their origin within the school that has the potential to impair improvements. To explore this further it is helpful to consider Stoll and Fink’s (1996) framework of norms that have been identified as applying to improving schools. These include an emphasis on shared goals, a collegiate approach and mutual respect. Continuous improvement and lifelong learning are also seen as significant, as is taking responsibility for success. The current research will explore these aspects in some depth through exploring the existence of the norms within the group of senior managers that were participants in the research.

Stoll and Fink’s (1998) norms for improving schools are interlinked and suggest that it is through the establishment of a collegiate identity that a synergy between culture and improvement can be created. Schein (1985) highlights the development of organisational culture in group dynamics as a learned product of a group with a significant track record and history.

These are strong arguments in the literature in support of the dominant role that collaborative activity, within a school or college, can play in improvement.

Furthermore, it is possible to link this with the effectiveness and accountability agendas supported through the inspection methodology. Davies (1997) argues powerfully that schools and colleges should take charge of both effectiveness and improvement through taking account of their own context. Preedy et al. (2004) highlight that the link between improvement and evaluation through internal collaborative mechanisms has greater potential to take account of a wider range of activities than does external evaluation linked to effectiveness. Hopkins et al. (1997) identify that effective school development relies on the establishment of ongoing collaborative self-review where evaluations are a routine and unthreatening part of the school or college culture. The first literature review chapter discussed the implications of the Common Inspection Framework for improvement and drew attention to the fact that the same framework is used for inspection and self-assessment purposes in colleges. Ferguson et al. (2000) suggest that this 'self inspection' has potential to link closely with OfSTED inspections and contribute to the outcomes of inspection.

The literature described above places an emphasis on the importance of collaborative and group activity in making improvements. In this context, leadership is also important. Leadership relates closely to two key dimensions of improvement: developing the capacity for both managing change and evaluation of the impact that change is making. Leaders help to create and sustain the culture underpinning these changes and also have a role to play in fostering learning as the cultures evolve. They are also important in facilitating interactions with outsiders and newcomers. Nias et al. (1989) articulate this combination of the provision of a direction and mission together with the facilitation of ownership as being central to the establishment of a culture that will support a school's improvement process. Wrigley highlights that:

"It is vital to effective school development that the relationships and structures encourage the emergence and practice of leadership and creativity in different quarters."

Wrigley (2000 p.160)

Here the concept of leadership is being used in a way that supports and fosters the development of the collaborative and reflective approaches identified above as being significant in the improvement process. In this context, leadership focuses on capacity building as a means of developing and sustaining improvement. Harris (2004), quoting Gronn, identifies this 'distributed leadership' as:

“an emergent property of a group or network of individuals in which group members pool their expertise.”

Harris (2004 p.12)

and she notes that:

“Research suggests that teacher leaders can help other teachers to embrace goals, to understand the changes that are needed to strengthen teaching and learning and to work towards improvement.”

Harris (2004 p.13)

The implications for the current research are significant. The first literature review chapter highlighted the emphasis placed on high quality teaching and learning in the Common Inspection Framework and the idea of how distributed leadership clearly has potential to link this with improvement strategies. The concept is far from clearly defined, with Wrigley (2003b) suggesting that some headteachers see distributed leadership as being related to delegation activity rather than capacity building. It is, however, possible to identify some distinctive features of distributed leadership. For example it uses expertise within the organisation regardless of the formal role that the ‘experts’ might have. A good example of this in practice is the existence of teams of ‘advanced practitioners’ in many colleges. These are groups, operating as peer mentors, with a specific remit to improve teaching and learning. Distributed leadership relies on working where expertise is shared in a collaborative but multi-dimensional manner using knowledge wherever it exists in the organisation. In developing this model Harris (2004) identifies that the formal leader is crucial in establishing an environment where a common culture of expectations exists and learning processes that lead to shared purposes will thrive.

The discussion above was critical of a lack of clear links between Stark’s first two phases of improvement. The gap between the first stage where the problems of a failing institution were acknowledged by the individuals within it and the following phase where improvements were implemented is large and seems intuitively too far to bridge in one step. The current research explores this interface between a college being identified as inadequate and its transition into improvement in some detail. The notion of distributed leadership may be helpful here as it implies interdependency and shared responsibility that has potential to move individuals and organisations between Stark’s first two phases. Important in this context is the evidence that the existence of

distributed leadership has a positive impact on teachers' morale (Mitchell and Sackney 2000).

Distributed leadership is linked to Fuller and Unwin's (2003) 'expansive-restrictive' continuum which outlines pedagogical and organisational factors that lead to organisational learning and therefore, in the context of the research, to improvements in teaching and learning. Fuller and Unwin's framework also allows personal and organisational development to be aligned. In the context of the current research a restrictive environment, for example would be characterised by a narrow environment, where improvement would be measured through meeting targets based on performance indicators – the effectiveness model, where 'top-down' leadership has a focus on monitoring performance and accountability. An expansive learning environment possesses the multidimensional aspect of distributed leadership where improvements are defined and measured in a diversity of ways. Like distributed leadership, expansive learning also features participation in a wide range of networks both outside and within organisations. Because of the emphasis on formal outcomes it is likely that OfSTED's inspection regime could create a restrictive learning environment and therefore inhibit multidimensional improvements.

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001 and 2003) studied four school departments, all of which had had successful OfSTED inspections, but also had exhibited differences in the way in which teachers learnt within the departments. The research identified many features of expansive learning of which collaboration was a major feature particularly between 'experts' and 'novices'. Where student teachers were involved, for example, reciprocal effects were noted with the new teachers inducting their mentors into the use of new technology in a particular curriculum area. Collaboration was structured and planned but also happened intuitively and spontaneously. Learning was also used to support organisational goals, for example to meet the demands of the externally imposed curriculum, and it was clear that team work was highly valued in creating learning in the case study departments. Schön and Argyris (1978) indicate that it is the members of the organisations that learn rather than organisations themselves. Organisational learning is therefore the sum of individuals' experience - another feature of an expansive learning environment.

Fuller and Unwin's concept of a restrictive learning environment implies that barriers to improvement will exist. The field of organisational sociology (Salam and Butler 1994) explores how organisational structures and cultures, especially those that are hierarchical in nature, often restrict opportunities for openness and the discussion of alternative perspectives which may be interpreted as challenges to authority. In all of the case studies in Hodkinson and Hodkinson's research, managers, and heads of department, were active participants in the learning process. Fuller and Unwin's work suggests that the existence of a restrictive learning environment would increase the potential for barriers to impact on continuous improvement through the use of a predominantly directive management style, which can discourage questioning and challenge while providing few opportunities for effective reflection. Such an environment would be antagonistic to the development of the collaborative culture that the literature suggests is a key part of improvement in an education setting.

Using research specific to a college environment, Watson and Crossley (2001) see the learning of teachers as a function of the interaction of the institution's internal and external environments, including social, technical and political dimensions. The latter includes funding considerations but also the implications of the inspection methodology. Watson and Crossley identify an additional dimension, which they define as the strategic management process that can act as a mechanism to support a culture that brings about convergence of internal and external agendas. It is through such a mechanism that the processes of self-assessment with the associated activity of reflection and strategic planning align with the notion of continuous improvement. Over several years, in the college Watson and Crossley researched, ownership of the planning process moved down a hierarchical structure. Early plans were disseminated in a finished state whereas those for later years involved all staff in the planning processes, which Watson and Crossley identify as resulting in genuine learning within the organisation. It is possible to align this evolution in the planning process with many features of distributed leadership and the expansive/restrictive continuum. As ownership of the planning process becomes more widespread a climate is created which supports the development of individuals and organisations.

This section of the literature review has considered the link between the culture that exists within a school or college and the capacity to make improvements. In doing so it attempted to explore key themes that epitomised distinctive features of this

developmental culture, which included: shared values and norms, a collaborative and collegiate approach, shared responsibility and ownership. The relationship of these features to distributed leadership and expansive learning has been briefly explored and this chapter concludes by taking these themes forward and developing them in the context of the concept of 'communities of practice'.

3.4 The development of communities of practice and improvement in schools and colleges

The concept of community of practice is helpful in exploring the context of culture and improvement in a school or college. Although this concept relates closely to many elements of distributed leadership and expansive/restrictive learning environments, communities of practice also have a distinctly different focus. Distributed leadership and an expansive learning environment allow the conditions for learning to be established. They allow the organisation to develop in a way that supports learning and fosters the development of the norms and values that have been identified above as supporting organisational learning. Communities of practice, however, have at their core the very process of learning itself, not only of individuals but, significantly for the research, also of groups. In doing so the concept supports the importance in the literature given to collaborative activity within a school or college if improvements are to be made.

A community of practice (Wenger 1998) has several dimensions including: *a joint enterprise*: in the context of educational improvement this may have a technical element, for example, in developing an understanding of the inspection framework, the use of performance data and provision of good teaching and learning. Specifically in the setting of failing schools and colleges, this technical feature is likely to provide a focus, an imperative, for change. The inspectorate will measure the increments that define improvement and subsequently recovery. The second dimension of a community of practice: *mutual engagement* takes the involvement from defining what the issues are into actions that will make a difference. The link with the previous discussion on distributed leadership is perhaps strongest in this element where Wenger's communities are empowered by leaders to work collaboratively to a shared purpose. Clear links are evident too with the values that Stoll and Fink identify as being key features of improving schools. This collaboration results in a *shared repertoire* that carries the shared knowledge of the community linked to joint activity; for example, making improvements. It is likely that this will be linked closely to distributed leadership and

the current research explores some of the relationships between distributed leadership and communities of practice. It is possible to speculate that distributed leadership may well result from shared activities, rather than being the catalyst for it. External players to the community of practice may also influence this shared repertoire or create the impetus for the cooperative activity. This has implications for the current research in exploring the relationship between the external inspectors and the development of joint working and collaboration within the case study college.

It is recognised that the notion of community of practice can have limited application to large formal organisations. The work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) considered groups (often craft based) within organisations and paid little attention to the impact of formal structural power on these groups who may not be dominant within the organisation. Spender and Grinyer (1996) identify that the informal nature of communities of practice has potential to interfere with formal systems that represent organisational goals and the associated degree of control that managers have in the workplace linking with the formation of restrictive and expansive environments. Within schools and colleges hierarchical formal structures will exist and the relationship of this to the notion of community of practice is certainly relevant to the current research. However there are examples in the literature of the use of communities of practice applied to managers and those close to defining the strategic direction of an organisation (Lesser and Storck 2001). It is also helpful to draw attention to the difference between teams, which have a hierarchical focus, and communities of practice. Often team membership is assigned by the organisation: the management team, the science team etc. Explicit within this are hierarchy and authority relationships and goals that are defined from outside the team together with formal reporting relationships and processes. Community relationships have a focus around practice, where authority comes from expertise, not organisational status and where processes are defined from within the community of practice.

If Lave and Wenger's construct of a community of practice is to have relevance to the improvement of whole educational organisations, the community of practice must make an impact outside the community itself; it must lead to sustained and long-term developments. It is helpful here to relate the concept back to methodologies for assessing (school) effectiveness against improvement. It is likely that strategies aimed at

raising effectiveness will be less sustainable than those leading to long-term changes resulting from the operation of communities of practice.

Lesser and Storck (2001) define communities of practice as a group where the members regularly engage in sharing and learning, based on their common interests. They highlight that, significantly, communities of practice have the capability to inject pace into change, as compared to a slowly moving traditional hierarchy. Clearly also, it is important to link the activities of communities to organisational outcomes, for example, improvements in the educational context under discussion. The Common Inspection Framework used for inspecting post 16 provision assesses leadership and management in terms of its impact on learners, especially through retention and achievement rates. It is through the use of such measures by inspectors that the legitimacy of communities of practice in educational settings can be established and recognised.

Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), formulated a powerful continuum of more tangible to less tangible benefits of communities of practice, many of which are relevant to educational organisations being defined as failing. Tangible organisational benefits include rapid problem solving and an enhanced ability to execute a strategic plan. The development of the planning process has been identified above (Watson and Crossley 2001) as being significant in bringing about change in colleges and this emphasis on planning is especially significant, as one of the major factors in defining failing schools and colleges is poor leadership. The 'post inspection action plan' produced just after a poor inspection defines the timescale and actions that are predicted to have an impact on the weaknesses identified by the inspectors. It is progress against this plan that is monitored closely by the inspectorate during the recovery process, yet its speed of production means that there is a significant potential for the plan to have its origin in the poor leadership that may well have been recognised as contributing to the failure of the school or college.

Wenger et al. (2002) argue that the collegiate nature of communities of practice will result in "an improved quality of decisions" and increased retention of talent. Again these are powerful attributes in a post inspection setting. The discussion above highlighted the damaging impact of a poor inspection on staff morale and self-esteem and the development of a community, or communities, of practice has potential to reduce these negative effects by providing help with challenges, a sense of belonging

and a forum in which professional identity can be re-established. The prospect of retaining staff against the prospect of 'rats leaving a sinking ship' is enhanced.

The collaborative approach to learning within communities of practice means it is likely that multiple perspectives will be brought to bear on problems. Again this is likely to be a significant asset in a college following a poor inspection. Failure is often identified as being due to the lack of systematic approaches across the college, especially the inconsistent application of quality assurance procedures. Communities of practice therefore increase the organisation's ability not only to generate new strategies but also to encourage the implementation of strategies across all areas of the college's activities. Cox and Smith (2004) highlight that this transfer of strategies from one area to another is more likely between colleagues who know and trust each other and also recognise the value of a 'good idea' intuitively. This raises the importance of validating the activities of the community of practice as they need to be legitimised through the impact they have on measures used to assess organisational performance, and this is especially significant in the current research when, in the case study college, improvements were being made against a heavy background of scrutiny by the inspectorate.

This theoretical context suggests that, in the post inspection environment in a failing college, communities of practice have potential to operate at several different levels. The Common Inspection Framework allows for the assessment of the impact of seven themes on the quality of teaching and learning. This highlights that, to make an impact on improvements, communities of practice must operate at the teacher practitioner level also. In this context communities of practice have a role not only in generating strategies for improvement but also in implementing them and Reynolds (2003) suggests that

“ ..helping schools to learn from their best practitioners is conceptually simple. It is practically easy – there is so much better chance of learning from someone in the next classroom than from someone 20 miles away. Learning from your colleagues also removes any alibis for poor practice, since it is always possible to find explanations for why other schools are doing better to avoid taking any notice of them.”

Reynolds (2003 p.33)

Reynolds' emphasis on collaborative learning suggests that this is a fruitful area to link with the concept of communities of practice. As in many colleges, the case study college

established a team of advanced practitioners to identify and share good practice and the research explores the dynamic of this group as a community of practice and analyses its impact in making improvements. There is limited literature on the link between organisational culture and specific improvements in teaching and learning and it is hoped that the current research can make a contribution here.

Earlier in this chapter attention was drawn to Stark's three phases of the development of an organisation: from failure through the implementation of improvement strategies to achieving excellence. Scepticism was expressed that the transition from the initial phase where the difficulties were identified and acknowledged to the implementation of improvement strategies was not as unproblematic as Stark suggests, especially when an organisation has been publicly declared as failing. The above debate on the relevance of the concept of a community of practice in enhancing this transition attempts to argue that the collaborative nature of communities of practice can be central to moving a 'failing' organisation on. Schein's (1985) description of turnaround strategies in organisations is also helpful in illuminating the dynamics of this transition. Schein's phases demonstrate many links with the development of communities of practice. For example, initial activities result in the establishment of a supportive critical mass of people with a need to describe and facilitate desired changes as well as communicate new ideas. At the core of this group Schein sees an egalitarian ethos and cooperative activities as well as a willingness to share the credit (and presumably the blame if necessary) for improvements. The need for validation of a community of practice's ideas in an educational setting is reinforced by the second phase where the activities of this group became aligned with those of the educational establishment. Here benefits of the group's activity become explicitly articulated and have the effect of bringing other practitioners into the group. The need for legitimisation is carried forward into the third phase where peer support for change can be supported by teaching development facilitators. Momentum is maintained into Schein's fourth phase through visible rewards and support. In the context of recovery from a poor inspection this could be represented through formal recognition of the improvements made, or less altruistically, increased job security as threats to the teaching organisation are removed.

The above discussion has placed a strong emphasis on the collaborative nature of learning in a community of practice. It has also argued that this cooperative approach to learning aligns with several characteristics of culture and values associated with

improving schools and colleges. The discussion also has to take account of the learning of individuals within the community of practice, especially when individuals join communities and learn at the periphery. This has relevance for several aspects of the current research as several managers were new in post just before the 2002 inspection and others were new or promoted between the 2002 and 2004 inspections. Lave and Wenger (1991) draw attention to the impact that the transition from the periphery to the centre of a community of practice has on learning. They refer to this as 'legitimate peripheral participation' which:

“..provides a way to speak about the relationships between newcomers and old timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts and communities of knowledge and practice.”

Lave and Wenger (1991 p.29)

It is significant in the context of the current research that Wenger (1998) sees legitimate peripheral participation being facilitated by the restructuring of the practice to open it to non-members:

“It must engage newcomers and provide a sense of how the community operates.”
Wenger (1998 p.100)

For this engagement to happen in the first place, potential participants in a community of practice must possess 'legitimacy': a credibility that suggests to other members of the community that they will be useful participants.

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) suggest that Wenger's use of the concept of legitimate peripheral participation underplays the differences in learning between the full members of a community of practice and newcomers. This reservation is significant for the research as Hodkinson and Hodkinson draw attention to several ways in which individual biography is relevant to learning within a community of practice. Prior knowledge, skills and understanding are significant as is 'habitus' relating to an individual's disposition towards work and learning.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter an attempt has been made to complement the discussion in chapter two relating to the OfSTED inspection process and accountability where it was suggested

that there was an emphasis on summative evaluation and defining improvement through readily measured outputs. In this second literature review chapter the arguments have focussed more on the links between the culture of schools and colleges and improvement. In this context, research findings on the formative impact that OfSTED inspection has on improvement have been considered. To explore the formative dimension to improvement further the concept of community of practice was discussed in some depth. In this context, the literature suggests, it is likely that improvement will become part of a shared enterprise and this is a key part of the current research.

The research findings described in these two literature review chapters are linked to the research questions, outlined in section 1.2 of this thesis. The following chapter outlines how the research methodology was developed and implemented to provide data to answer these questions.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This methodology chapter opens with an account of the researcher's position in determining the research strategy used to explore these questions. The rationale for choosing the case study college is then examined and attention drawn to features of this organisation that were distinctive when examining the impact of inspection on improvement. Issues related to gaining access are then defined and related to a discussion of potential tensions that arose from the different roles that represented the researcher's interaction with the college.

A detailed description of the specific methods used to define the research methodology takes up a large part of the chapter and is related to theoretical methodological issues. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the limitations of the research methodology and the attempts that were made to address these limitations.

4.2 The relevance of the researcher's epistemological position to the research

The researcher joined the local Learning and Skills Council where the college is located in July 2002. He was an FEFC inspector and took this part time role into OfSTED when they became responsible for the inspection of post compulsory education, so therefore has access to internal OfSTED documentation and briefings. The researcher's role within the LSC is Quality Improvement Manager, and, as such, was responsible for overseeing and supporting the college in the post inspection environment. This support was through accessing very significant amounts of funding and by working closely with staff at the college in preparing the post inspection action plan and monitoring its implementation. The role also involved working with the inspectorate in providing information relating to the college's progress. The role itself required reconciling several tensions, notably between the support and monitoring functions and also between the latter and updating the inspectorate on the degree of progress the college was making prior to each monitoring visit. In a professional capacity, therefore, the researcher had built up considerable knowledge relating to the improvements that were being made but was also influencing these and establishing credibility with the college.

