

SCHOOL INSPECTION AS A MECHANISM FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract:

This paper examines school Inspections as a government tool for monitoring, controlling, assessing or assisting school improvement in a number of European countries in the past two decades. The study looks into the roles and functions of school inspection as a mechanism that has in some cases been credited for school improvement and at the same time is found to produce negative side effects that often outweigh the positive impact incurring additional burden for schools and educators. The opinions on the impact of school inspection are divided and reflect different attitudes towards practices that are embedded in education policies in various countries. The paper also explores some inspection models that are more positively accepted by the observed schools and other stakeholders involved in school evaluation. The paper looks into characteristics of the inspectors as well as the relationship between inspectors and the inspected, to determine the future trajectories of the external evaluation development. This paper is a short review of the literature on the topic of school inspection involving an online search. Relevant articles dating from 2014 to 2019 were accessed using SpringerLink and Taylor & Francis online Library, Research Gate and Google Scholar database.

Key words: school inspection, policies, monitoring and control, functions, relationships, policy shifts,

1. INTRODUCTION

Nations around the world place undisputable emphasis on education as a means for building a brighter future and higher standard of living. Education is recognized as a means that contribute to economic growth, reduce poverty, and increase general well-being (Ehren & Schackleton, 2016). Based on an abundance of evidence, there is a growing concern related to the quality of education that has been characterized as low and in need of improvement. An establishment of a number of national and international mechanisms resulted in an effort to assess the quality in education (Kauko et al, 2018). Among these mechanisms school inspection is commonly employed in most European countries and wider. In some countries the history of inspection dates back to the early eighteenth century (Brown *et al*, 2016) while in some countries it has only been recently introduced. Different modes of governing political systems have impacted change in the practices of school governance. School inspections across Europe have also experienced a number of changes and transitions that on the first sight appear to be modernized and act from a position of support, collaboration and trust (Altrichter, 2017). The shift in policies is changing the attitudes of schools towards inspection and a number of studies report on positive influence of school inspection. On the other hand there is a body of literature that contests the impact of school inspections and argue about the neutral effects or even unintended consequences (Penninckx *et al*, 2015).

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The research into school inspection and the effects on school improvement can be categorized in the body that supports the positive effects of school inspection on school improvement, the category that negates any positive effects and bring forth the unintended effects that inspection inflicts upon schools, schools principals, teachers and students in general. There is also a category of researchers that maintain more of a neutral position by claiming that school inspections are a needed mechanism whose practices may be ameliorated by changing policies that redefine the role of school inspection.

3. RESEARCH QUESTION

This review will explore the following study question:

- What are the current trends in the development and transformation of school inspections as a mechanism that aims to improve quality education?

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1. The role of school inspection

In Europe school inspections date back as early as eighteenth century and in most countries it was instituted with the opening of public schools. The aim was to check compliance of the schools with the mandated rules and programs (Brown *et al*, 2016).

Nowadays school inspection is a mechanism employed by the majority of systems across Europe with the aim of evaluating and assessing the quality of education while holding schools accountable for a variety of goals related to student attainment, teaching, and effectiveness of school leadership (Gustafsson *et al*, 2015). According to Ehren & Shackleton 2016, school inspections are external evaluations conducted by the external officials mandated from the Governments to check the quality of schools, quality of teaching, fulfillment of learning objectives for students, as well as the schools environment in terms of safety and preconditions for the development of children. As stated by Baxter 2017, school inspection is a means of governing and improving standards in education. Inspectorates and inspectors are also considered policy implementers that drive and facilitate the achievement of policy goals (Baxter, 2017, pp 2).

Kemethofer, 2017, posits that there are common features of European school inspections. Similarities are apparent in the way school inspections are conducted. Usually inspections happen in cyclical timelines, ranging from yearly inspections in some countries, to once in seven years in some other countries like Norway. Usually a notification is sent to schools about the time when the inspection will commence and

the process follows the procedure normally stated in the handbooks or other official documents (Hall, 2017). In these documents there are stated criteria by which schools are to be evaluated so in most cases schools are informed what to expect. The visitations are carried out by teams of inspectors according the school size. In the process of inspection relevant documentation is reviewed, data is collected from the school principal, teachers, students, support staff, and in some cases from other stakeholders outside the school. The process includes teacher observations and talking to students. At the end of the process inspector/s put together a report that goes back to school principals for approval and sometimes corrections are made in case the report differs very much from the perspective of the observed.

One of the significant differences between school inspection systems across countries is related to inspection reports. In countries like England reports are made public and affect the ranking of schools that in turn may have very negative effects for schools reputation and existence. Countries where negative evaluations may have consequences for the work or licensing of schools, attracting or experiencing decrease in enrollment numbers, exemplary teachers and principals, attracting additional funding and other benefits are known as high stakes systems (Moreton et al, 2017). On the contrary, in low stakes systems like Denmark and Norway, for example there are no such implications. Inspection reports do not result in loss of teachers' or principals' jobs and schools rarely are closed down. These systems are known as low stakes systems (Hall, 2016).

4.2. How have inspections changed

Countries like England have a long history of inspection. Inspection was instituted as a form of control and supervision mandated to supervise the quality of schools and quality of teaching, including teacher qualifications. Till late 1980s schools enjoyed a relative autonomy. A major shift occurred when Governments adopted the New Public Management approach to implement as a new governing method to regulate education from the distance (Lillejord et al, 2018). In 1990s, the Management by Objectives and New Public Management became part of the education evaluation system that would help politicians formulate goals, and steer from a distance, administrators should interpret goals that would be further explained to schools, and oversee how teachers and principals implemented these goals in practice. As pointed by Moreton et al, 2017, inspection in the new public management system enable governance at a distance where 'schools are deemed not to be trusted to regulate themselves effectively and must be monitored and held accountable by external agencies'. (Moreton et al, 2017, pp.140). Accountability is presupposed to enhance education quality and promote school improvement (Hanberger, et al 2016) and at the same time reinforce competition that results in better performance. The era of accountability as Moreton 2017, describes it, represents an increased scrutiny of school practices by centralization of control, through the establishment of agencies that will police schools thus becoming an important element of regulation of public services. A regulated approach to accountability also is conditioned by the use of limited resources and the priority to add value to student learning outcomes (Sachs, 2016). Accountability was introduced as a counterbalance to the autonomy and decentralized governance of schools. The need for accountability gave rise to even bigger authority and power to school inspection. Brown *et al*, 2016, and a culture of performativity, or as Hall, (2017) calls an audit culture. In this audit culture schools and principals are held responsible for students' performance. This is considered a major shift in the Danish system for example where the focus of evaluation shifted from students to bring under the loop the evaluation of teachers and schools (Wallenius et al, 2018). He continues to further elaborate that the rationale in accountability approach is that schools and teachers are service providers, while students and parents are considered customers. Wallenius et al, continue to explain that accountability has been made visible through standardized measurements and production of public data and rankings that will be used to inform the decision makers and parents.

4.3. What is the impact of the school inspection on school improvement?

Baxter (2017) states that there is no documented direct effect in support of the claim that school inspections influence improvement, taking into consideration the fact that improvement cannot be attributed to a single factor. Ehren & Visscher (2006) contemplate on the topic, agreeing to the claim that it is expected that after inspection some action would follow leading to improvement, as a result of feedback, recommendations, and inspection reports. Improvements are characterized as indirect

depending on the type of feedback, school characteristics, characteristics of inspection, inspectors' relationships with schools, communication styles. The same authors in a later study state that the combination of provision of feedback and helping schools formulate their action plans for improvement will pave the way for schools to take positive action (Ehren & Visscher, 2010). Along the same lines Penzer confirms that the effect of feedback depends on the relationship between schools and inspection (Penzer, 2011). Ehren et al, 2017., report on a different set of factors that impact improvement comprised of setting up expectations, providing quality feedback, capacity development of educators and capacity development of local stakeholders, with particular emphasis that before looking for improvement as a result of school inspection more effort should be directed towards school's internal quality assurance system that directs and detects areas for improvement, giving more weight to the importance and relevance of self-evaluation processes as a new element to be included as part of the evaluation processes. (Ehren et al, 2017, Gustafsson et al 2015, Brown et al, 2017). Nelson and Ehren (2014) are in favor of the claim that where accountability system has been functioning for longer periods it resulted in school improvement particularly for the schools deemed to be underperforming.