This relationship developed positively over the period between the 2002 and 2004 inspections of the college and links between the college and the researcher became very close as the 2004 inspection approached. The researcher, for example, gave an input at a staff development day, leading one of the participants in the research to comment:

“Everyone said ‘Oh, we were inspired by Colin’, Colin’s been absolutely wonderful”.

It was against this changing and complex relationship that the research took place and in many ways the researcher became an ‘insider’ to the college and its systems and processes. Conventionally researchers will be outsiders to the case forming the focus of the research and will have to make the transition from being external, ‘etic’, to the researched culture to being an integrated ‘insider’. The latter, ‘emic’ position helps to minimise the distinction between researcher and participants but in the context of the research being described here this transition had already occurred and the researcher was already an insider in many respects at the start of the research. However it was possible to adopt a more distant role in undertaking some elements of the research, especially the interviews, and this position is described in a later section of the methodology chapter. There were many intermediate points on the insider/outsider continuum and Bagga-Gupta (1995) highlights the implications of moving along this continuum - in either direction - as the research progresses. The negotiation of roles in making this transition was ongoing and required continuing renegotiation. Because the researcher was a data gathering instrument it was important that this was made explicit to the participants in the research. The literature identifies that a personal approach is seen as important in establishing yourself as a “credible person doing a worthy project.” (Woods 1979 p.23), and the credibility that the researcher had established through regular working with the college was important here.

The researcher’s professional role as a quality improvement manager dictated a specific approach to working with the college outside the research. Certainly a formal monitoring relationship existed between the college and the LSC, especially focussing on financial information where monthly returns were necessary. The researcher was not heavily involved in this aspect but instead focussed on supporting the self-assessment process, working with some individual consultants and working with senior college staff in preparing for the monitoring and inspection visits. In this role the position of the researcher was firmly based in an improvement rather than effectiveness approach. The nature of this professional relationship with the college had to be considered when

designing the methodology for the research. The approach was therefore informed, not only by the research questions and the nature of the data that was to be collected but also by the pre-existing relationship that had 'insider' elements to it. An interpretative approach was adopted to allow phenomena to be studied and interpreted in relation to the meanings assigned to them by the participants in the research. It was intended to explore theories relating to the impact of inspection on the senior managers' improvement strategies as they emerged rather than using the research findings to test predetermined hypotheses.

This interpretative approach is defined by Bryman (2001 p.504) as "an epistemological viewpoint that requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action". Cohen and Manion (1998) indicate that, within this paradigm:

"Investigators work directly with experience and understanding to build their theory on them. The data thus yielded will be glossed with the meanings and purposes of those people who are their source."

Cohen and Manion (1998 p.37)

The research was characterised by its emphasis on the researcher developing an appreciation of the participants' interpretation of the social context of the college, especially their perception of the impact of inspection on this context. This required the researcher to take account of the perspective of the participants in the research and an intimate professional relationship facilitated this approach. Cohen and Manion (1998 p.39) identify key features of the interpretative approach as focussing on:

- The individual
- Small scale research
- Human actions continuously recreating social life
- Non statistical methods
- 'Subjectivity'
- Personal involvement of the researcher
- Interpreting the specific
- Understanding actions/meanings rather than causes
- Investigating the taken for granted
- Micro concepts: individual perspectives, personal constructs, negotiated meanings, definitions of situations

The high level of personal involvement between the researcher and the case study college has already been identified as contributing to the researcher's philosophical position in determining the research methodology to use. Certainly the focus of the

research was at the level of the individual participant but it was understood that meanings at a group level were also likely to emerge. The research was small scale, in a single setting, and used non-statistical methods to investigate meaning. In the context of Cohen and Manion's 'investigating the taken for granted', OfSTED inspection was anticipated to have a range of effects on the participants in the research.

It has been highlighted above that not only the type of data to be collected but also the professional relationship between the researcher and the college determined the interpretative methodology. The emphasis of the research was describing the phenomenon under study and generating rather than verifying theories. The subjectivity of adopting such a research perspective has been criticised by positivists who believe "that social facts can be observed objectively, measured and quantified" (Haralambos and Holborn 2000 p.1023). In this paradigm the case study college would represent an organisation as a "real entity with a life of its own" (Cohen and Manion 1998 p.10) rather than being a social construction of the individuals within it. Adopting a positivist approach to the research would have assumed that a universal theory would apply to the impact of inspection on how senior managers behaved, which could be defined through quantitative analysis. Furthermore, a positivistic approach would have suggested that universal theories could be investigated through experimentation. The latter approach would have been extremely risky both in terms of the future of the college and the researcher's job security!

The regular involvement of the inspectorate in the college under study did allow improvements to be defined in quantifiable increments, as represented by grades given by inspectors, but the complexity of the dynamics surrounding these improvements did not make quantitative research methodologies appropriate. Few variables existed that were amenable to objective measurement and no hypotheses were available for testing. Neither time, nor the size of the college, allowed for the research to use the large sample (more than 30) of subjects necessary and therefore it was not possible to attribute statistical significance to the findings. The necessity to gather information on the 'real-life' context of the college was the major feature of the research and a case study approach was therefore adopted.

It was clear from the literature review that it was unlikely that it would be possible to demonstrate the participants' perceptions of a direct link between inspection and

improvement. There was a high degree of confidence that there would be evidence of improvement within the college, but being able to attribute this to a single factor within the complex educational setting was unlikely. Instead the research was intended to identify where evidence from a range of sources was pointing in similar directions. All of these elements combine to make a case study an appropriate model for undertaking the research.

Researchers have used a case study approach within both a positivist and interpretivist research tradition (Cavaye 1996). Although Hammersley (1998) indicates that to argue for the existence of such contrasting approaches is mistaken as most methodologies blend elements of each, a case study conducted from the former perspective would use controlled observation, controlled deductions, replicability and generalisation.

Theoretical constructs would be empirically evaluated and measured. As indicated above, when considering the impact that inspection was perceived to be having, the latter interpretivist approach to the case study was adopted where it was acknowledged that different constructions of the world would exist (Fletcher 1996). The further education college where the research took place represents a context where individuals invented 'different realities' according to their own perspective. The emphasis within this sort of case study approach is in "understanding phenomenon through the meanings that the participants assign to them" (Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991 p.5).

4.3 The rationale for choosing the case study college

The research began in a different college, within the same LSC area, from the institution finally used as a case study. This college had not been identified as failing and was acknowledged, by the inspectorate and LSC, as having good quality self-assessment processes in place. At this time, the focus of the research was slightly different from that reported in this thesis. In the original college it was intended to focus on the links between self-assessment and improvement rather than considering the impact of external inspection specifically on improvement. Access had been negotiated and the principal had agreed to facilitate access to the research participants. Agreement to begin the research was in place in mid-2003 but, at this time, the principal obtained a new post at a college in a different region. The researcher was then faced with renegotiating with a new principal, which may well have been a distraction for her when new in post, or considering alternatives.

The researcher's attention turned to the college that was used in the final research. The change in case study organisation resulted also in a shift in the emphasis of the research to consider specifically the impact of inspection on improvements made within the college. This college had been inspected by OfSTED in January of 2002 and was judged 'inadequate' to meet the needs of its students. The inspectors identified that leadership and management, and quality assurance were 'unsatisfactory', five curriculum areas 'unsatisfactory', five areas 'satisfactory' and three 'good'. These grades necessitated a full re-inspection and this occurred in March 2004. Following the 2002 inspection scrutiny of the college by the inspectorate was stepped up, the college produced a post inspection action plan and termly monitoring visits took place. These two-day visits focussed on both leadership and management and curriculum area developments. The college therefore represented an environment where scrutiny by the inspectorate was frequent and intense. A timeline of critical events within the college is given in Appendix B.

Other interesting features existed in the case study college. A significant amount of higher education as well as further education was also delivered. This allowed staff to develop an understanding of the role of alternative methods of educational quality assurance alongside that relating to further education forming the focus of the research. OfSTED's involvement in the inspection of post compulsory education and training and the use of the Common Inspection Framework had been in place for two years at the time of the college's 2002 inspection and over four, by the time of the March 2004 inspection. The choice of the specific college therefore allowed the implementation and impact of the Common Inspection Framework to be studied in a longitudinal fashion. The majority of the research interviews took place just before the 2004 inspection, a further interview with the principal was undertaken after this inspection and the 2004 inspection report and action plan were used as part of the data collection.

The principal was new in post at the time of the January 2002 inspection. She had held a senior position in a college outside the area and therefore was able to bring a recent external perspective to the college. From the summer of 2002 until early 2003 the principal was supported by the secondment of a vice-principal from another college. This also enhanced opportunities during the research to explore views on the inspection process that were not entirely formed from within the college. Another important feature

of the case study college related to the provision within the Local Authority District. In the context of the local post compulsory education environment it is the only further education institution serving the LEA. The funding body, the Learning and Skills Council, took the decision shortly after the 2002 inspection to put resources into improving the provision at the college, rather than finding alternative ways of securing the provision. Despite the very poor 2002 inspection the college's short term future therefore was secure and emphasis was on making improvements within the college rather than placing the provision elsewhere. The definition of the college as 'inadequate' in 2002 allowed the LSC to access very significant funds for colleges with 'extreme and serious weaknesses' to support developments in the post inspection action plan. Such developments included the establishment, by the college, of a team of 'advanced practitioners'. These were peers who had a mentoring role in improving teaching and learning. The funding also paid for a 'mock inspection' by trained inspectors. The focus however of this activity was developmental, rather than for accountability purposes, as the 'inspectors' placed an emphasis on highlighting actions to address weaknesses rather than generating grading profiles. The LSC funding also partly supported the secondment of a vice-principal, from another college, to focus on self-assessment. This secondee was also a participant in the research and brought an external perspective to the improvement activity within the college.

In the January 2002 inspection generic weaknesses were identified that had an impact across the college; these included issues with: retention, achievement, self-assessment, data and use of the management information system, programme reviews, student support (including attendance), sharing of good practice, recruitment marketing, low student numbers, poor teaching and learning, poor accommodation, few links with industry and limited work experience, and poor course management.

There was insufficient awareness and use of financial and management information, and quality assurance was judged to be ineffective and significantly weaker than the previous inspection. During the inspection, retention and achievement records held in curriculum areas relating to a three-year period were often found to be different to the centrally produced data. Tutors did not have access to important central student data and were unable to monitor students effectively. Inspectors noted that, in many areas, management information was neither trusted nor effectively used, and comparison of college data with national averages was given insufficient attention. The college had no

overall development plan for its management information system and staff lacked confidence in the reliability of data and complained of difficulties in communicating corrections. These profound weaknesses described the background against which the research could explore improvements.

The March 2004 inspection, using the same inspection framework as 2002, reported very significant improvements. Inspectors judged the quality of provision to be good in five of the curriculum areas inspected and satisfactory in four, with two curriculum areas unsatisfactory. Standards of teaching and learning were now judged as satisfactory, as were leadership and management. Attention was drawn to the open and responsive management style, the strong focus on assuring the quality of teaching and learning, the scale and rapidity of improvements made since the last inspection, the scale and effectiveness of collaborative working, the thoroughness of the self-assessment process, high staff morale, good financial management, good quality performance data and improving retention and achievement. Most significantly, the inspectors highlighted the consultative, supportive, and open-style management of the principal and senior management team as being key to changing the culture of the college.

Appendix B gives a chronology of key events at the college and gives the context for the timing of the major elements of the research. The principal was formally approached for access in the summer of 2003 and retrospective access to documentary evidence for research purposes was secured. One of the research participants was interviewed in late 2003, as he came towards the end of his secondment at the college, and the bulk of the interviews took place with the senior managers in February 2004. A single interview took place after the March 2004 inspection with the principal.

The college therefore presented an excellent context for research on links between inspection and improvement. Its short-term future was secure, some continuity between the 2002 and 2004 inspections existed with staff, but access to external perspectives was also available. Expertise and understanding of differing educational inspection regimes also existed within the college. A system of peer support had been put in place since the 2002 inspection and a greater emphasis placed on self-assessment. The two inspections, two years apart, used the same inspection framework, which also set the agenda for the termly monitoring visits. The March 2004 inspection saw the improvement being

formally recognised and also gave an insight into the role of culture change in driving the improvement.

4.4 Gaining access and ethical issues

The principal and her deputy were key to gaining access and a formal approach was made to the principal before the research started. This was in the form of a letter, reproduced in Appendix A together with the principal's very positive response.

Although this response was to the researcher's business address, all correspondence relating to the research was sent from the researcher's home address in an attempt to make a distinction between different roles.

Many authors indicate that in qualitative research it may be necessary to recruit a 'key informant', like William Whyte's Pecci (Whyte 1994) who can speak for many people and facilitate access to other participants, and the principal and her deputy fulfilled this role very effectively. Whyte found further advantages to this role; as well as recruiting a facilitator in allowing him to gain access he found that his key informant, over time, became an equal collaborator in the work and certainly the college principal demonstrated an increasing interest in the outcomes of the research. Pecci, because of his detailed understanding of the culture, was able to alert Whyte to other potentially relevant issues and this was happening in the current research, through, for example, the principal – the key contact – alerting the researcher to literature that defined her philosophy and approach to making improvements within the college.

The issues of confidentiality impacted on the collection and presentation of the research data on many levels. For example, there was potential for subjects to be critical of the inspectorate and/or each other and the audio recording was stopped when requested, section 7.4 of the thesis highlights the possibility that had the potential effect of reducing the impact that dissenting views had on the findings. The researcher also needed to 'ring fence' the research findings from other activities involving the LSC and the inspectorates. For this reason the timing of access to the subjects to undertake the interviews was crucial. The interviews took place over several days shortly before the inspection in early 2004. At this time all of the briefings on the college's progress had been completed for the inspectorate and the college was confident that all its preparation was in place. There was therefore little opportunity for information that might arise from

the research to impact on the inspection itself. As the research findings emerged it became clear that the principal had played a major role in driving the improvements noted by the inspectorate. It was impossible, without compromising the findings, to hide this individual contribution in the final account. It also became apparent that it was possible to identify to lesser extent other participants in the research. These were the participants who had a unique role within the college, and this role was significant in defining their perception of the inspection process so became relevant to the research findings and was identified in the research data. The interview responses were been coded so the identity of the research participants with generic roles, like Head of School or Programme Manager were not revealed. Their own interview transcripts were shared in the entirety with each participant and care was taken then to secure agreement from all of the participants that they were happy for selected extracts of their interviews to be included in the written account. Lankshear and Knobel (2004) highlight that this type of acknowledgment can be important in celebrating key players' roles in the research findings.

An increased external interest in the dynamics leading to improvement within the college followed its improved status and the need to keep the identity of the college confidential was reduced. Many of the research participants, and the researcher to a limited extent, were involved in disseminating key aspects of this improvement. This had potential to reduce the implications of identifying the case study college in the research as an atmosphere of celebration existed following the 2004 inspection. The principal herself began to share her strategy for improving the college through the Centre for Excellence in Leadership. It is acknowledged by the researcher that, if the inspection outcome had been different, it would have been necessary to adopt a different ethical position to the issue of confidentiality.

In designing the research, account was taken of BERA's ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA undated). These guidelines give a framework within which ethically sound research can be developed. It was crucial to have a sound research design that the participants could relate to and use. The research was designed to explore an issue uppermost in participants' minds at the time and several participants expressed considerable interest in the research itself and its findings. This empathy was crucial when taking up considerable amounts of participants' time and it was also important in minimising the effect of intrusion. Subjects appreciated the purposes of the

interviews in the context of their own professional development and care was taken to time the interviews when the bulk of the inspection preparation had been undertaken. It was important to be alert to situations when the research touched on sensitive issues and on one occasion the researcher withdrew from a staff workshop when requested by the principal, as his presence was likely to inhibit the openness of the discussion.

Responsibilities to the research participants are highlighted in the BERA guidelines and the discussion above outlines how the participants' voluntary informed consent was gained. Careful attention was given to the wording of the letter reproduced in Appendix A and a high priority was given to ensuring that participants were aware of the aims of the study and also understood that the researcher's commitment to confidentiality was binding on him. The discussion above has explored how the researcher's approach to the issue of confidentiality changed, in consultation with all the participants, as the research developed. In the final presentation of the findings it is possible to identify the case study college and the contribution of the principal and a few other very senior staff but the identity of other participants in the research has not been revealed.

It was critical in the research to avoid deception. The earlier section outlined that the researcher was interacting with the college at many levels as part of his professional role. It was very important to articulate to participants within the college what the aims and purposes of the research, as a separate activity, were. The trust from the participants that information gained from the research would not be used for other purposes had to be very strong. Any subterfuge of this nature would have constituted 'first order deception' (Cohen et al. 1998) and great care was taken to avoid this.

4.5 The phases of the research

The discussion above has highlighted that an interpretive approach was adopted, with an emphasis on understanding how the research subjects participated in and made sense of the changes that were happening to the culture of the college. The table in Appendix C outlines the relationship between the research questions and data collected supported by a brief rationale.

Shimahara (1988) identifies five methodological considerations for qualitative research and outlines the sequence in which these components are inclined to feature. This

section links the methods used in the current research to these considerations.

However, it is acknowledged that the development of the specific methodology was an iterative process, with early stages often being revisited.

i) Definition of a research problem. This required a broad, general analysis of the phenomenon under study, in order to take account of the breadth of contexts impinging on it. The literature review chapters explored many of the important ideas that were crucial in gaining an insight into senior managers' perceptions of the inspection process, in all its formats, in supporting improvements.

ii) Choosing a setting: in which to explore the problem under study. The concept of access to the setting is important here and was briefly explored above. It has also been highlighted above that the final setting of the research was arrived at after initial exploration with another organisation with a slightly different focus to the research. The key features of the new setting included:

- The improvement option, rather than closure of the college, being favoured by the funding body – there was an imperative for the college to improve.
- The impact of a poor inspection on staff morale
- The intense scrutiny of the college by the inspectorate following the 2002 inspection.
- The access to significant 'emergency funding' to support improvements
- The involvement of new members of staff, including the principal, in the college around the time of the 2002 inspection, brought external perspectives to bear to making improvements.
- The higher profile given to high quality self-assessment through the secondment of a vice-principal from another college

iii) Descriptive observations: this phase moves the researcher from the generality of the first phase into gaining an insight into more specific issues that can be translated into researchable problems. Trochim (1999) pleads for this process to be given a high(er) priority in qualitative methodology. He feels that this early and direct experience of the phenomenon is crucial in putting the literature and current theories in the context of a fresh perspective with high potential for generating "interesting and valuable new theories". The vehicle for generating these provisional hypotheses is likely to be the data from the narrative description recorded in field notes or diaries. Attention is likely

to be given to the activities, participants, the use of space and the physical environment, and the sequencing of activities. It is in this phase that 'domain analysis' (Shimahara 1988) develops through the reviewing of the field notes, and the emergence of categories and clusters of related activities. Potential for evolution and transformation of the domains needs to be built in at this stage. The themes and categories that emerged following the literature review included considering the impact of inspection in a summative context: including, for example, the use of performance indicators and data, the categorisation of the college as inadequate in 2002, and the use of grades for teaching and learning, curriculum areas and leadership and management. It was also clear from the literature review that inspection was likely to be perceived also as a form of formative evaluation. Relevant areas here included: the use of inspector feedback, the role of the monitoring visits, the use of consultants and mock inspections and experience of other inspection methodologies, for example, those used by the QAA.

iv) Guiding questions/hypotheses. Appendix C links the research questions to specific sources and these data allow channelling of the enquiry in a certain direction whilst facilitating the development of other questions at a later stage. Examples within the research include:

- focussing on the impact of inspection on managers and their activities, especially in the context of empowering them and validating their agendas
- asking what role self-assessment played in making improvements
- gaining an insight into perceptions of different types of inspection process
- the diagnostic impact of inspection
- asking about the relationship between OfSTED and other inspection regimes.

v) Observation: The discussion above outlines the insider/outsider role of the researcher, by engaging in the situation under study, and also commenting on it at a distance. These approaches may include 'hanging out' (Walker 1985 p.83) or 'knocking around' (Cohen and Manion 1992 p.125) and certainly the researcher was working very closely with college staff over a considerable amount of time. This sort of activity was to be very important in establishing the researcher's credibility as part of the group being studied and Appendix B outlines key events in late 2002 and early in 2003 that were critical here. These activities also provided an induction for the researcher into the

dynamics of the situation as an informal understanding of relationships both within and outside the college developed.