4.4. Side effects of school inspections

Inspections throughout Europe and other continents operate in accordance with rules and regulations that each government has constructed to define the roles and functions of inspection. School inspections as a mechanism for assessment, evaluation, control and support have power vested in them that is interpreted and experienced differently from various actors that are impacted by the process of inspection. Nowadays in most countries, inspection has become an indispensable means of governing education (Segerholm & Hult, 2016) and they do so by collecting data, conducting school and classroom observations, talking to head teachers, teachers, students and other stakeholders involved in the education process. Inspectors are guided by many criteria, nevertheless decisions that they make are based on their professional judgment (Baxter, 2017). Inspectors claim to use data and combine them with their judgments from observations in an objective way and free of judgment. However, the accuracy and fairness of these judgments has been a source of many tensions and subject for discussion between the inspection, the inspected and Governments. A number of researchers in the field state that the effects of inspection are debatable, and there is evidence of side effects that are harming the teacher profession, resulting in negative emotions, stress and anxiety, absenteeism, disappointment, lack of motivation, decrease in creativity, fatigue, to name just a few (Hall, 2016, Penninckx, 2014).

Side effects are evident in a number of behavioral changes related to classroom practices. These practices may include schools' tactical maneuvers to impress, or disguise and resort to window dressing, excluding weak students from school on the inspection days, instructing students about their answers, changing daily routines, teaching differently, and preparing different lesson plans during the inspection visits (Hopkins et al, 2016., Segerholm & Hult, 2016., Hanberger *et al*, 2016).

Inspection side effects may be determined by factors such as school features where leadership, innovative capacities, teacher qualifications, student population and other contextual factors are at play, and inspection features, such as inspectors' personality, their behavior, credibility, quality of feedback they provide, communication style with the schools and other stakeholders as elements that influence the outcome of the inspection effects (Penninckx *et al*, 2016. Nelson & Ehren, 2014., Hopkins *et al*, 2016). The level of acceptance and operationalization in practice of feedback and recommendations, the quality of feedback may influence the effects of inspection, including inspectors' behavior towards the school.

4.5. Newest policy changes in school inspection and the impact on education

Jones & Tymms, 2014, emphasize a lack of evidence that supports the claim that there is a direct impact of inspection on school improvement. However there is a common agreement between a number of authors that schools need inspection to prove that they are offering quality education to children (Alkutich & Abukari, 2018). In support, Hanberger *et al*, 2016) note that although schools' cultures differ in many respects, the approach towards performativity as a norm has been ingrained in school culture of many countries and student performance is defined as criteria for the measurement of the school success and development.