In addition to these five considerations, curiosity was also important in order to provide the long-term motivation to surmount the inevitable frustrations in setting up and implementing interviews and the synergy between the research and the researcher's professional role was important here. There was a genuine professional interest, shared with the college, in understanding what factors were underpinning the improvements the college was making.

As described above, the researcher had been involved with the college since July 2002. This was characterised through supporting the college with writing the post inspection action plan for approval by OfSTED and preparing for their regular monitoring. The latter activity included working directly with the team within the college charged with ensuring that the performance data was accurately captured by the college's Management Information System. This was significant for several reasons: the accuracy and use of data was a major weakness in the 2002 inspection, effective curriculum management is informed by reliable data and the college's funding is related directly to retention and achievement returns. The researcher was therefore involved in several meetings and activities with a focus on making improvements. *Post facto* notes were made following these meetings and this led to detailed written descriptions of these events, which were used to construct interpretations to inform the research.

Examples of activities that informed this part of the research included:

- Meetings with college's executive to construct the post inspection action plan. This gave insights into priorities and use of data, the emphasis the college gave to self-assessment and the links and relationships that existed between the management team, faculties and teachers within the college.
- Meetings with OfSTED inspectors during the monitoring visits. These highlighted, for example, the issues that the inspectorate identified as having potential to undermine improvements and also the college's reactions and responses to these.
- Meetings with consultants and secondees working with the college. These allowed developments within the college to be explored in the context of external perspectives and recent experiences of the same inspection regime in other colleges.

4.6 Methods of data collection

The main method for collecting the research data was the use of semi-structured interviews. The scope of the research problem had defined loose parameters and the use of semi-structured interviews allowed freedom to be given to the participants to respond in an open-ended fashion but within certain boundaries. When undertaking the interviews, the researcher attempted to engage with the immediate issue while holding a holistic appreciation in order to be immediately alert to developing issues that have potential to inform the research findings. There was, in this research, also considerable potential to reflect on the use of the researcher as a tool in terms of the reaction of others to their presence. Walker (1985 p.86) quotes an example to illustrate this point:

Teacher: "Don't expect me to tell you anything about the headteacher"
 Researcher: "You just have."

Some participants in the research had been at the college before the 2002 inspection, others were relatively new to the college and the characteristics of each are identified in Appendix D. 13 interviews were undertaken with the following senior managers:

- Principal, before and after the 2004 inspection
- Vice-principal (Finance)
- Assistant principal with responsibility for quality assurance
- Executive secretary
- Four heads of school and three programme managers all from a range of disciplines
- A secondee, a vice-principal from a local college, with a brief to develop self-assessment within the college.

The researcher requested that the participants were senior managers and the principal and her executive secretary selected the individuals and organised the interviews. This selection was undertaken using participants from the senior management team and used pragmatic criteria including availability during the college holiday period. The majority of the college's senior managers made up the sample, although one vice-principal was not available at short notice. All the heads of school were interviewed as were the three senior programme managers with significant cross college responsibilities. The profiles of the research participants are summarised in Appendix D and show a mixture of backgrounds, with some managers being in post prior to the 2002 inspection, some also in post at this time, but promoted to senior level after this inspection and some appointed to the college in the period between the 2002 and 2004 inspections.

Interviews were in the order of 30-45 minutes, although some took considerably longer. The interviews were recorded using audio recording and transcribed in their entirety afterwards. The data analysis chapters identify the themes used to analysis the data from the interviews. The interviews were carried out a few weeks before the inspection in early 2004. All the monitoring visits by the inspectorate had been completed and the college had just experienced a 'mock inspection' undertaken by trained inspectors working on behalf of the college with a brief to highlight further work that would be necessary to undertake before the external inspection in March 2004.

The three, high level, research questions outlined in Chapter 1 directed the questions used in the semi-structured interviews. Examples of specific questions used to explore these in more detail included:

- *Open with: general questions about the participant's role, length of time at the college.*
- *Is the Common Inspection Framework useful in helping you to make improvements?*
- *How have you prepared for inspection?*
- *Do you find inspection a helpful process?*
- *How do inspectors use performance data?*
- *Is the feedback from inspectors useful? Is this the case with both full and monitoring inspections?*
- *How does your experience of OfSTED inspection compare with that under other bodies, e.g. FEFC, QAA?*
- *Are your priorities for improvement the same as those of inspectors?*
- *How does the self-assessment process work?*
- *How do you use data relating to the performance of students in self-assessment?*
- *Did you have anything to do with writing the inspection action plans?*
- *How helpful was the recent 'mock' inspection?*
- *What is the role of the advanced skills teachers? Are they helpful in making improvements?*
- *How does inspection impact on college resources?*
- *Close with open-ended question inviting further contributions.*

A further interview was carried out with the principal after the successful 2004 inspection. This was designed to enhance the researcher's understanding of key issues relating to the improvements that were emerging once the inspection outcome was known. This was a lengthy interview that focussed specifically on gaining an insight into the principal's reflections on the relationship between improvement strategies and the inspection process. This interview was again semi structured and covered issues

like: focussing on learners, empowering staff including external partners, differential approaches used by individual inspectors (especially those inspecting one curriculum area), the planning and self-assessment processes, the role of advanced skills teachers, and the links between 'mock' and 'real' inspection.

Cohen and Manion (1998) identify three key attributes that researchers need to have to conduct successful interviews. Trust is needed to encourage an ethos of shared goals between the subjects and the researcher and again, the lengthy involvement of the researcher in a professional context was helpful here. The integrity and motivation of the researcher to ensure that improvements were recognised facilitated the development of strong relationships. The participants within the college were taking a significant risk in becoming involved in the research since if the inspectorate had not recognised the distance that the college had travelled then there was potential for management weaknesses to be highlighted to the funding organisation through the research.

The study of college documents was also used to provide a range of perspectives on events and issues. This activity also allowed the researcher to reconstruct accounts of past events, especially when analysing parallel perspectives of similar events. The documents studied included primary sources written by participants in the research. Examples include minutes of meetings, and staff updates written by the principal. Secondary sources were also used. These included the college's self-assessment report, which paraphrased individual departments' own reports, reports to governors, and inspectors' reports on the progress that the college was making. The key documents that formed part of the data collection included:

- The post inspection action plan for the 2002 inspection. This gave an insight into the relationship between the newly appointed principal and her team, the relative emphasis given to actions and the degree of ownership of actions at all levels within the college.
- Annual self-assessment reports and development plans. Study of these allows an appreciation of the college's approach to the use of evidence to support improvement, an insight into timescales for improvement and the role of performance data in defining improvement. The relationship between the inspection and the college's own view was also explored, as was the tension between using self-assessment for internal purposes and for sharing with the inspectorate and the LSC. Tensions were identified in generating a self-assessment for these different audiences.

- Staff newsletters allow the emphasis given to different themes relating to improvement to be teased out. For example, the need to have accurate data and for solidarity between and within teams was articulated in these documents as was the role of the college's new cohort of advanced practitioners who had a role to identify and share good practice.
- The monitoring reports from the inspectorates allowed their perceptions to be taken into account, but also provided rich opportunities to observe and analyse the college's responses and reactions to their interim findings. From these sources data were also available relating to the contrasts that existed between the relationship between the inspectorate and the college during these monitoring activities and the formal inspections.
- The post inspection formal evaluation of the inspectorate's activity by the college provided an insight into the college's perception of the inspection process and its impact on staff and the college's activity.
- Minutes of meetings of the governing body that were publicly available on the college's website.
- The college's post inspection action plan following the 2004 inspection.

The section above has attempted to outline the nature of the data and how it was collected and the data analysis chapters include a discussion of the themes and categories used to make sense of the data. It is acknowledged that the use of a qualitative approach has been criticised in the literature and the following section identifies some of the major difficulties and outlines how these were addressed in carrying out the research.

4.7 Limitations of the methodology used in the research.

The opening sections of this methodology chapter identified that the research was undertaken from an interpretative position. This epistemology meant that the researcher was a data-gathering tool, and his values and perspectives had to be acknowledged. It has been argued that the very closeness of the researcher to the researched in the type of qualitative research described above results in findings that are too dependent on:

“..the researcher's often unsystematic views about what is significant and important, and also upon the close personal relationships that the research frequently strikes up with the people being studied.”

Bryman (2001 p.282)

This subjectivity leads to a further criticism of the lack of a facility to generalise from the findings of qualitative research. Some subjectivity is also apparent in the interviewing process used in the research. Lankshear and Knobel (2004) draw attention to the power dynamic that can exist when undertaking research interviews and suggest that this can lead to research bias. This bias has its origin in the fact that, even with semi-structured or unstructured interviews, the power relations between the researcher and the participants are unequal, or perceived to be so by the participants. This factor is potentially important in the current research where the researcher, in his professional role, had significant interaction within the college as a representative of the funding body. Tuckman (1972) points out that, in such a situation, participants may be responding to show themselves and the organisation where they work in a good light.

Serious attempts were made to minimise the impact of the power that the interviewer had, or was perceived to have. For example, although written notes were made at the same time as the tape recording, these were minimised and attempts made to maintain eye contact with the participants. The interviews were undertaken in an informal environment where a sofa and easy chair were placed around a coffee table. The researcher also tried to engage in conversation before the interview started in order to relax the participants. This focussed on the background to the research and outlining what would happen to the findings. It was also felt important for the researcher to convey genuine interest in the participant's response through positive body language and following up on particular points the participants made. At a more fundamental level, it was not possible to completely separate the professional role from that of researcher and the potential influence on the findings of the power dynamic between the researcher and the participants is described in depth in section 7.4.

A further cause of bias has its origin in the interviewer focussing on questions where the responses are likely to support the researcher's preconceived ideas. To try and reduce this effect the questions used in the semi-structured interview were written down and asked of all the subjects. Carspecken (1996) indicates that participants often say things in interviews that they would not speak about in everyday life, as there is an intense focus on their responses to the interviewer's questions. This is a reminder that the interviews described above were contrived situations where the researcher's reactions and responses may well affect the participants' own responses. The outcomes of the semi-structured interviews used in the research therefore represent co-constructed data

reflecting the fact that, in this study, the interviewees were participants in the research rather than being the subjects of it. There is also another fundamental consideration when exploring the limitations of this research. Many of the researcher's questions were related to eliciting the participants' views and beliefs. The analysis of the research data section assumes that the participants were always able to articulate these in a time-limited situation. There was potential for participants to misunderstand questions and the interviewer to misunderstand their responses. This has implications when considering the validity of the methods used in the research. Convergence with the findings of other studies can enhance validity and certainly some of the outcomes of the research identified in the literature review relate closely to those of the current research. Examples include: participants' views of the importance of feedback from inspectors and a positive view of the involvement with the inspectorate over time, rather than through a 'hit and run' relationship. The concluding section of this thesis draws attention to the relationship between the research findings and the policy context underpinning changes to the inspection methodology and it is interesting to note that several of the issues raised in the research are the focus of the new approach. This suggests that the research outcomes do resonate with feedback from other sources to the inspectorate itself.

In the data analysis sections of the thesis extracts are used from a range of sources, increasing the potential for the reader to check the researcher's interpretation. Trochim (1999) argues that it is only the participants that can accurately judge the credibility of the findings and therefore they are a true measure of the internal validity of the qualitative study and this strategy also provides checks in reducing the researcher's perceptual biases. To this end, the emerging themes from the research were shared with the participants, and their views on these issues were interpreted as being representative of the dynamic that existed within their college.

The researcher attempted to further establish external validity through enhancing the potential of transferability to other contexts by making the methodology explicit to the audience. The research findings were also shared with an ex chief inspector for colleges, again to see if they 'rang true' from experience in a wider range of contexts.

Reliability depends on obtaining the same findings on repeated occasions. The researcher had these opportunities through extended involvement with the research

subjects. However, it is possible, in qualitative research, that this repeated engagement with the subjects will alter the dynamic under study. Trochim (1999) argues that the notion of *dependability* is more useful in a qualitative context. Here the researcher explicitly accounts for the evolving context in which the research is developing and engages in a description of how these changes affect the way in which the study is approached. Independent researchers can then replicate the procedures in comparative settings. *Confirmability* also has a part to play, where other researchers take a 'devil's advocate' role and look for negative instances and, in this context, the data analysis sections draw attention to situations where emerging themes are not supported by isolated events or interview responses. The researcher also noted that Hammersley (1994) draws attention to the considerable emphasis that has been placed on the writing of the qualitative accounts and how researchers construct these accounts. Wallace et al. (1998) argue that the final narrative account is inextricably linked with methodological issues reinforcing the points made above in the discussion regarding validity and reliability.

It was highlighted above that the closeness between the researcher and the participants necessary to arrive at a realistic representation of a situation could attract criticism (Beach 1998). Jeffrey (1999) quotes the perspective shared by several authors that such distancing and the suspension of such 'values, feelings, and prejudices' are not now considered viable and also that it is not possible to separate the researcher's subjectivity from the analytical process. It is also pertinent to reflect on the notion of 'giving back' (Wallace et al. 1998) to the respondents. For example, these authors invited the participants to the book launch and issued free copies. This is perhaps an under-documented feature of qualitative research but it allows the support of the participants and/or the institution to be reciprocated and, no doubt, facilitates access for future work. In the autumn of 2004 the researcher did participate in work with the college to share the improvement strategies identified during the research with the DfES's Standards Unit. There was an element of 'giving' back in this activity as the researcher's contribution articulated closely with that of college staff, most of whom had been participants in the research.

It is certainly important to acknowledge concerns that exist with such a methodology in the current research and suggest that the findings of the research remain tentative.

However, the methodology has generated issues that warrant further debate and investigation and these are explored in the following data analysis chapters.

Chapter 5 Data analysis: senior managers' perceptions of the Common Inspection Framework and its application

5.1 Introduction

The data collected from the sources identified in the methodology chapter suggested that analysis could be undertaken under two closely related headings linked to the main research questions. These themes have many interrelated elements but the data suggest that it was appropriate to approach the analysis using two areas: firstly, senior managers' perceptions of the Common Inspection Framework and its application, and secondly, the perceptions of senior managers on the impact of inspection on improvement within the case study college.

This first data analysis chapter explores perceptions of the Common Inspection Framework itself; this includes the influence of the framework in making expectations clear to all participants in the inspection process and its learner focus. Data relating to the use of the framework by inspectors is then analysed, especially in the context of grading lesson observations, curriculum areas and the overall leadership and management. The dominance given within the framework to performance indicators and their use by inspectors is then explored in the conclusion to this chapter.

The analysis in this first data analysis chapter relates mainly to the first research question: *How do senior managers perceive the OfSTED inspection process?* In order to address this question the data were analysed under a number of categories:

Impact of Inspection Framework

- definition of orthodoxy
- impact on diversity of practice, circularity
- making expectations of inspection clear for managers
- emphasis on learners
- consistency between inspectors in use of framework

Preparation for inspection

- persistence of improvements
- rehearsal for real inspection

- inspection observations relate to better practice or better performances during inspection?

Use of grades in inspections

- significance of grading
- hypotheses determined before the inspection
- openness to challenge

The data analysed in this chapter comes mainly from the interviews with the senior managers. The participants' responses are coded according to the key given in Appendix D.

5.2 Seniors managers' perceptions of the Common Inspection Framework

The framework and the seven key questions within it (listed in Appendix E) dominated activity preparing for the inspection. This is a function not only of the inspection process, but also the requirement for college self-assessment reports to be written to the Common Inspection Framework. (DfES 2001). The participants drew attention to what they perceived to be a number of positive features of the framework. Several subjects comment on its learner focus and the emphasis on teaching and learning within the framework:

"... It is explicitly dealing with how learners are impacted by activity - that's very useful and helpful." (P1)

".. it defines quality provision for our learners." (HS1)

"..it's incredibly self centred in terms of students working through the activities they do." (HS3)

"The impact of OfSTED has put a much sharper focus on the teaching and learning." (HS2)

"With inspection priorities, I think it does set standards, the key questions do help us focus on things, they are not new things, but they have put that focus on them." (PM2)

The Common Inspection Framework comprises seven questions with amplification and is intended explicitly to represent not standards but rather a set of principles for inspection (OfSTED May 2002). The perception of one participant that the framework is standards based is interesting and other participants did see the framework as exemplifying inspectors' expectations and agendas.

".... Because you have got the Common Inspection Framework, you know what inspectors are looking for." (HS1)

"It gives us the standards that we know that we should work towards." (PM1)

The latter point was developed as part of a discussion of the framework supporting compliance and accountability:

"I understand that there are 400 odd colleges in the country and you need to be able to standardise. You have to know that the educational ethics are the same in those colleges." (P1)

"It's about the learner environment, the government ensuring it's satisfactory." (P1)

"I think that it enforces the compliance approach in the way that we go about meeting external requirements as it is about encouraging organisations to go on their own way and develop what they are good at, I think that there is a tension there." (AP)

The framework therefore is seen as facilitating a consensus, shared between the inspectorate and colleges, as to what the main features of successful teaching and leadership and management in further education contexts might be. There is also an acknowledgement that the framework is in the public domain but represents a set of closed criteria; they are not open to negotiation – they are what the inspectors are looking for, thus the way in which they are used takes on greater significance. There is an indication that the use of any framework has the facility to constrain and inhibit in the search for the uniformity that is necessary for accountability purposes.

5.3 Senior Managers' perceptions on how the Common Inspection Framework is used

The consensus that existed relating to the design of the inspection tool itself proved more fragile when the use of the framework was considered. The existence of the framework in the public domain and a long lead in time to inspection did give rise to the notion of preparing especially for inspection. Several participants were sceptical that this was not likely to lead to permanent improvements in teaching and learning but spoke in terms almost of rehearsing for a performance.

"I think that the whole process is artificial, and I think that colleges really go through a process of preparing for an inspection, they spend a week or two preparing tip top lessons and then lapse back into the old practice they have before." (HS3)

"I think that some of the good grades reflect good preparation technique as opposed to maybe good teaching and learning. I'm not saying that good teaching and learning doesn't go on, but a good inspection technique and good inspection preparation can probably get you a grade or two more than working on the teaching and learning could do." (HS3)

"I believe that inspection has an impact on the way in which my colleagues work, their teaching styles. I do believe it has an effect, the question that I'm not entirely sure of is, does it stick? So in terms of teaching, does it stick?" (HS4)

"I think, on the human nature side, if you're going to be tested or observed, you'll fall back on your pet, your favourite methodology. You are not going to go out on a limb and try something new, you're going to fall back on what you're most comfortable with. It doesn't promote adventurous teaching – which I think is counter to what the idea was in the first place." (HS2)

Here research subjects identified the potential for the inspection framework to cause convergence of styles, the use of a more conservative approach to teaching and learning. The inspection handbook, supporting the framework, suggests that inspectors "will not be prescriptive" about what characterizes good quality teaching, yet the research data suggest that inspectors may well only see teaching that the teachers and their managers judge is 'safe' to be inspected. There is little recognition of this potentially perverse aspect of inspection elsewhere in the literature on further education, although Alexander (1999) implies that this is likely to be a function of the closed criteria represented by the inspection framework.

Another participant starkly articulated the impact that inspection was having on the setting of priorities for himself and his team. In doing so, he is highlighting the 'risk', for him, of poor preparation and also drawing attention to his perception of the status of inspection as a special, high profile activity that should dominate much of his time and that of his colleagues.

"I won't go as far to say the eye is taken off the ball in preparing, but people are well aware of the sight of their eye, yes, recruitment is important, marketing is very important, yes the finances are very important, but my God, if we don't get through inspection does any of that really matter? I mean does it really? If you get wiped out at inspection, does any of that really matter? So there's bound to be this focus on inspection and a transfer of priority, for these areas, now that's not to say that these areas are ignored, because they're not, but the priority is this because it has to be." (HS4)

This reinforces perceptions of the punitive nature of OfSTED inspections reported in literature relating to school inspections that was explored in Chapter 2 (Jones 1999, Norton Grubb 1999). This comment also contrasts strongly with the views of his colleagues, outlined below, who would appear to be welcoming inspection as a routine, almost 'drop-in', approach. There is a confidence, a professional assurance, implied in these views that will be explored further in the second data analysis chapter.

"If we've got a culture of continuous improvement, improvements should happen regardless of whether we get inspected." (VP)

"I think that what we do during inspection should be the norm at any time. My belief is that an inspector should be able to walk in on any day and it should be no different." (HS4)

"We should not be preparing for OfSTED, you should be preparing for your normal current practices." (PM3)

"I certainly think that it needs to be truncated, the amount of preparation time available." (HS1)

This impact of the framework on the notion of preparation relating to performance was reinforced by an emphasis on providing additional, often paper based, evidence relating to the Common Inspection questions during the inspection. This was felt to be largely for 'defensive' purposes; to support a position outlined in the Self Assessment Report or to rapidly help refute hypotheses generated by inspectors.

"It is a very evidence based process. You have to be able to substantiate a lot of things where sometimes you wouldn't have to." (PM3)

"We have to think 'if the question's asked, how can we evidence this?'. I think that you probably over elaborate on keeping records and files." (HS4)

The literature review draws attention to the tension between applying the inspection criteria and making qualitative judgements that underpin quantitative grades. The inspection handbook gives extensive lists of evidence that will be used to make these judgements, and the comments above are based on the use, by teachers and managers, of this information. The existence, however, of indicators of appropriate evidence does not automatically ensure that inspectors' judgements based on this evidence are watertight; some subjects felt that the implementation of the inspection framework was idiosyncratic and used in different ways by different inspectors. The notion of individual inspector styles came through strongly and the impact of this is explored in more detail

in the second data analysis chapter. There was a lack of confidence that the framework was being implemented consistently across the inspection team:

"The process almost seems like a lottery depending on which inspector you get, some inspectors seem very good, very knowledgeable, and often give you good advice, even though that is not part of their remit and try to be helpful. Other inspectors don't do that and there seems to be a whole spectrum of well, different inspectors see different things and report different things. What one inspector might see as good practice, another might completely miss." (HS1)

"We had a real battle with them to up the grading at the end of the day, despite the fact that benchmarks were good, they graded the result as unsatisfactory. In another area where I had concerns they had no concerns at all, we didn't have that argument at all – there were no significant problems brought up." (HS2)

(referring to two inspectors in one curriculum area) "I think that their approach was completely wrong. When they came in (they) were completely negative and the whole ambiance about the way in which they conducted the inspection was confrontational. Then that affected the way in which people were able to perform in the classroom." (P2)

"If you trawled round all the inspection reports you could find very similar reports and they could be one grade up or down. That's purely a reflection of the fact that we've not got automatons doing inspections, we've got human beings that will look for certain things and certain traits." (PM2)

"...the number of specialists coming who have some sensibility to the subject area they are observing but nevertheless bringing with them an element of personal subjectivity. I don't think you can change this because it's a people organisation." (HS3)

"I would like to see the inspector we had last time (from the full inspection) coming back. For the monitoring visits we would have been more suited to someone who had come through the trade rather than a general builder." (PM1)

These concerns are being expressed in the context of inconsistency or subjectivity in applying the inspection framework. This revisits the notions of validity and reliability applied to OfSTED inspections explored in the literature review chapters. Fitzgibbon and Stephenson-Foster (1999) cross checked inspectors' judgements against the value added scores of individual subject departments and thus called into question the reliability of inspectors' judgements and the validity of the classroom observation process.

The comments above do also give indications of the characteristics of what a good inspector might be perceived to be. Certainly subject expertise is seen as important, as is empathy for classroom dynamics and a desire to minimize the effect of inspection of

these dynamics. After the 2004 inspection the college identified that the interpersonal skills of the lead inspectors were also important:

“Excellent conduct of meetings between inspectors and staff (etc)....., communication between inspectors and key managers was a strong, positive feature of the inspection....the reporting and assistant inspectors were highly responsivethe Reporting inspector and the Assistant Report Inspector were highly professional who managed a process by being thorough, demanding and fair ... commanded general respect from college personnel.” (College OfSTED Evaluation March 2004)

This links closely with the findings of Wallis and Jackson (2004) where inspectors were being seen in some instances as equal partners in the inspection process. As in the current research, the findings identified that the ability to give advice is welcomed, although it is acknowledged that this is outside the remit of individual inspectors. The value of this aspect of inspection is explored in some depth in section 6.5 of this thesis.

5.4 The use of grades by inspectors

The comments above illustrate that some of the concerns about inconsistency relate to grading by inspectors. Lessons are graded on a seven-point scale and curriculum areas on a five-point scale. Profiles for quality of teaching and learning are reported but grades are not given to individual teachers. The grading is seen, in many ways, as reductionist as this powerful analogy reveals:

“I think it is helpful, that in a sense of getting a very simplistic snapshot of what’s happened. It’s rather like a number of goals scored in a game of football, one team scores three and the other team scores two, for example but that won’t tell you what the game was like. It doesn’t really tell you how close it came to being three-two the other way round, how many missed penalties there were, how many fouls were taken, how many people were taken off. One side ended up with eight players and still managed to get a second goal.

“You know what I mean you don’t get the story, all you get is the goals and what some people were like, and that’s all you read because these have gone away from the league table and people can compare these, and nationally we can set bench marks and that kind of stuff, well that approach to quality is commendable in some respects because it provides benchmarks for people to consider how they are performing compared to others, but I think there’s a danger of losing how the game went and what actually went on, what were the difficulties that were overcome during, if you’re referring to the football game at the moment, what were the difficulties that were overcome during that match?” (AP)

The literature review drew attention to the ambiguity that exists within the inspection framework: the tension between subjectivity, judgements and the requirement of inspectors to place a grade on individual teachers' performance and on overall curriculum areas. For the first time there has been an acknowledgement from OfSTED, albeit from a single HMI that inspection is not "an exact science" (Raymond 2004). The researcher's own experience of annual training events with the inspectorates is that there is often little consensus between inspectors as to what grade is appropriate, and this is confirmed in the literature. For example, Winkley (1998) draws attention to the existence of fundamentally different preconceptions within the inspectorate of grading methodology. One inspector is reported as initially assuming that every teacher will achieve the top grade, and therefore works downwards, while another awards very few high grades, as by definition, these are exceptional.

The research data suggest that some senior managers perceive that weaknesses play a disproportionate role in determining grades.

"There's only the weaknesses being picked up. The weaknesses were played on and the staff were acknowledged for the weaknesses, but not praised for the strengths." (PM3)

"I think that they (inspectors) are confrontational, antagonistic, adopt a witch finder general approach, they are there to sniff out weaknesses and then go away." (S)

There is an interesting contrast here with some aspects of the literature. Winkley (1998) reports a surprising statistic in the context of primary school OfSTED inspections where 58% of schools felt that their inspection report, rather than emphasising deficiencies, understated organisational weaknesses.

The emphasis in the literature on schools' inspections linking with the intimidating nature of OfSTED inspections and grading on individuals did not dominate the research findings in this further education context. However relevant comments in this context include:

"I think that there is a tendency with OfSTED to be demoralizing in that it is quite draconian, I think that that probably came from Chris Woodhead – the blaming and the ripples of distraught teachers who had come out of the OfSTED experience." (PM1)

"You're being closely monitored all the time, it's pressure all the time and that stifles initiative." (HS3)

"I think that there is too much emphasis on paperwork and bureaucracy and that puts added pressure on staff." (VP)

These link closely with the findings of Rennie (2003) who describes (and represents graphically!) the impact of inspection in a further education setting as an emotional roller coaster. As described in the literature review, Rennie's research participants were teacher practitioners and with this group she captures oscillations between high degrees of confidence and anxiety about the potential grades an area might receive, and also a lack of faith about what the inspection process might reveal. Perhaps there is in the current research findings, a perception of what inspection is *expected* to be like because other comments were more positive:

"There was a high level of respect from the OfSTED Inspectors, there was a real respect for the work being undertaken and that had a major impact." (P2)

"I am an ex school teacher and my friends used to say how hard OfSTED inspectors are. I've not found that, they're very thorough, much focused and very clear. I have not found personally any inspector that I felt was harsh." (HS3)

Where the research data indicated that there was more criticism for the inspection process, this was in the use of performance data, especially in the context of the pre-inspection commentary and the hypotheses within it.

5.5 The use of data by inspectors

Most of the questions within the Common Inspection Framework are concerned with 'Achievement and Standards'. Key question 1: *How well do learners achieve?* is informed by the extent to which results and retention rates compare to national averages, proportions of high grades and trends. The lead inspector writes a pre-inspection commentary for the inspection team. This is written a few weeks before the inspection starts, at which stage the evidence is dominated by current and past performance data. This is an explicit part of the inspection process and identified as part of the methodology by OfSTED in their inspectors' handbook (OfSTED 2002a). The commentary is formulated as a series of hypotheses and it is inevitable, because of the timing, that performance data will play a large part in determining the nature of these hypotheses. This was always likely to be a key feature of OfSTED's involvement with the case study college as poor data was a critical factor in the college being deemed

inadequate in 2002. Inspectors judged that, not only did the data show poor student performance, but also that the quality of the data itself was unreliable and variable between curriculum areas and the central management information system. The inspection report of 2002 comments on this latter aspect:

“In many areas, management information is neither trusted nor effectively used, and comparison of college data with national averages is given insufficient attention. Staff still lack confidence in the reliability of data.” (OfSTED 2002b)

The research data shows that improving the quality of the college’s data dominated the early months following the 2002 inspection and was a strong feature of the early post inspection action plan. It was a priority for the principal and her senior team to make a rapid impact on this weakness.

“The executive is beginning to work closely with the faculty heads in enhancing the monitoring of student data and finances at faculty level. A financial spreadsheet is in place allowing for an appreciation of cost benefit issues to be gained. This is likely to be enhanced by a business-planning tool to facilitate links between strategic planning student/course numbers and resources. Faculty Heads are just starting to engage with these tools and all teachers will also have access to them from September.” (notes from meeting between principal and the researcher July 2002)

The research data reveals that the high profile given to performance data in the 2002 inspection specifically was unhelpful for one senior manager:

“There were some issues I had with the (2002) inspection, especially when it came to data. Data is a critical indicator in the way OfSTED perceive the college and you know yourself that when you make first judgements very quickly and then you spend the rest of the time trying to justify what you think you’ve got. So in (my area), the data wasn’t good only because the data wasn’t good as in it was very poor, so judgements were made on that and then it was like finding evidence to justify decision making.....To slavishly work towards stats which are based on percentages should have a health warning in terms of the accuracy of aggregation of the information up to the headline. I think in any OfSTED organisation, you have to unpack what those headlines are and get underneath the story. I think that is where critical sensibility lies.” (PM1)

Another research participant takes the point further in expressing a view that the use of data in generating pre-inspection hypotheses is unhelpful:

“The information that goes out to inspectors is based around data. They have to make their conclusions and come in with their questions they’re going to look at on the data they get sent. They’ve got to draw their hypotheses from the information that they get. By its nature it’s data based. That is one of the areas where I think there can be

weaknesses in that if you come in with a hypothesis you are there to prove it right or wrong, you are not coming in with a neutral viewpoint. It's very difficult for anyone, by human nature, you've read your information, drawn your conclusions, you construct your hypothesis and then you're going in to test that hypothesis. It's a drawback that it's not a neutral inspection, it's a testing of a hypothesis that somebody has drawn." (HS1)

"Sometimes it's human nature that we use the data as an absolute fact, a universal truth and you and I know that facts are not data. So whether we use national benchmarks which give us an overall view of where we fit into the sector, they should be read with a health warning but they should be read with intelligence." (HS3)

It is the inference that such hypotheses, based largely on performance data, are resistant to change during the inspection itself that is significant. It may even prove to be a barrier to improvement, as one research participant observed:

"I have some concerns about the obsession with data, a complete concentration on the quantitative rather than the qualitative because unless you know how it is going to get better then you are going to end up, a year down the road, saying that it is just the same." (S)

"We can lose the creativity of individual organisations – we can reduce the risk taking of individual organisations if they are focusing their performance compared to other organisations rather than their performance against their own set objectives." (S)

The emphasis on improving the data was reinforced during the early monitoring visits by OfSTED where the lead inspector observed that poor quality data had potential to limit the scope of improvements the college was making.

In interviewing the principal it did become apparent that there was some understanding of wider contextual issues relating to data amongst the inspectors:

"... here they (inspectors) were advising, it didn't go into the report but they spoke to me and said 'If you think that by replacing your infrastructure for learner data that you will be solving the problem, you'd be very much mistaken, it's complete root and branch lack of understanding'. So that didn't go into the report but they were willing to advise me on that off the record." (P1).

Here is an indication that the tension between inspection judgements based on qualitative and quantitative evidence was apparent to the inspectors themselves; however they were disclosing this in an almost furtive way and acknowledging that this tension would never be recognised in the written report. The literature review also highlighted the importance of feedback for making improvements within the organisation and this is explored in more depth in section 6.5.

The use of performance data by inspectors is related to the issue of grading described above and is allied to the employment of a positivistic methodology to arrive at grades. This links to the discussion in the first chapter of the literature review on the reductionist nature of elements of the OfSTED methodology. Qualitative judgements are translated to quantitative grades which are amenable to aggregating and averaging. The literature relating to OfSTED and school inspections however does not highlight the dominance of performance indicators in inspectors' judgements. This may be because there is no equivalent measure of retention existing in the schools' sector but the literature reveals that similar issues arise when measuring school effectiveness. Wrigley (2003) highlights that measures of school effectiveness claim scientific status by replacing sociological and pedagogical analysis with increasingly complex statistics, where what cannot be measured does not count.

The 2004 inspection report on the case study college (OfSTED 2004b), at which the college was no longer classified as inadequate, has the performance statistics leading the commentary underpinning the grading of the curriculum areas. There are however indications that contextual issues are being acknowledged. Attention is drawn to where high proportions of students are drawn from disadvantaged areas and how the needs of asylum seekers and refugees are met. None of these comments however feature in the section on 'achievement and standards' and no attempt has been made to put the performance of cohorts of students in the context of their background or the distance they may have travelled in their studies. This was profoundly frustrating for one of the participants in the research:

"..a retention figure of 50% is unacceptable, but where the students have been excluded from school up to 7 times...?" (S)

This participant reveals that the inspection framework and its use is not value free. He perceives that contextual issues, addressed elsewhere in the inspection framework, are given little emphasis in the inspection methodology.

The notion of context does not only apply to the use of performance data that are used to measure the effectiveness of an organisation, but relates also to the impact of leadership and management on the quality of teaching and learning, as measured by key question 7 in the Common Inspection Framework.

5.6 Key Findings

The research participants perceived the Common Inspection Framework as being useful in outlining the scope of inspection activity. This framework was also recognised as contributing towards achieving accountability by articulating criteria against which judgements could be made. Nevertheless, despite its name, the framework was not necessarily seen as resulting in a consistent or common approach amongst inspectors. The way in which the framework was used by inspectors, either collectively or individually, drew attention to some ambiguities not referred to in the literature from school inspections. For example, the participants in the research did not see the framework as 'value free', as exemplified by the dominance that performance data was perceived to have in the inspection process (key question 1). The perceptions of some participants of the inspection process being based in a scientific methodology reinforced this point. In this context, the objective nature of performance data was seen to give this element a higher status in the inspection process than other, qualitative facets of the Common Inspection Framework.

Participants' views of how performance data were used extended into the pre-inspection phase. The participants perceived that much of the preparatory work undertaken by inspectors drew on performance data sent by the college in advance of the inspection. There was therefore felt to be significant potential for preparatory hypotheses to be resistant to change during the inspection itself.

Although the group of research participants were drawing attention to ambiguities and inconsistencies in the inspection framework and how it was used, there were few hints of the 'battleground' scenario reported by Rennie (2004). Nevertheless, tensions were acknowledged by the participants between the use of grades and a more qualitative description of the quality of a college's provision. It is here that the participants highlighted that the behaviour of individual inspectors had potential to show significant variations in how judgements, many of which were perceived to be subjective, were translated into grades.

Perceptions relating to the consensus implied by the use of the 'common' inspection framework indicated that a perverse effect of the framework's use may have been

operating within the case study college. It appears possible that the framework had colonised the thinking of the participants to such an extent that there was potential for only a limited range of teaching styles to be employed during an inspection. This suggests that some research participants had a perception of a model of 'good teaching' that is amenable to being easily recognised within the Common Inspection Framework. This relates closely to Rennie's (2004) use of the notion of 'rehearsal' when preparing for inspection and clearly suggests that inspection, and the Common Inspection Framework, has the potential to reduce the diversity of teaching practice to a repertoire that is 'safe' to be inspected. This finding raises fundamental questions over the durability of changes to teaching practices in a situation where there is frequent scrutiny by inspectorates.

Chapter 6: Data Analysis: The perceptions of senior managers of the impact of inspection on improvement

6.1 Introduction

In the second data analysis chapter the interactions between the inspection process, inspectors and senior managers are portrayed and teased out. Contrasts are made between the use of the framework by inspectors, operating in both full and monitoring inspections, and by consultants working within the college. Attention is also drawn to the managers' perceptions of the other inspection regimes encountered by the college and the impact of the inspection process on the use of college resources. The relationship between inspection and the impact of the team of advanced skills teachers is evaluated. The data analysis links the role of inspection with improvements made and explores the impact of inspection on organisational development, together with developing an understanding of the influence that inspection had on the college's self-assessment activities.

The data analysed in this chapter mainly address the research questions: *How does inspection impact on senior managers' strategies for improvement?* and: *Does inspection identify similar priorities for improvement as those identified by senior managers?*. As in the previous data analysis chapter, in order to address these questions, the data was categorised under a number of themes:

Impact of different types of inspection

- monitoring: the influence of an ongoing relationship with an HMI
- impact on pace of change
- full inspections: snapshot over one or two weeks
- nature of feedback: oral v written, monitoring v full inspection, use of exemplars by inspectors

Comparisons with other types of educational inspection

- FEFC, college inspector providing ongoing links
- QAA

Influence on empowering managers

- Confirms agenda, provides levers for action
- Allows access to special funds
- Impact on morale and self-esteem of staff

- External assessment of strengths and weaknesses
- Validation of improvement activity
- Degree of ownership of original findings of inspection

Curriculum specific inspections

- Evaluation of subject teaching
- Sharing of good practice
- Consistency of inspectors

Use of resources

- Burdensome?
- Tension between documentation and evidence rather than focussing on teaching and learning
- Distraction of college nominee?
- If confirmatory – benefit of confirming self-assessment
- Use of ‘mock inspection’

Self-assessment

- Links with advanced skills teachers
- Links with improvement
- Impact of the use of the same framework and evidence as inspectorates
- Use of data
- Openness of self-assessment: tension between realistic self-assessment and drawing attention to weaknesses
- Agreement between self-assessments and inspection findings
- Observations of teaching and learning
- Influence and impact on leadership and management

Mutual support of different initiatives

- Role of LSC extreme and significant weaknesses funding
- Role of LEA

6.2 Inspection as supportive of managers

The research data indicate that inspection was helpful in justifying and confirming managers' strategies. This was through the provision of an external account that may either confirm or challenge current practice through providing reminders of where priorities lie and what is (or perceived to be) important.

"I think the external inspection is a very useful window system for a number of reasons, one is that it's useful for attacking complacency, because it's quite easy for an organisation that's doing well or not doing well to just continue what they've been doing, and there's no one from outside comes in to look at what's happened when you can just get stuck into doing what you're doing, which I think is useful in that sense that it reminds people that there are certain things that need to be looked at." (VP)

And:

"Much as colleges would like to say 'we can do it ourselves' there is always the question 'do you benchmark yourselves properly?'; in theory we should, but in practice, we tend to slip away and unless somebody pulls them up again and says, 'every four years there's going to be an inspection'." (VP)

These views are in line with the findings of Jones (1999) where such external perspectives are valued in school inspections. Also implicit in this view of inspection as a constructive process is the notion that the external inspection and the associated framework encapsulates a vision of what is good practice and what works well. The limitations of using the inspection process in this way have been explored in the first data analysis chapter. These perspectives also imply limitations to institutional self-evaluation, ones that need an external perspective to provide rigour, direction and challenge. This external influence is explored in depth below, in a range of contexts.

The role of inspection in identifying weaknesses and supporting managers in specialist areas was also highlighted. The vice-principal, for example, relied on inspection almost to educate her colleagues as to the relationship between academic and financial performance:

"So it was a helpful process in that respect; coming in new to a college, it confirms what I know from the financials to be a set of weaknesses already but what really helped is that it helped to highlight to academic colleagues that things are not quite right. And this is confirming through financials that the two interlink – quality and financial skills hand in hand..... the inspection helped to show colleagues the link between financials and quality." (VP)

The link made here between inspection, financial issues and quality of provision is not explicit within the OfSTED handbook for inspecting colleges and the Common Inspection Framework. Inspection teams are accompanied by auditors who make judgements on the quality of financial management. In terms of the Common Inspection Framework this is represented most strongly in terms of effective use of resources to support learning, an essentially qualitative judgement.

There is some evidence that although the vice-principal identified inspection as supporting increased awareness of the links between quality and financial issues, the impact of inspection on improvements in this area may not be as great as she was hoping for and indicating. The 2004 inspection found:

“There are regular meetings between members of the finance team and budget holders to review the use of resources. However, class sizes are small and numbers are declining. During the inspection, class sizes averaged 8.4, which is well below the national average. In some classes, the average number of students is as low as 6.5.” (OfSTED 2004b para. 128)

Analysis of the same report however reveals a tension between financial viability and students’ perceptions of the college’s strengths. The inspectors found that the students appreciated the small class sizes and this fact is reported verbatim within the section on student views, but no commentary or judgements are included in this section of the report and it stands alone within the report. No attempt is made to integrate evidence on students’ views into other sections of the report and thus to provide contextual perspectives on reported weaknesses. This is illustrated by a negative judgement when referring to the same piece of evidence on small classes in the report under leadership and management.

The importance of inspection to managers new in post also seems crucial. In this context inspection is seen and used as an audit tool that is significant in empowering managers. This impact had a number of elements: free consultancy, in a diagnostic context, that is perceived to be clear in identifying what is wrong.

“...it makes my job easier in the inspection process in demonstrating to colleagues, “listen, it’s ‘free consultancy’” actually confirming for the management team that there is a problem. So I found the inspection process, coming straight in, very helpful, and as a wake-up call really.” (VP)

This reflects the inspection dominating the ‘lifeworld’ of the managers in that they have the same agenda as the inspectors and are using the inspection in a confirmatory way, a statement of a starting position from which to make improvements. This may also relate closely not only to teaching and learning, but also to the standard of resources. There are also links with the accountability discussion in the first literature review chapter. The research data suggest that inspection does not just drive external accountability but can also be linked to supporting internal accountability in developing the position of Davis

and White (2001) through giving internal self review a higher status as an accountability tool.

The vice-principal is also proposing using the inspection report and the inspection judgements as a way of adjudicating the priorities:

"The usefulness of inspection relates to non teaching as well, IT resources for example, where would we put our resources? That's an area that was identified as a real weakness for us at the inspection. It points the way for us in terms of strategically putting resources where they need to go. Quite often everyone wants resources, don't they? Inspection points us to the areas where we need to have resources." (VP)

She is implying that she can justify her decisions for supporting certain resources in terms of the inspectors. They become the proxy decision makers. This approach would appear to have potential to reduce conflict within the college if decisions on financial commitments can be rationalised in terms of external agencies.

The influence of the inspection is also seen as helpful in defining not only what is wrong, but also in giving pace and direction to the changes that are necessary post inspection.

"It might have taken us longer to put into action what we suspected were the issues,but inspectors put the meat on the skeleton to put the pieces together and focus on the areas to do quick hits on." (VP)

"I found it really enabling in galvanizing staff to be able to see that this wasn't the view of one individual i.e. a new principal, who they might have perceived as wanting to 'speak clean' and there might have been more cynicism, but because it was the view of OfSTED, I think that helped me to move things forward faster. So, my response to it, during the actual inspection event, was that I welcomed feedback." (P1)

"It hasn't done anyone any harm to do them as fast as we did them. I guess that if we hadn't had inspection, some aspect of human resource management, some theoretical framework, would have told you or informed you that you needed to do things a little more organically or gently in order to do it. So the pace might have been different." (P2)

The inspection process was therefore perceived as giving some urgency to senior managers to the pace of improvements that had to be made and this was felt to be helpful when articulating this change to staff. This is also significant in the context of the phases, identified in the second literature review chapter, where scepticism was expressed about whether the movement from Stark's (1998) initial phase of

'acknowledging failure' to implementing improvements was as unproblematic as he suggests.

The discussion immediately above refers to the fact that inspection was perceived as 'free consultancy'. This is interesting as the vice-principal articulates:

"leading up to a visit, everything gains momentum, things are incurring extra costs, and things escalate. It is overkill really." (VP)

This was the only time that a research participant raised the issue of cost, yet the literature reveals some doubt that inspection is a cost effective way of raising standards. Thomas (1996) draws attention to the fact that the inspection of schools is very expensive, not only for the inspectorate but also in terms of the hidden costs for schools, especially in the preparatory phase. As might be expected, OfSTED holds a different view, indicating that inspection costs are 0.29% of the schools' budget and the average cost of inspecting a further education college was £41,000 in 2002/3 (Matthews and Sammons 2004). This ignores the costs generated internally to the college. A recent discussion between the researcher and the vice-principal of a large college that had recently been inspected revealed an estimate of about £70,000. This was spent mainly on the preparatory activity, employing consultants and collating significant amounts of paper based evidence.

The lack of interest in the financial cost in the case study college may be closely related to the impact that the poor inspection of 2002 had on the funding body, the LSC. The declaration of the college as 'inadequate' by the inspectorate allowed the LSC access to the 'Extreme and Significant Weaknesses Fund'. This resulted in extra money, in the order of £1 million, being available to the college to support its post inspection action plan. This was a direct effect of the poor inspection and supported much of the college's development activity described in this chapter. Discussion between the researcher and other principals reveal that the irony of being able to access such funds directly only when in a failing situation was not lost on other organisational leaders who wanted to make improvements.

6.3 The perceptions of the principal and senior managers on how inspection influenced improvements

The initial part of this section considers the role of the principal specifically and the discussion then goes on to link her strategies with the approaches used by the senior managers. The timescale for change was formally defined in the college's post inspection action plan following the 2002 inspection and analysis of this document and notes of meetings taken during its construction reveal that the link between inspection and the speed at which improvements are made had the greatest impact at the top level of management, the principal and her deputies. Considerable control and responsibility in this plan and supporting documentation was identified as residing directly with the principal. This contrasts strongly with later activity that shows greater delegation of responsibility. In exploring this with the principal, following the 2004 inspection, she articulates:

"If you look at the last inspection report, it describes a weakness in curriculum management, and I could see, when I walked into the college in October(2001) that there were no discernible real stars. I might have done things differently if there were 3 or 4 people in the organisation shining out, who you could depend upon, they had got the right approach, they're the people who are going to be able to model how we do it and those who haven't got that, I can use those people to do peer development... . First of all when I came, I started to look for it, then I started to fret about it, and analyse why, but that was fruitless because it didn't matter why, we just had to do something about it. I had to stay here and work with people very directly, to give the people who could be stars the help to do it." (P2)

This emphasis on capacity building is related to a growing body of evidence from the school improvement field that this is crucial for sustaining improvement. This emphasis is related to the notion of 'distributed leadership' (Harris 2004), explored on page 54 of the second literature review chapter, and resides in the human potential to be released within an organisation. The inspection report of 2002 had identified a lack of capacity of management to make changes and the new principal was therefore working very directly with people at this level. Kelly (2003) identifies this as a feature of new leaders in educational settings. His research focussing on new headteachers indicates that they spend significantly more time interacting with individuals and small groups than experienced heads.

The findings from the current research suggest that, in the case study college, the motivation for these engagements was also external and resulted from the work of the

inspectorate and the subsequent report. The research also indicated that the inspection initially suggested and defined task centred activities as characterised through the preparation and submission of the post inspection action plan, just two months after the publication of the 2002 inspection report. Examples of these activities included (from college post inspection action plan July 2002):

- *Implementation of central system of attendance monitoring*
- *Implementation of student reward scheme*
- *Enforce requirement that all FE Learners have pre-entry guidance interviews*
- *Allocate mentor to all new personal tutors*
- *Decrease volume of teaching delivered by part time staff*
- *Improve clarity of job roles*
- *Implement targeted use of advanced practitioners*

The impact of the latter action features strongly in the research data relating to improvements and will be discussed below. However it is interesting to note here that the advanced practitioners were required to report to the principal on a monthly basis on progress on their work in improving teaching and learning. This approach in engaging directly with practitioners was acknowledged as an explicit tactic by the principal:

"I would say 'I want that to happen', I explained how I would like to see it happen but I would go and see that it is happening. That really helped me, because if I hadn't had that information (from the inspection findings) I would have probably decided how I thought it should happen, explain how I wanted it to happen and left the managers to implement that, and by the time I'd found out that it wasn't happening, it would have been too late. So that had quite a big impact on how I did things." (P2)

The inspection was therefore focussing the principal's activity and thinking into a very 'hands on', operational approach that, she suggests, she would not have adopted without the inspection. In the context of the research findings the inspection was therefore supporting the tendency of new leaders generally to operate in this way and this has been identified specifically as a key part of an effective communication strategy to achieve turnaround in failing colleges, where the chief executive usually has to have more direct communication further down the organisation than may be common in healthy organisations (Atkinson 2002). This also aligns with experiences in turning round failing schools where the limitations that staff attitudes and perceptions can place on making improvements can be significant (Myers 1995). Nicolaidou and Ainscow (2002) highlight that headteachers' styles and abilities are crucial in turning round failing schools. Significantly they identify that a strategy that empowers others to make

reforms is unlikely to succeed in the early stages of a school being placed in special measures where staff will not be in a position to embrace the change process.

The research data shows that, following the poor 2002 inspection, the principal was heavily involved at an operational level and took responsibility for the majority of the actions in the post inspection action plan. Amongst the criteria for approval of this plan are requirements for the post inspection plan to have measurable impacts to facilitate monitoring. Later discussion will indicate that improvements made within the college some time after the inspection were less amenable to measurement in this way but arguably more powerful in making changes. An example of the principal's evolving role includes:

"The inspectors are commenting on what they see pragmatically in front of them. It is relatively easy to have quick hits like putting in new systems, but the process of working up an educational culture in an organisation is obviously a slower process. I think here that we have accelerated that and that won't change when the inspectors have gone. The pace would have been different if there wasn't an inspection." (P1)

"It is seen as important to enhance staff morale in the post inspection period. Some elements of good practice have attracted attention nationally, for example, other colleges have been in contact regarding teacher education. A recent 'straw poll' at a cross college staff meeting indicated that only ten staff felt that the situation in the college had deteriorated with the majority indicating an improvement." (Notes of meeting between researcher and principal July 2002)

"Leaders and managers becoming clearly focussed on improving the quality of learners' experiences", "A new Quality Assurance Framework" has been introduced with service to learners central to its design and function. All aspects of this QAF are implemented only after thorough consultation, communication and training." (College Self Assessment report 2002/3)

These dynamics place the role of inspection in making improvements and the use that the inspection was put to by the principal and her very senior managers in the domain of situational theory (Adair 1988). Style is matched to circumstance and a mixture of people and task centred approaches adopted. The inspection report of 2004, however, suggests that improvements within the case study college were based on the evolution of even richer strategies:

"The consultative, supportive, and open-style management of the principal and senior management team have helped to change the culture of the college. A stronger focus is given to the role of management in supporting learning and the student. There is a

strong corporate identity and staff morale is high. The college has made significant progress in addressing weaknesses identified at the last inspection". (OfSTED 2004b)

This view is also supported by research data from internal college documents, for example:

"The Head of Faculty consults with programme managers, curriculum leaders and course tutors ... Targets are set in consultation with teams and shared ... There is a good team ethos and a generally very positive responsiveness to new initiatives." (College Self Assessment report 2002/3)

"Staff are highly motivated to improve and succeed and there is an exceptional team spirit... teams are beginning to take ownership of the self-assessment process and to make valuable contributions to a more detailed and evaluative report." (College Self Assessment report 2002/3)

This suggests that it was in the wider facets of organisational learning that the improvements became rooted. Following the 2002 inspection the research data show that improvements had their origin in easily measured and closely defined tasks, where the inspection was the major catalyst. However as confidence grew within the organisation more diverse and complex strategies were employed leading to organisational learning at a different level than that suggested from the initial task centred approach. This links closely with the concept of 'community of practice' (Wenger 1998). The improvement of the college became a shared enterprise amongst the senior managers that gained a momentum that was, to some extent, independent of the scrutiny of the college by the inspectorate. This development, together with the role the principal played, was recognised in the research data:

"Before there wasn't team motivation. We'd gone through a difficult time and because we hadn't had the leadership we were working independently but we have come together as a team now." (HS2)

"The principal's consultative style has led to a clear mission, ethos and culture which has refocused the college. The staff value the principal's newsletter, development days and regular meetings." ('Mock Inspection' Report undertaken by consultants January 2004)

"The development days are very useful. Because it gives people a chance to get away and they get to know each other, and they listen to each other. You find out some interesting things, normally you don't have time, you listen to their views. You get some good contributions coming through. It's all good for team building. We had so many people wanting to be at the last event, I was ringing up asking for more spaces every

day because people kept emailing me saying 'I think I ought to be at this management development event!' The principal said in the end 'If they want to come, come!' So I thought that was excellent. Even more want to go next time!" (ES)

It is these notions of consensus, solidarity and shared activity that underpin the concept of community of practice and the research data strongly supports the proposal that the senior managers formed a community of practice within the case study college. The data suggest that the principal fostered an environment where this formation and, crucially the associated learning, could take place. It is the learning that is a key feature of a community of practice and several participants identified this developmental aspect, alongside other elements of a community of practice, as significant for making improvements:

"It's the same people as at the (2002) inspection, it's not that we have suddenly imported these wonderful new staff, it's just the focus and the re-engaging and sharing, we do share." (PM2)

"The investment in the team has been worth it, and you turn a corner, it felt at the time (after the 2002 inspection) that a lot was coming from me, but now people are coming back and actually saying, 'We've done this and we've thought it through'. They sign up to the culture and the way of working." (PM1)

"We are continually looking for improvements, no matter how well you are doing, we are constantly looking at improving, we have never sat back and thought 'We have done a good job now'." (HS2)

"There's so much effort and enthusiasm and so much hard work gone in. Everyone wants to do well for the learners, there's a lovely spirit here. The whole college is a lovely place to be. I never thought I'd say that in such a short space of time." (HS4)

These data reveal that the concept of 'practice', within the context of a shared enterprise, refers to those things that individuals within a community do, drawing on community resources to further a set of shared goals, in this case making improvements within the college. It is interesting to note that the research data quoted above illustrates this collegiate approach as being based on improving the situation for the learner – a focus acknowledged as being a strong feature of the Common Inspection Framework (as described in the first data analysis chapter). This finding resonates with the work of Lumby (2001) who suggests that the leadership of teaching and learning in a further education college may well be through activity that relates to the cultural engineering of

the attitudes of staff towards students and learning rather than directly providing the resources that support high quality teaching and learning.

Wenger (1998) sees the development of practice towards shared ends as being driven through the interaction of two processes, 'participation' and 'reification'. Participation refers directly to the shared experiences that were occurring within the environment of the case study college. This is essentially local with idiosyncratic elements, as these experiences will differ from one setting to another, and is represented through a common understanding of specific activities and concepts. For example, the principal recalls a managers' conference before the 2004 inspection.

“Remember when we looked at this right at the beginning, these were the things we said that were the strategies that were being employed in colleges or organisations that were trying to affect major change, and you all signed up to it, and you all agreed with it. I needed them (college managers) to take a little time out to fully appreciate it and recognise it to also feel their input into it, feel they're part of it. So that they were strong when we had the (2004) inspection, confident, strong, owning it, understanding it, able to assert it as a way of doing things, and to feel confident.” (P2)

Wenger's reification is the process by which communities of practice produce concrete manifestations of their practices, through for example stated approaches to self-assessment:

... process of self-assessment is to establish greater involvement and ownership of the process by staff through gathering information systematically from the MIS, students' perceptions of course, complaints monitoring, verification reports and lesson observations to allow course teams and managers to monitor, evaluate and report on performance at course, qualification and programme area level.” (College, Self-Assessment report 2002/3)

... The Assistant Principal (Standards) then presented the written report which provided a summary of grades for the College Self-Assessment 2002/03. She stressed the ownership of the process of self-assessment throughout the College, more robust data upon which to form judgements, and the development of Programme Managers to be evaluative (rather than descriptive). The Assistant Principal (Standards) explained the role of the Self-Assessment Validation Panel and S W (governor) added that she believed the process of self-assessment had become more rigorous within the College and that the College was maturing in its ability to assess. (College, minutes of governors' meeting October 2003)

These data epitomise the relationship between participation and reification that manifested itself over time within the case study college. A particular strategy was

developed, that had its origin initially in very task centred responses to the 2002 inspection report, but then became embedded in reifications of *intended* practice. The implications of this practice, however, only became clear when approaches started to be used and developed at all levels within the organisation. This type of social learning leaves behind a trail of evidence that has significant potential to cement organisational development. The discussion above has attempted to highlight some of the key elements of this development including: an increased awareness of accountability (both within and outside the community of practice), an increased ability to evaluate the actions of individuals and teams and finally, to draw on an energy from within the community to support the improvements that represented the shared goals of the community of practice.

There are even indications that the confidence within this community had grown to such an extent that, actually during the 2004 inspection, arrangements were made for a new building to be opened by a member of the royal family. The assumption seemed to have been made, by the senior managers within the college, that the inspection would go well and that the opening would be part of a wider celebration. The senior inspectors, and the researcher, also participated in the opening.

The section above has used the research data to explore the relationship between inspection and the highly complex impact on organisational learning including the development of a community of practice between the senior managers. An attempt has also been made to use the research data to place these developments in the context of the evolution of a distributed leadership approach, from an initial emphasis on a task centred approach to one that empowered managers in the context of a shared wish to make improvements. These themes are now taken further in the context of a group of teachers with an explicit brief to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

6.4 Senior managers' perceptions of the impact of Advanced Skills Teachers on improvements

The 2002 inspection report drew attention to poor lesson planning, a lack of sharing of good practice and poor teaching and learning. One of the actions to address these weaknesses was to establish a team of six or seven Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs), initially drawn from the teaching studies area, although at the time of the 2004

inspection these were from a wider range of backgrounds. The 2004 inspection acknowledged the effectiveness of this group:

“There is a clear commitment to professional development, updating subject knowledge and skills, and improving teaching and learning. Seven advanced skills teachers support this process, and have recently begun to work with teaching teams developing intranet and independent learning resources in curriculum areas.”

“Staff with additional training needs identified through lesson observations are supported by advanced skills tutors who are used extensively to improve teaching, learning and attainment. Lesson planning, teaching and learning methods and design of materials have improved.”

The positive role of the ASTs in making improvement was reinforced by several subjects in the research:

“The ASTs gave us a real kick-start, we had a strategy for supporting tutors, especially in teaching and learning. Now we’ve diversified and people with different skills have come on board. That’s very beneficial because different areas have got different needs and staff want to achieve.” (HS3)

“I think at first it was quite difficult to break down the barrier with the ASTs, but course teams are now quite receptive. Because it’s peer support, to let someone else into your classroom to observe you and to come up with an action plan of how they can improve and develop.” (HS2)

“What we tried to do was to give people the confidence, or at least a substantial ability, to move themselves on, so we used the advanced skills tutors. To me that was really important because it was recognizing that we haven’t got it together in terms of developing you as professionals and we are going to do that and invest in that.” (P2)

“The advanced skills role is about generic teaching skills and spreading them. There is a sort of recognition that you don’t need to be a subject specialist to watch someone teach and give them feedback. Their role is to advise other staff in teaching and learning.” (AP)

Again there are some interesting contrasts with the literature and some of the other research data. The research findings suggest that inspection was originally acting here as a diagnostic tool and the role of the AST is to provide solutions through ongoing development work that is based on information from (non-graded) lesson observations. The earlier analysis suggested that subject expertise was one of the criteria of a good inspector and certainly OfSTED use subject inspectors in the inspection of curriculum areas. The research findings suggest that the ASTs have their credibility in being good teachers and represent a generic resource. The way in which the research suggests they

are operating is through facilitating legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991) within the community of practice represented by the teachers in the college. This concept has its origin in situated learning and in its original form relates to the learning of newcomers. The colleagues with whom the ASTs were working to improve performance were not necessarily newcomers, although the inspection may well have identified them as novices with poor teaching skills. The way the ASTs were working resulted in the movement of the less skilled teachers from the periphery to the centre of the ASTs' community of practice. The involvement of peers, rather than individuals within a hierarchical relationship, is central to this approach:

"The effectiveness of the circulation of information among peers suggests, to the contrary, that engaging in practice, rather than being its object, may well be the condition for the effectiveness of learning." (Lave and Wenger 1991 p.93).

The research data suggests that the ASTs were part of a different community of practice from that represented by the senior managers and were operating in a different way. With the senior managers the impact of inspection was still to define a shared enterprise – improving from a poor inspection – and to give pace and validity to their actions. The role of the ASTs was perceived to be related much more to commenting on what other colleagues were doing, with an emphasis not on teaching them but on colleagues' learning through dialogues and coaching. A productive area for future research would be to examine the degree to which learning transforms behaviour and moves the AST's colleagues from the periphery to the centre of the community of practice represented by skilled teachers within the college.

The role of the advanced skills teachers also relates closely to the concept of distributed leadership explored earlier. Leithwood and Reihl (2003 p.3) suggest that "Teacher leaders can help other teachers to embrace goals, to understand the changes that are needed to strengthen teaching and learning and to work towards improvement". The senior managers, who were the participants in the research, were empowering the ASTs. The drivers for this included the Common Inspection Framework, with its emphasis on the learner, and the weaknesses in teaching and learning identified in the 2002 inspection. Empowerment also took place through reducing the teaching load of the ASTs and in supporting them if difficult situations arose.

6.5 The impact of inspectors' feedback on improvement

The literature shows that the lack of dialogue with inspectors is frustrating for teachers (Norton Grubb 1999) for several reasons, the main being that it is not possible to explain the context of a lesson to an inspector who operates on the basis of 'if we didn't see it, it didn't happen'. Teachers know their students very well yet there are few opportunities to illustrate this to inspectors. Significantly, OfSTED discourage advice giving and feedback by inspectors, portraying the inspection process as a monitoring rather than developmental activity. The research data reinforce the disquiet that senior managers have with this approach but also draw attention to the fact that alternative models of inspection are viewed in a much more positive light.

Two types of OfSTED inspections took place within the case study college. The 'snapshot' inspections took place over a week or two weeks in 2002 and 2004. These inspections were interspersed with termly, two day monitoring visits by a team of two or three curriculum inspectors and the lead inspectors. The research data indicate that the approach adopted by inspectors during the monitoring visits was significantly more valued, especially in the context of impacting on the improvement strategies used by the senior managers.

"The monitoring visits have been really useful, because they have maintained the impetus for change, they have given feedback on a regular basis and they've motivated people." (P2)

"I felt the monitoring visit was very supportive. The teachers thought it was a good process. I think that we will come to a point where the inspection will be a good thing." (PM2)

"Certainly, the fact that they come in and focus on just a couple of areas is very good and I think that those areas found them helpful because it was giving them a sort of measure I suppose all the time about whether they were improving or not. I think it wasn't overkill. I think it's important to be doing that because you can't leave something can you and just rely on the fact they've done it and then in two years...you've got to be coming in and checking on it." (HS1)

"They came and did a 2 day monitoring visit. It was good to know that we were moving forward in the right direction. I'd have hated it if we had left it until the full inspection, at least you've got some sort of health check." (PM3)

"I think the tone is more helpful and probably not so judgemental. I think there's more talk, you know, 'you need to be doing more on that' and 'that area's coming up well'. I think you feel that they are actually trying to help. I suppose it's probably quite a bit to

do with the fact that if they sense that the staff are keen to improve and are actually listening to what's being said then I think they feel they get a better comeback." (HS2)

This mode of inspection allows regular checks to be made on progress. The fact that these checks were undertaken by external inspectors was seen as significant in validating the incremental improvements made. Attention is also drawn to the fact that the approach adopted by the inspectors is perceived as being distinctly different and more helpful. This contrasts strongly with the research findings and literature relating to OfSTED inspections described in the first data analysis chapter. It is interesting to speculate as to the origin of this different approach. The inspectors are the same as those that make up the teams undertaking the routine inspections, and the same Common Inspection Framework is used for the monitoring visits. Lessons are observed and grade profiles generated. The focus of the monitoring visits is described in the inspectors' handbook (OfSTED 2002a) and it is clear that the emphasis is on monitoring the college's progress against the action plan. This progress is categorised as 'no significant process made, limited, satisfactory and good'. The judgements are recorded in a letter sent to the college and the LSC. There is nothing to suggest therefore in the guidelines for these monitoring inspections that they should be anything else but 'monitoring' progress. With such an explicit brief it is possible to speculate that the inspectors would be less rather than more likely to give advice. The research data shows that this was clearly not the case and it is most interesting that the inspectors were behaving differently and in a way that was strongly valued by the research subjects. This is an area explored by Wallis and Jackson (2004) and would be a fruitful area for future research but the research data suggests a few hypotheses. Although the monitoring inspectors use the Common Inspection Framework they do not have to grade areas according to the five-point scale: excellent to very poor. They do not have to write a formal report that will be in the public domain, and this may result in the inspectors gaining some freedom from the formal OfSTED methodology. What would seem to be the most important factor however is that there is some continuity in personnel that make up the team undertaking the monitoring visits. This has the potential to allow relationships to be established between college staff and the inspectors and it is perhaps this that explains the change in approach of the inspectors undertaking the monitoring visits.

It is also possible to speculate that the existence of the monitoring visits implies that OfSTED has a direct role in supporting improvements after a poor inspection. It would be politically unfortunate for the inspectorate if the judgements made during a series of monitoring visits were not reflected in some way in the re-inspection findings. There would therefore seem to be an onus on the monitoring teams to offer suggestions for improvements.

The importance of supportive feedback in making improvements was also illustrated in the context of a mock inspection that took place a few weeks before the OfSTED inspection in May 2004. This was in fact supported by the local Learning and Skills Council, but the researcher, in his role as a LSC employee was strongly discouraged by the LSC National Office from releasing the funding for it. This scepticism of the helpfulness of such an activity shortly before an inspection was reflected also in some quarters within the college:

"Was that a wise thing? Will it mean that we're focusing on mock inspection and not focusing on the real thing?' But actually, I think it's worked really well because it gave people fairly good indicators that they're going in the right direction. I think essentially that most people feel that we're on the right track. There's loads to do, but we're going in the right direction and that's given people confidence." (ES)

This echoes the themes expressed by participants when talking about the monitoring visits and apart from two areas, there was a close correlation between the findings of 'mock' inspection and the OfSTED inspection a few weeks later. None of the participants in the research felt however that the two processes were conducted in the same way. For example:

"We were given the grades in the mock inspection, they were very supportive. They said that you can get to this grade by doing this, so that was very useful and highlighted some main areas of weakness and some particular members of staff." (HS4)

"We wanted the people who carried out the observations to spend significantly more time with the person observed, giving feedback on what they observed and what the teachers might look at next. When external people come into a college I think that we need to maximize the opportunities for people engaging in conversations about what they see. Sometimes there is a need to clarify some of the things that might go unrecorded." (AP)

"The mock inspection was very important in organisational terms, because it was providing people with a mirror. The inspectors would describe in bullet points what they saw as key judgments and in doing that they would help them, talk to the staff about

what they were doing well and what they could do more of. The ability to have the dialogue and to have people respecting the work they were doing came across much more strongly in the mock inspection.” (P1)

The two types of ‘inspection’ were similar in their findings and outcomes, yet the ‘mock inspection’ was valued much more highly because of its developmental nature. Although the methodologies were similar, the audiences were clearly different. The findings of the mock inspection were directed at the teachers and managers within the college and linked closely with suggestions for development. The full inspection had an external audience informed by a very detailed and publicly available report.

Several subjects saw the developmental aspects of the monitoring and mock inspections as strong positive features of other inspection methodologies they had been subject to, for example those operated by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education.

“The QAA inspection regime is almost a peer support type system, the OfSTED is more a compliance type system and the opportunities for people to discuss the findings, perhaps contextualise some of the outcomes to an organisation get missed. I think in Higher Education there is quite a lot of play made on the individuality of the organisation and the extent to which it is achieving its own aims.” (AP)

“I think the QAA is a lot less artificial, they spend a lot more time in the place with a lot more emphasis on what the students have to say and do less observations. It relies on what the students have to say about the quality of what they have received and the QAA put an emphasis on that side.” (HS2)

The QAA review process is based on similar principles to those that underpin OfSTED inspections, including: ensuring accountability, providing information to stakeholders on standards and quality, and setting a basis for rapid action in respect of weak or failing provision. Significantly the QAA also see the review process as contributing to the promotion and enhancement of quality (QAA 2002). These themes appear to be superficially related to the aims of OfSTED inspection; however more detailed examination of QAA review reveals some significant differences. The auditing of organisations’ own internal processes for assuring quality is central to the process where the QAA seeks evidence that institutions’ self-evaluations are accurate, and that they are capable of maintaining and enhancing quality. In previous versions of the review process quality was largely defined by the institution being reviewed, but comparisons

are now made with national benchmarks, which represents a point of convergence with the OfSTED approach.

The participants in the research identified the involvement of peers as being significant for supporting improvement. Like inspectors, these reviews are conducted by consultants external to the organisation but with rather more of an emphasis on external monitoring. The process foregrounds a more collegial approach than that which the literature suggests exists within school inspections.

These research data revisit the fact that it is seen as important for inspectors to understand the context of the organisation they are inspecting, and also raise the profile of peer review. These concepts were also explored by research participants, who referred back to the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) inspection methodology that preceded OfSTED.

“The fact that the FEFC left an inspector behind after an inspection was very useful. They could follow up the observations and go through how you were going to make them better. OfSTED are not interested in making things better, once they are gone that’s the end of it. The relationships with the college inspectors were very productive, because they had seen good work at other colleges and would point us in that direction. It was a very productive relationship – a critical friend who challenged what you were doing but also said that they would like to tell other people about interesting things. That helped to boost people’s esteem, the atmosphere is completely different under OfSTED.” (S)

The research data indicate therefore that the involvement of external inspectors is perceived to be most powerful when there is continuity in the relationship between them and the college and/or their feedback has a developmental rather than measurement focus. This is a significant factor in the debate outlined above that described the impact of inspection as supporting the development of a community of practice amongst the senior managers. The role of self-assessment also has a part to play here and this is explored in the next section.

6.6 The links between inspection and self-assessment in making improvements

The work of Davis and White (1998) was important in informing the discussion in the literature review chapter that focussed on the relationship between self-evaluation,

inspection and improvement, and the research data has revealed some insights into this dynamic. As with inspection, the college's self-assessment process uses the seven questions in the Common Inspection Framework. The self-assessment also draws on a profile of lesson observation grades that are generated internally, by peer and/or line management observations. In the case study college, self-assessments are prepared at course team level and aggregated into formal reports for each faculty. An overarching commentary is prepared on leadership and management and there is extensive involvement in the process at all levels within the college. Governors review the self-assessment reports and there are external representatives on validation panels that agree the grades to be awarded to each area of the college.

The inspection report in 2004 drew attention to the high quality of the self-assessment activity that took place in the run up to this inspection.

"The self-assessment process is thorough. Staff are fully involved and there is a thorough validation process. The findings of inspectors matched many of the judgements in the self-assessment" (OfSTED inspection report paragraph 34)

This was reinforced in the mock inspection:

"All staff understood the self-assessment arrangements and are implementing them termly. This has led to a better understanding of issues and action planning amongst teams." (Mock inspection report 2004)

These judgements contrast strongly with the situation following the poor 2002 inspection. Here the quality assurance system, including self-assessment, was judged ineffective and there was a lack of emphasis on assuring high quality teaching and learning. Many of the research subjects saw self-assessment as being key to supporting improvement and more specifically in securing ownership over the issues and the actions. This includes the increased awareness of the governing body of key issues.

"The way in which the governing body works now is very different. The agenda and reports are far more focused on teaching and learning. They're much more focused around the college's raison d'etre being around learners and learning." (P2)

Self-assessment is different from inspection, self-assessment is part of the cycle: it's monitoring our strengths and weaknesses and putting actions in place. Inspection is monitoring what we have been doing." (HS2)

"Self- assessment -, in a short space of time, we got a handle on what the issues were. This helped us prepare for the monitoring visits." (AP)

"We had the monitoring visits, they've picked up some things we haven't picked up in the self-assessment, but largely it's been the same kind of thing. I don't think that there are many more rocks to overturn, I don't think that there will be many surprises." (HS1)

The research subjects are indicating here that there is a good correlation between the inspection findings and the judgements in the self-assessments. One research participant saw the notion of a collaborative self-assessment process as being a significantly better alternative to inspection.

"The alternative is a system that is based on a rigorous approach across collaborative ventures. The Leeds Colleges send their self-assessment reports to a partner college for an external view. Self-assessment is a crucial process for improvement – if it is embedded in the culture of an organisation. We all know that OfSTED treats college self-assessments with total disregard because they believe that they are the fount of all knowledge." (S)

It is acknowledged therefore that self-assessment is a useful process for making improvements and that some external validation is necessary. It is perceived however that this does not necessarily have to come from the inspectorate. There is some support in the inspection literature for the view that OfSTED pays little attention to the colleges' self-assessment findings. The FEFC approach was based explicitly on the validation of a college's own self-assessment, but the OfSTED Inspectors' handbook makes a single line reference to self-assessment in three pages of guidance relating to judgements on the quality of leadership and management.

The literature suggests that self-assessment can go some way to addressing the weaknesses in the OfSTED inspection methodology that relate to the reductionist nature of the process, by turning qualitative judgements into grades and by rigorous editing of reports that lose the richness of the lesson observations that have taken place. Working with the same criteria as the inspectorates but *within* an educational organisation was found to engage people because

"..it began to give them some sense of ownership, and because it generated dialogue and exposed different viewpoints. People did not immediately agree as to what words meant or how important things were. But they did not want to arrive at a consensus that concealed their differences. They wanted to find patterns of meaning which lay in the spaces between the words."

Mortimore and MacBeath in Preedy (2004 p. 247)

It is here that the research participants felt that the strength of their self-assessment lay: i.e. not in the production of a surrogate inspection report, but in the processes and activities that lay behind the formulation of the self-assessment report. This links closely to Wenger's complementary concepts of 'participation' and 'reification' (Wenger 2002). The production of the report, in the case study college, represented the organisation of meaning that represents reification. However, it should be remembered that the self-assessment report is only an end product where the concrete outcome is unlikely to reflect the deep meaning that lay behind the statements in the report. This understanding, in the college, came from the process of participation where the senior managers were part of a social community working towards a shared enterprise.

This collaborative approach is in stark contrast to the findings revealed in the first data analysis chapter where frustrations were expressed regarding the lack of opportunity for discussion and dialogue with inspectors and therefore a lack of access to an understanding of the meaning of inspectors' comments and the evidence behind their judgements. It is also possible that an external evaluation of self-assessment by peers in other colleges will facilitate an understanding of the contextual issues that impact on improvement, an aspect that the research subjects suggest is missing from the inspectors' approach.

6.7 Key findings

The data analysed in this chapter has given a rich insight into the workings of the college's senior managers as a group within which the role of the principal proved to be particularly significant. Inspection was seen to be important to how this group created strategies for improvement within a college defined as inadequate. Several participants perceived inspection to be important in empowering them to make changes. This factor was operating at different levels; for example, inspectors had the potential to become 'proxy' decision makers where research participants felt that articulating decisions on the basis of their importance for inspection resulted in little disagreement from colleagues. At another level, inspection was seen as being significant in determining the pace and, to some extent, the direction of change within the case study college.

Inspection was perceived to have a differential impact at varying stages of the college's recovery from being defined as 'inadequate'. Initially inspection resulted in the principal behaving in a very operational way, where improvement was closely linked to defined activities in the college's post inspection action plan. In the initial stages of recovering from a poor inspection, the inspection findings dominated improvement activities and were very closely linked. This was seen, by the research participants, as a response to inspection as a diagnostic tool. As time went on, the research data suggest that more subtle links were also perceived to exist between inspection and improvement. The heavy scrutiny of the college by inspectors resulted in a solidarity between the senior managers. This effect has been reported elsewhere in the literature, where it is almost exclusively due to the combative nature of the relationship between staff and external inspectors. Within the case study college this solidarity did not have its origin in a defence against outsiders but instead in an emphasis on activities that resulted in improvements for the learner. This learner focus was a key feature of the Common Inspection Framework that was shared by both the research participants and the inspectors. The data suggest, however, that an increasing confidence developed within the team of senior managers to make improvements that were based on strategies that were more diverse and complex than those suggested by the initial post inspection action plan.

The research data also suggest that solidarity and the development of a collaborative approach to improvement led to the creation of mutual engagement and a shared enterprise between the research participants, which showed many characteristics of a community of practice. In this context, inspection was perceived as changing from being a tool for diagnosing weaknesses to a legitimising tool for the activities of this community of practice. Feedback from inspectors was key to this legitimisation and the research participants saw this as being central to making links between inspection and improvement. The participants perceived that different models of inspection had variable impact here and drew attention to the fact that some approaches were seen as significantly more helpful in supporting improvements than others.

One important outcome of the senior managers operating as a community of practice was the establishment of a team of 'advanced skills teachers'. The research participants saw this as being significant in making improvements to teaching and learning and creating and reinforcing the link between improvement strategies and changing

classroom practice. This revisits the consensus that the research participants perceived to exist between themselves and the inspectors on having a learner focus to improvement.

A significant contribution to the reification of the senior managers' community of practice was the self-assessment report. This report, like inspection, is based on the Common Inspection Framework and, unsurprisingly, was perceived by the research participants to have a close correlation with the strengths and weaknesses identified by the inspectors. What was seen, however, as a distinctive feature of the self-assessment process was the opportunity to articulate different views. It was perceived that it was in the resolution of different viewpoints that the greatest potential for making improvement lies. This contrasts strongly with the perceived lack of opportunity for dialogue and debate that characterised the inspection process and was seen as having significant potential to hamper improvement.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 New insights from the research findings

OfSTED's claim to drive improvement through inspection is a bold one, but the research findings suggest that the implication of a direct link is flawed. The findings indicate that the participants in the research perceive that inspection did indeed have an impact on improvement in the case study college but in ways that were, in many instances, unanticipated.

In the context of the first research question; *How do senior managers perceive the inspection process?*, the findings suggest that the dominance of one element of the framework, relating to performance data, was felt to be unhelpful by the research participants in supporting improvement. Participants felt that inspectors were using data to construct a one-dimensional picture of quality and improvement. The findings suggest that the emphasis on data reinforced the notion of inspection being based on a positivistic methodology, characterised by 'pre-inspection hypotheses' that were resistant to change in the light of qualitative information arising during an inspection. This view of the inspection methodology links closely with the concept of inspection as supporting accountability and generating measures of effectiveness that are perceived to be amenable to objective measurement.

This perception was reinforced by the use of grading in the inspection methodology. This was felt to have a reductionist effect where, for statistical purposes, qualitative judgements were translated into numerical scores that were subject to mathematical manipulation. This was identified as having the effect of reducing improvement to numerical increments and thereby largely losing the story behind the improvement.

The learner focus in the Common Inspection Framework was felt to be helpful and, the participants perceived, supported expectations that were shared between the senior managers and the inspectors. This shared ownership however resulted in the inspection framework being seen, by some participants, as a definition of orthodoxy, raising the potential of inspection to have the perverse impact of

constraining improvements to those that are amenable to being recognised within the Common Inspection Framework. The framework was seen as implying that a model of good teaching and learning existed and teachers would, at least for inspection, attempt to comply with this model. This finding is closely related to the notions of 'rehearsal' and 'performance' raised by Rennie's (2002) research and suggests that improvements may, to some extent, be contrived for inspection purposes and do not represent long term change.

The research findings indicated that there was potential for a clash of cultures to emerge in the interaction between the senior managers and the inspectors and the view reported by Clancy (2004) reflects some of the participants' position in the current research. In reflecting on his recent inspection one principal of an 'inadequate college' wrote:

"What he needed, he said, was advice, guidance and support. But all he received was more inspection, more monitoring, and more critical judgements."
Clancy (2004 p.1)

The tension here between the inspection methodology with its framework that is perceived as being dominated by the measurement of standards and the social learning that took place amongst the research participants that the findings suggest was most powerful in creating and supporting improvements. The research findings do not imply that it was the increasing familiarity with the inspection process itself, through rehearsal, that drove improvement but, instead, that inspection was having a subtle but significant impact on organisational development. This impact was not a direct outcome of the inspection process but a result of the interplay between internal organisational developments orchestrated by the senior managers and 'outsiders', including inspectors.

In addressing the other research questions: *How does inspection impact on senior managers' strategies for improvement?* and; *Does inspection identify similar priorities for improvement as those identified by senior managers?*, the research findings suggest that there was a close relationship between the two areas.

Different inspection methodologies and different approaches by individual inspectors had varying degrees of impact on improvement, including an evolution of strategies when the college was emerging from being defined as 'inadequate'. In this context, the research findings link with research in schools examining the

transition out of special measures when the self-esteem of individuals within a failing school is likely to be very low. No equivalent research has been undertaken in a further education setting and the current findings suggest that this transition is unlikely to be as simple as suggested in the schools' literature. For example, the current research suggests that the movement from recognising the problems to implementing appropriate solutions is far from the straightforward process proposed elsewhere. The findings highlight that the role of the principal of the case study college was crucial in making this journey from inadequacy, especially in the early phase. The initial poor inspection resulted in the principal being heavily involved in a series of very operational activities to address the weaknesses identified in the inspection report. Here the improvement was characterised in an almost mechanistic way with small increments of progress being noted and acknowledged by inspectors. As the confidence of the senior managers grew, a climate of distributed leadership was established and energies were focussed on generating improvement strategies that potentially had a longer-term impact than merely removing the inadequate status of the college. The findings suggest that inspection, during this transition, was perceived to be impacting on the pace of change as well as confirming the appropriateness of the direction of travel.

The findings suggest that senior managers within the case study college exhibited many features of a 'community of practice', which was important in supporting improvements. Rennie's (2004) research looking at the impact of inspection on teachers within further education colleges also suggests that inspection resulted in the creation of solidarity between her research participants. However, in a significant contrast to the research described in this thesis, the mutual enterprise was a combative response to the involvement of the inspectorate. The current research findings suggest that inspection was an important motivation for the formation of a group dynamic that was very productive in terms of making improvements within the case study college. This community of practice was characterised by the shared desire to move the college out of its inadequate categorisation, a consensus about strategies to bring this about and a sharing of knowledge and understanding amongst the members of this community. The research findings provided a unique insight into these developments and suggest that the influence of inspection was operating at many different levels. It was

certainly important that re-inspection removed the inadequate status of the college, but the community of practice was not merely operating to address this short-term goal. The findings suggest that the community of practice's shared desire was for sustainable improvement and capacity building within the case study college that took the concept of improvement well beyond 'passing' an inspection.

The activities of the community of practice relied not only on an understanding of the Common Inspection Framework but also on regular feedback to legitimise its activity. The research findings provided an insight into the influence of feedback that is not reported elsewhere in the literature. Inspectors were seen to be behaving differently in their various interactions with the case study college. The most powerful effects reported by the research participants were not when inspectors were undertaking a closed, snapshot inspection, but during the termly monitoring visits. Here the inspectors were undertaking evaluation in a formative way, they were not grading curriculum areas or leadership and management but identifying progress against the college's post inspection action plan- a reification of the community of practice's activities. This feedback was valued most highly by the research participants and they also noted its existence when inspectors were working within a snapshot inspection, but here the research participants explicitly acknowledged that inspectors were perceived to be operating outside their remit. The research findings suggest that it is in this area of feedback that internal drivers came together with the external influence of inspection to support improvement. It appears that this convergence is significant in linking explicit aspects of the inspectorate's role in seeking accountability of educational organisations with its aspiration to bring about improvement. The research participants perceived that it was the developmental formative evaluation by inspectors that supported the capacity building that led to sustained improvement. This gives an insight into the links between the second and third research questions where feedback can confirm, or otherwise, the likely effectiveness of improvement strategies as well as influence the pace of change and improvement.

The research findings also suggest that evaluative feedback from other outsiders apart from the inspectorate was also seen as important. A mock inspection in the case study college was seen as significant in supporting improvement and used

OfSTED trained inspectors, working to the Common Inspection Framework. The focus of this 'mock' inspection was different from inspection; it was explicitly to give developmental feedback to college staff, including the research participants. The findings suggest that this approach enhanced confidence and self-esteem and again provided a validation of strategies combined with suggestions for improvement. Here was an explicit acknowledgement of the importance of feedback from outsiders who were undertaking a surrogate inspection but with an added dimension that proved to be perceived as most important in supporting improvement. This research finding was supported by the participants' views on the nature of other inspection activity that was happening in the case study college; for example, the approach adopted by the QAA in reviewing the quality of the higher education provision.

The research participants acknowledged that the emphasis on teaching and learning within the Common Inspection Framework was helpful and the findings suggest that inspection influenced the senior managers' strategies for improvement at the classroom level in a subtle but powerful way. Classroom practice was an area that the senior managers had largely become remote from but their influence at this level was through another reification of their participation in a community of practice. They established and empowered a group of 'advanced skills teachers' to act as mentors to improve teaching and learning. This was in direct response to the identification of poor teaching and learning at the initial inspection and the work of the advanced skills teachers was focussing on developmental feedback and support rather than measurement of the standard of teaching and learning. The findings relating to the work of the advanced skills teachers suggest that the research participants were acknowledging that improving teaching and learning involved much more than the mechanistic reporting of surface features of teacher performance that many perceived underpinned the inspectors' observation and grading of lessons.

A further reification of the senior managers' practice was the self-assessment activity where discussion, debate, and the articulation of different views, were all part of the improvement process. Here the findings draw attention to the role that 'outsiders' might play in validating the self-assessment activity and judgements. It

is clear that these outsiders do not have to be inspectors in order to support improvements.

The awareness, by the research participants, of the ubiquitous nature of the Common Inspection Framework suggests that both the case study college and the inspectorates wanted the same thing: an improved learner experience. The research findings suggest that, although at a superficial level, the inspection colonised the improvement strategy within the college there was, in fact, often a very limited sharing of norms and values between the two organisations. The inspectorate was operating in two different ways in its interactions with the college and it was largely through the formative evaluations of the monitoring visits that the senior managers perceived that there was convergence in values.

It is important to note that the research findings were from a single case study, with limited potential for generalisation, but the following section of this chapter does suggest some implications of the research findings for the changes to the inspection methodology proposed for the autumn of 2005. Finally, this analysis will be put in the context of the researcher's own professional practice.

7.2 Implications of the research findings for changes to the inspection methodology.

Late 2004 saw some significant changes being announced to OfSTED's inspection methodology and the inspection framework for post compulsory education. A consultation was launched on proposed changes to the Common Inspection Framework (DfES 2004). The commentary to the consultation indicates that:

“The proposed amendments do not constitute a significant shift in the basis for assessing quality and standards and will allow a continuity of judgements to be made across inspection cycles.”

DfES (2004 para. 2.1)

When analysing the proposed framework changes in the context of the research findings it is clear that there is, in fact, a significant change in emphasis and a fundamental departure from the current methodology and values that are implicit in the current Common Inspection Framework. Inspectors, for example, will be

directed to consider:

“the overall effectiveness of the provision, including any extended services, and its main strengths and weaknesses; the capacity to make further improvements, the effectiveness of any steps taken to promote improvement since the last inspection”.

DfES (2004 para. 2.3)

The new framework appears to be continuing to contribute towards achieving accountability and links with an emphasis on effectiveness, but the new emphasis on improvement implies that there will be a new and direct interaction between inspectors and the colleges' own improvement strategies. This suggests that an increased status will be given to an organisation's own self-assessment and associated strategies and this is confirmed in the leadership and management section of the new framework, indicating that self-assessment and capacity for improvement will be assessed directly. The research findings suggest that improvement, in the case study college, was defined through the activities of a community of practice that relied on a relationship with outsiders that was based on dialogue, feedback and evaluation. The new methodology does not acknowledge how the clash of cultures defined by improvement as being generated within organisations and external summative evaluation of the inspectorate will be resolved. There is also no indication as to what criteria the inspectorates will use to assess capacity for improvement. The research findings go some way in suggesting the form that such criteria might take.

The emphasis on achievements and standards persists in the new proposals but they now stand alongside attributes relating to learners' attitude, behaviour and personal development. New measures are also being developed for assessing value added performance. Discussion in Chapter 2 highlighted that the 'old' Common Inspection Framework had potential for inspectors to highlight contextual issues but nevertheless the framework was perceived not to be value free in this respect. The new, contextual, feel to the revised framework is significant and implies that parity will be given to other measures alongside performance indicators, perhaps representing a departure from the emphasis on a positivist methodology that has been criticised in the literature and by the research participants.

The changes to the Common Inspection Framework as an inspection tool have to be placed in the context of policy changes. In July 2003 the Office of Public

Service Reforms (Prime Minister's Office 2003) published the government's policy on inspection of public services, including OfSTED and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI). This policy statement, for the first time, outlined key expectations of inspectorates. These include: a requirement that inspectorates should contribute to the improvement of the service being inspected; an end user focus; a move away from a compliance focus to encourage innovation and diversity; a risk based approach that puts more inspection resource into poor providers; an encouragement for rigorous self-assessment; the use of only validated evidence – both quantitative and qualitative; the use of an open process including the use of disclosed criteria; an increased emphasis on value for money, including for the inspectorates themselves, and the facility for inspectors to continually learn from their experience and therefore become more effective. The research findings suggest that the inspectorate's role in supporting improvement is not, as OfSTED currently suggest, *through* inspection but rather by providing a diagnostic approach that results in action planning for improvement. The new arrangements for inspection appear to have an increased developmental emphasis where it is proposed that colleges will have ongoing involvement with the inspectorate. This seems to increase the potential for dialogue that was seen as significant by the research participants in supporting improvement. However it appears that this involvement will only take the form of a single visit to focus on risk assessing a college so that the inspectorate can ascertain the level of resources that need to be deployed when undertaking an inspection of that college.

How the potential tensions resulting from this approach and the current role of OfSTED in supporting the accountability and effectiveness agendas will be resolved is currently far from clear. It is perhaps naïve to speculate that there will be a complete convergence of values as the continued existence of a Common Inspection Framework suggests that only diversity of practice that is capable of recognition within the framework will be acknowledged.

7.3 The implications of the research findings for the researcher's own professional practice.

As an LSC manager working in the field of quality improvement, undertaking the research and the analysis of the research findings has had a profound impact on my own conceptual understanding and impacted on how I work with colleges.

Although the research was based on a single case study, it required me to engage with some fundamental concepts that had not troubled me, or perhaps even the organisation I work for, before. I was certainly of the view that improvement was likely to be defined largely through measures and increments that were quantifiable. Neither the idea of quality nor improvement seemed difficult or problematic before embarking on the study but the research made me realise that improvement strategies within individual colleges were worthy of much greater consideration. The complex links between organisational development, self-assessment and the inspectorate are now clearer and I now perceive developmental feedback from outsiders as having a crucial part to play in supporting improvement, especially as a way of validating the activities of social groups within colleges that are focussing on bringing about improvement. The discovery of the influence of communities of practice on improvement was most exciting and has resulted in me approaching the concept of improvement in a much more holistic way than before.

These insights have given me greater confidence to engage with the central concepts underpinning the recently announced policy developments relating to the inspection of colleges. I now have the opportunity to participate in two *DfES/LSC/OfSTED* groups that are working on formulating a national quality improvement strategy for the post 16 sector. There is, therefore, significant potential for some of the research findings to become incorporated in these developments and the opportunity to undertake the research has proved very timely.

There are many issues that would warrant further exploration. These include the fundamental irony of an inspectorate that, up to now, has been very cautious about giving developmental feedback or engaging in dialogue regarding organisational improvement whilst simultaneously highlighting such skills as being central to supporting the effective learning of individuals in the classroom. The research findings suggest that it is in the resolution of this paradox that the true potential for inspection to impact on improvement resides.

7.4 Reflective Postscript

In this final section the research findings are considered in the context of the influence of the researcher on the research setting and participants. The influence of power relationships are outlined and used to inform a discussion on the limitations of the conclusions. Finally, the researcher concludes by highlighting the impact of the research on the direction that his relationship with his employing organisation might take.

In section 7.1 it was highlighted that the findings were from a single case study and therefore had limited scope for generalisations. Other limitations arose from the researcher's different roles in interacting with the college. It is highlighted in section 4.4 that the professional role, as a Quality Improvement Manager with the local LSC, was essential in establishing the credibility necessary to gain access to the research subjects and win their trust as a supporter of their improvement agenda. Access to the research context would have been very difficult without this professional interaction between the researcher and the senior managers that were the participants in the research. It is likely, also, that this relationship had potential to influence the research findings and affect the dynamic of the research methodology. In section 4.7 the steps that were taken to minimise the power that the researcher had, or was perceived to have, whilst undertaking the interviews are outlined. In acknowledging the existence of a power dynamic it is important to explore how this might have impacted on the research findings.

In sections 1.5 and 1.6 it is highlighted that the further education sector was vulnerable to aspects of the funding methodology and certainly the LSC is currently stating that funding will be withdrawn from poor quality provision. There was a clear threat to the case study college if the 2004 inspection showed the institution to still be failing. Although there was no direct relationship or dialogue between the LSC and the inspectorate it is possible that the research participants were not able to separate the researcher's role from that of a representative of the funding body and therefore as a potential challenge to the ongoing viability of the college. In this scenario, it is likely that the community of practice, as identified by the research, was nothing more than the natural solidarity of a closely-knit team of colleagues presenting a united front to outsiders. In this

situation it would have been difficult, for example, for senior managers to criticise the principal or her approaches to improvement. There were a few occasions when the researcher was asked to stop tape recording when criticisms of other colleagues were made and these elements of the interviews have not been used in the research findings, reducing the impact that dissenting opinions have had on the findings.

Nuutinen (2003) identifies that the power dynamics in an educational setting can have a number of dimensions. The aspects that have potential to impact on the setting of this research include the researcher as a mediator between the wider power structures of the LSC, as described in section 1.6, and the use of power by the researcher himself. The researcher worked closely with the college in supporting, and securing funding for, improvement strategies and also prepared detailed briefings on progress for both the executive of the LSC and the inspectorate. It would have certainly been possible, through these channels, for the research findings to have a negative impact on the position of the college from a LSC perspective. This aspect of the power relationship became apparent on one occasion when the researcher was making a contribution to a development event for senior managers but, when arriving early, was asked to leave the room until the previous session had finished. This relationship also had potential to work to the benefit of the college, especially when improvements were not easily measured through better performance indicators but the researcher in his professional role had confidence in the quality of the organisational development that the research findings were revealing and could reassure LSC colleagues that progress was being made and act as the college's 'champion' within the LSC.

The researcher also had opportunities to use power directly. In the professional relationship with the college he was in a privileged position in being a conduit for support funding and therefore had potential to reduce or modify the nature of the support that the LSC was providing for the college. The relationship however was stronger than merely accessing extra money and took the form of an ongoing strategic dialogue that was important in establishing the mutual respect that proved crucial to gaining access to the participants as a researcher. In his professional role the researcher was prevented, by the National LSC, for releasing funds for the 'mock inspection' that the findings indicate was powerful in

supporting improvements. The researcher worked with the college's senior managers in presenting the same activity in a different way and therefore subsequently secured the funding. This 'subterfuge' was not to support the research but it was through such approaches that the impact that the power that the researcher's professional role represented was reduced. This is an example of the conflict described by Crespi (1992) between the symbolic-normative order of the organisation that the researcher represented in his professional role and the 'ordinary course of life' – the dynamic that existed in the case study college.

It is suggested above that it was possible that the research findings relating to the development of a community of practice were influenced by the power that the researcher had in his professional role. If a community of practice did exist the lack of dissent may also be a function of the nature of such groups. It is acknowledged by Wenger et.al. (2002) that:

"it becomes difficult for any one member to take risks or engage in any activity that would distinguish him or her from the rest of the community"

(Wenger et.al. 2002 p.146)

The senior managers were interviewed shortly before the 2004 inspection and it is possible to speculate that it was difficult for them, in an environment where they were highly rehearsed in preparation for a crucial inspection, to articulate any views that were different from the corporate approach and that would be 'on show' shortly to the inspectorate. It may have been helpful to adopt a more longitudinal approach to collecting the research data in order to gain an appreciation of how the views of the research participants were changing over time. This could have been supported by a sequence of interviews or asking the participants to keep journals in which they recorded their feelings and views. The imperative for the improvements within the college to be recognised by the inspectorate was strong and the researcher felt that such an approach had potential to be obtrusive and overly time consuming and therefore become a distraction to the research participants in their own professional roles.

The research complements that undertaken by Rennie (2003) looking at the impact of inspection on teachers in further education colleges, but it is acknowledged that the findings are compromised by the lack of teachers in the

group of research participants. Rennie's research does point to a 'shared enterprise' existing within her cohort but this had its origin in a battlefield analogy where the inspectors were seen as an enemy to be repelled. This view was not strongly articulated by the research participants in the current cohort. This may not in fact represent a different philosophical position between the senior managers and teachers but may be a function that the senior managers participating in the research described in this thesis were not being inspected as individuals. The performance of classroom teachers is subject to individual scrutiny by inspectors in their classrooms and a detailed record kept of these observations, whereas the impact that senior managers make is assessed more through meetings and the study of strategic documents by inspectors. Unlike the inspection record of a lesson observation, the contribution of an individual senior manager is not graded. It may be this difference in approach that explains the contrast in the findings of the current research and that of Rennie (2003). It would have enhanced the findings significantly if this aspect had been explored in the research, but including teachers as research participants would have created different issues of access. In his professional role the researcher worked closely with the senior managers and therefore had established credibility at this level before the research began. This was not the case with classroom teachers and a different approach would have to have been taken, perhaps using more remote techniques like closed questionnaires.

In conclusion, the final aspect of the research that has potential to compromise the findings lies in the area of critical theory. As the research progressed the initial findings began to suggest that many aspects of the improvement activity of the senior managers had their rationale in a social dynamic rather than working towards validating national policies. As the findings of the research began to be shared with the participants the potential increased to emancipate the senior managers through giving them a voice in the arena of contested values described in section 1.5. This was particularly the case as wider interest in the research findings grew and the researcher undertook presentations for DfES and presented a key note speech at a LSDA research conference. The findings suggest that it was the senior managers and their community of practice that were the custodians of the 'quality' environment of the discourse and were somewhat disempowered by elements of the inspection process. The research gave the participants an

opportunity to reflect and raise their consciousness regarding the political element of inspection. It is possible therefore that this awareness-raising had potential to impact on the participants' thinking regarding the impact of inspection. The findings therefore may, in part, be a function of the research process, and in particular the semi structured nature of the interviews.

Critical theory created another difficulty: one residing entirely with the researcher rather in the relationship between the researcher and the research participants and represents a development of the issues explored in section 7.2 above. In section 4.2 the researcher describes how his own professional position impacted on the research methodology, as this role was located in the improvement aspect of the improvement-effectiveness binary which influenced the adoption of an interpretivist methodology. It is important to acknowledge the importance of the strength of this position in potentially influencing the researcher's own interpretation of the findings. The research had a profound impact on the researcher's own thinking and he became uncomfortable in working with colleagues who he saw as partners in hegemony whereby ideas, structures and actions that underpin the LSC, the researcher's own employer, were beyond question or challenge. It is possible that this new level of understanding raised the researcher's expectation to see improvement originating not in a model based on target setting and measurable outcomes but in the social learning of the research participants. In this context, the research and the findings were not an end point but only the start of a complex and challenging onward journey.

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Appendix A: Letters relating to gaining access

Dear Colleague

Thank you very much for offering to be interviewed for part of my research. I am undertaking research as a student at Leeds University. I am interested in the link with OfSTED inspection and institutional improvement.

I would like to explore these questions:

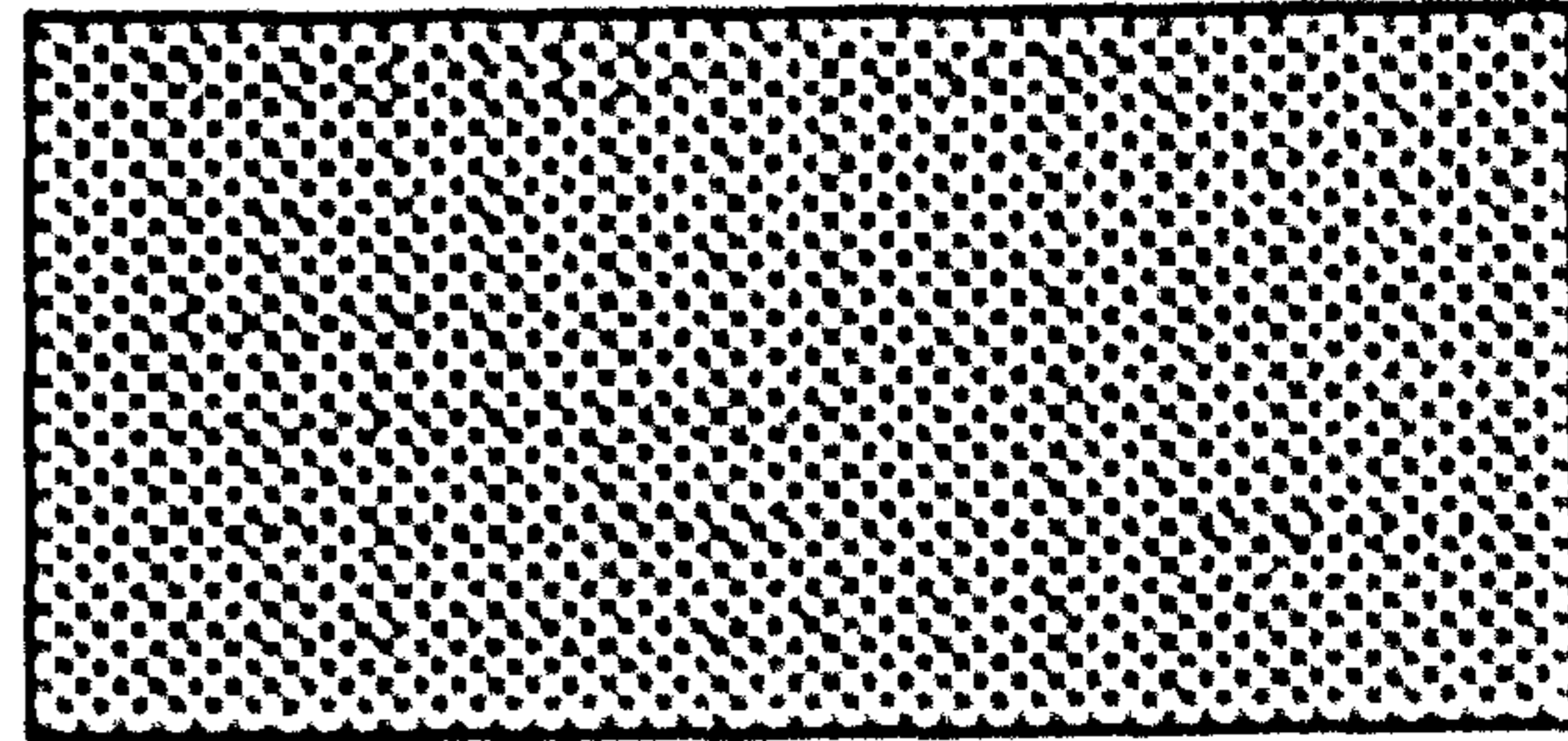
- *How do you perceive the inspection process?*
- *Does inspection generate changes in teaching and non-teaching practice?*
- *Does inspection identify similar priorities for improvement as those identified by the college?*
- *Is the inspectorate's use of performance indicators in defining standards helpful?*
- *How useful are performance indicators in undertaking self-assessment?*
- *Is the inspectorate's use of grade profiles for defining the quality of teaching and learning appropriate in helping colleges to improve?*

I would like to tape record your responses and I will share a copy of the transcript with you to allow you to make any changes. These responses will remain entirely confidential to you, the University supervisor and myself.

Thank you for your help.

Colin Forrest

- 5 AUG 2003



30 July, 2003

Mr C Forrest
 Learning & Skills Council
 Mercury House
 4 Manchester Road
 BRADFORD
 BD5 0QL

Dear Colin,

Following your request for myself and other College staff to support you in your research into links between inspection and improvement in a further education college, I would like to confirm that we will happily participate in whatever way is appropriate to your PhD programme.

Yours sincerely

Monica Box
 Principal/Chief Executive

Appendix B: Chronology in the case study college

November 2000	FEFC declares college in 'exceptional support'	
Spring 2001	New chair of governors and interim principal appointed	
October 2001	New (current) principal appointed	
January 2002	OfSTED inspection categorises college as 'inadequate' with unsatisfactory leadership and management, poor financial management and quality assurance arrangements	
July 2002	<p>New management structure put in place by principal: two vice-principals (three previously) + new post: assistant principal with responsibility for quality and standards</p> <p>Quality standards manager appointed and move begun on establishing a team of advanced skills teachers</p>	<p>Researcher joins LSC begins involvement with the college.</p> <p>Focus on supporting the college to prepare post inspection action plan. Begins to access funding from Extreme and Significant Weaknesses Fund linked to improvement activities.</p>
August 2002	Post inspection action plan agreed by OFSTED and LSC to be sufficiently robust to support improvement	Researcher works directly with the college in supporting specifically improvements in data systems and use of the Management Information System.
September 2002	<p>Vice-principal from another college seconded to support self-assessment activity in college</p> <p>First monitoring visit by OfSTED: considerable progress made by college in developing systems to monitor student achievement and retention but too early to assess impact. Still unreliable information at curriculum level.</p> <p>Inspection of three curriculum areas: 'reasonable' progress made</p>	<p>Regular meetings with quality assurance manager and college executive re progress of actions in post inspection action plan. Executive acknowledge need to raise morale of heads of school through continuing support</p> <p>Researcher attends OfSTED feedback meeting</p>

October 2002	OFSTED feedback letter received Agenda set for focus of next monitoring visit	Researcher meets with executive to discuss contents of feedback letter Works with consultants and quality assurance manager on improving the quality of the performance data for inspectorates
November 2002	Use of ESW funds to support use of consultants, including very experienced inspectors to work at curriculum level in supporting improvements in teaching and learning and retention and achievement.	
December 2002	Vice-principal's secondment finishes	
January 2003	New assistant principal (Quality and Standards) starts Second OfSTED monitoring visit: improving quality systems and leadership and management: 'reasonable progress'.	Researcher attends OFSTED feedback meeting and continues to work closely with faculty managers and executive Further funding agreed from ESWF
March 2003	Self-assessment report submitted	Self-assessment analysis (for 2001/2) shows that college is reporting improvement from 2002 inspection in several areas including: retention, teaching and learning and quality assurance but some weaknesses identified at inspection are perceived by the college to still exist. Financial management improved
May 2003	OFSTED's third monitoring visit: reasonable progress made. Improvements noted in teaching and learning and impact of advanced skills teachers acknowledged. Curriculum management improving in some areas but still some problems with retention and achievement.	Ongoing involvement in self-assessment and inspection preparation activities and monitoring impact on actions within post inspection action plan
July 2003		Principal approached for access to college as case study. Correspondence in Appendix A
September 2003	OfSTED's fourth and final monitoring visit. ****	
October 2003	Self-assessment draft prepared for 2002/03: emphasis on putting learners	Supporting SAR preparation, where analysis of draft SAR shows some weaknesses in

	first and continuous review and improvement. Highlights role of senior managers in 'championing advanced skills teachers as a successful means of championing good practice', limited improvements in work based learning	some areas persisting from 2002 inspection, including retention course management, unsystematic quality assurance in work based learning
November 2003		Interview took place with the vice-principal who was seconded to the college Sept02 – Jan 03
January 2004	'Mock Inspection' took place using OFSTED trained consultants. Highlights open and responsive senior management, good financial monitoring and dramatic improvements in MIS. Assesses all curriculum areas as satisfactory or good. Leadership and management assessed as satisfactory with rigorous and effective quality assurance. Impact of advanced skills teachers recognised	
February 2004		Interviews take place with senior managers (see Appendix C)
March 2004	Two week OfSTED inspection. College no longer inadequate. Two curriculum areas unsatisfactory.	
April 2004		Second interview undertaken with principal

Appendix C: Sources to support data analysis

Research Questions	Data Sources and Methods	Rationale
<p>How is the inspection process perceived?</p>	<p>Pre inspection Interviews with senior managers, vice-principals and principal</p> <p>Post inspection interviews with principal</p> <p>Notes of inspection preparation activities</p> <p>Minutes of meetings relating to pre and post inspection activity</p>	<p>Allows understanding to be gained of dominance of predetermined hypotheses. How resistant to change are they during the inspection?</p> <p>Explores potential impact of variability of approach between inspectors, some approaches are felt to be helpful.</p> <p>Also contrasts and comparisons to be made with alternative approaches to inspection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OfSTED monitoring • QAA • 'mock' inspections • FEFC inspections – college inspector remained behind after inspection
<p>How does inspection link to improvement strategies?</p>	<p>Pre inspection Interviews with senior managers, vice-principals and principal</p> <p>Post inspection interviews with principal</p> <p>Inspection reports of monitoring activities</p> <p>Inspection reports Post inspection action plans Reports from mock inspections Staff development records</p>	<p>Allows role of compliance model to be explored, e.g.:– does the inspection framework suggest a single model that the college is following to gain a good report, convergence of practice, reduction in diversity of approaches, stifling of creativity.</p> <p>Exploring stability of teaching practices and the notions of teacher 'performances' during inspections</p> <p>Assist understanding of the nature of inspection feedback on making changes to teaching and learning. Understanding impact of staff development activities on changing practice, roles of Advanced Skills Teachers of inspectors in making changes to teaching and learning</p> <p>Exploring impact of inspection on changes over time. Formal inspections are a snapshot, termly monitoring visits allow progress and developments to be monitored</p>

Research Questions	Data Sources and Methods	Rationale
		<p>Assessing impact on/of resources. Poor inspection allows access to 'emergency funding' from inspection. Intensive monitoring expensive in terms of staff time.</p> <p>Exploring Concept of 'over-preparation' – extensive lead in time perhaps allows focus on teaching and learning to be lost.</p> <p>Understanding of impact of inspection on ownership of data within the college – and the link between better retention and achievement and college income.</p>
<p>Does inspection identify similar priorities for improvement as those identified by the college?</p>	<p>Pre inspection Interviews with senior managers, vice-principals and principal</p> <p>Post inspection interviews with principal and</p> <p>Self-assessment reports</p> <p>Post inspection action plans</p> <p>Data analyses by college and inspectors</p>	<p>Understanding of issues behind significant mismatch between inspectors and college self-assessment grades in one curriculum area.</p> <p>Testing of perceptions of clarity of inspection in identifying priorities for improvement by college. Impact of perceived emphasis given to identifying weaknesses at the expense of strengths.</p> <p>Understanding of relationship between college self-improvement culture and inspection in determine pace of change – externally driven or autonomous?</p> <p>Understanding of other inspection models (see box 1)</p>

Appendix D: Research participants

Role	Transcript Code	
Principal		Appointed to college October 2001. First post as principal after senior role in another college
	P1	First interview February 2004
	P2	Second interview April 2004
Vice-principal	VP	Responsibility for finance, appointed autumn 2001
Assistant Principal	AP	Appointed autumn 2002, started January 2003. responsibility for quality and standards
Head of School	HS1	Appointed 1998. Art and design
Head of School	HS2	Appointed September 2001. responsible for Business and IT
Head of School	HS3	Long-standing college employee. Appointed to management position. Science and maths
Head of School	HS4	Started January 2004. health and social care, and hair and beauty
Programme Manager	PM1	Long standing college employee, appointed to management post 2000. Construction
Programme Manager	PM2	Long-standing college employee. Appointed to management post November 2001. Health and Social Care
Programme Manager	PM3	Long-standing college employee. Appointed to management post January 2003. Teacher Education
Executive Secretary	AS	Long-standing college employee. Worked to support executive team since before 1997.
Seconded Vice-principal	S	Many years experience at senior level within colleges. Seconded to case study college from September 2002 – January 2003.

Appendix E: The seven key questions in the Common Inspection Framework**ACHIEVEMENT AND STANDARDS****1: How do learners achieve?****THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING****2: How effective are teaching, training and learning?****3: How are achievement and learning affected by resources?****4: How effective are the assessment and monitoring of learning?****5: How well do the programmes and courses meet the needs and interests of learners?****6: How well are learners guided and supported?****LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT****7: How effective are leadership and management at raising achievement and supporting all learners?**