In the words of Baxter & Hult, 2017, changes in inspection have been influenced by a number of factors among which are alarming comparative results from PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) that in many countries were experienced as what is by a number of authors labeled 'Pisa shock' that mobilized governments to initiate new reforms and changes in education and in the governing systems as well (Baxter & Hult, 2017., Altrichter, 2017., Brown et al 2017). A range of changes is taking place in the governing methods and some countries like Germany, Sweden, and Ireland school inspections were reinstated or drastically reformed in an effort for the governments to closer monitor the work of schools (Baxter, 2017). Inspections are governing tools for the governments but they are also organizations that have to undergo transformations in order to keep abreast and respond to changes in education policies. School inspections are expected to act as policy implementers as well (Dederring & Sovada, 2017). Changes include a shift in policy of how inspectors interpret their role and how they enact the policies in practice. For example in England that has had a long tradition of inspection, the claim that inspectors inspected 'without fear and offered fair judgment' has caused a lot of tension and stress for the schools by 'naming and shaming schools, and has devalued the teacher professionalism, (Sachs, 2015., Baxter, 2014)). The new policy is about changing the inspection composition of the work force employing more head teachers as school inspectors (Moreton *et al.*, 2017). The reasoning behind this endeavor is that school inspection in England is trying to build back the credibility by believing that head teachers will be able to inspect and evaluate teachers and other head teachers in a more objective way. (Dobbelaer et al, 2017) describe the importance of feedback for quality improvement considering that the way in which feedback and who is included in the process of evaluation will result in better student and school performance. Another element included in Dutch inspection processes is dependence on school self-evaluation which is part of the Irish system too (Brown et al, 2017). In her article about changes in inspection policy Baxter & Hult, 2017, note that remodeling of inspection in England includes a movement towards changing relationships, combining regulatory functions, and aligning them with lenience towards support for improvement. On the other hand Hult & Segerholm, 2017, state that an interesting element in impacting change derives from the perceptions of what inspectors feel are their aims and goals of inspection and on the other side what is the perception of schools about the impact of inspection, stating that in cases where schools believe that inspection can make a change they are more receptive towards the process of inspection. There are countries that employ a different approach to school evaluation. Germany is a representative case where Inspection was tried and abolished due to focusing on other methods of evaluation and accountability. Switzerland employs an inspection system that focuses on the process features such as leadership, cooperation, climate and classroom management (Schweinberger *et al.*, 2017). Kosovo on the other hand is trying an approach oriented towards self-evaluation combined with regular inspections that are lined towards monitoring schools in terms of compliance and the level of effectiveness in implementing new curriculums that have been constantly changing due to efforts for reforming education in Kosovo (Mehmeti, *et al* 2018). The first results are encouraging. The recommendations are that the schools need to build their capacities in understanding and conducting the process of self-evaluation and the emphasis that implementing such processes schools will need external support in capacity building. The first pilot projects have revealed need for drastic measures of improvement including professional development of school leadership, teacher pre-service training, on-service teacher training, hiring and training new inspectors, focusing on decentralization and ameliorating relationships between politically appointed heads and municipal education directors and inspectors that may have been appointed based on political affiliations. The international community is still investing and offering support in capacity building but according to the MSI (Management Systems International) a USAID funded project, the efforts are directed at many levels, however, there is no coordination between donors, and therefore, a lot of support work is not resulting in significant improvement. Efforts are being focused on building capacities and structures to support decentralization supported by accountability mechanisms. The Inspectors are focusing mainly on assisting schools in the implementation of curricula, and teacher evaluation. There is movement towards assisting schools conduct self-evaluation processes. All these uncoordinated efforts, are resulting in high levels of confusion among educators regarding all the reforms that are taking place.

5. METHODOLOGY FOR THE REVIEW

The articles used in this paper were selected based on their relevance to school inspection as a mechanism for evaluation. The search yielded a number of results that focus on school inspection as a mechanism for school improvement. The search was expanded by adding terms that relate to effects and side effects of school inspection which in fact shows a tendency of decreasing in number in the recent years. Being that school inspections are implementers of reforms in education through education policies and policy shifts more articles were identified that address the concepts of policy in education, reforms in education including reforming the inspection work force. A number of articles connected to teacher performance, and school evaluation mention inspection as a mechanism closely connected to new trends in education. Reference lists are a good source containing information on authors and topics researched related to inspection. After filtering the available sources about 50 articles were selected for review. The data bases used were Taylor and Francis Library, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar online databases. Research Gate proved to be a valuable source with a few authors making their work available on request.

6. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The literature review presents the current situation related to school inspection, modalities of inspection used in the European countries. Countries differ in their policies how they implement change and reform in education by shifting to new forms of governance, (Baxter, 2017). Inspection work force is also undergoing transformation in response to new policies where inspection is still maintaining the standards of legal compliance and professional approach towards standards while taking a more supportive and development stance. A new approach is a move towards the proportional risk-based inspection that takes the local context into consideration. The review reveals that self-evaluation is gaining in importance and inspectors are relying on the data and findings through which schools present themselves.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The school inspection as a mechanism that has been part of a school evaluation for quite some time, is still very much present in many educational systems in Europe. It is a mechanism that governments use to monitor and evaluate schools. The purpose of inspection is school improvement through offering schools external insight on how well they are performing compared to other schools nationally or internationally. By focusing on performance data inspection keeps watch of standards in education by collecting and interpreting data, exercising judgment, and informing the public about the quality of education schools offer to children (Ozga, 2016). In the market economy that fosters competitiveness schools are pressured to comply with standards of evaluation responding with a number of reforms that affect the work of teachers, their relationship with students and other stakeholders. One such reform was the tendency to assign more autonomy to schools by allowing them to make decisions related to hiring, curriculums, professional development, and be responsible for the results. Inspections have also been reformed moving from a regime of checking for compliance towards focusing more on development and helping schools use inspection as a support mechanism that offers schools fresh perspective on strengths and weaknesses. The way inspection provides guidance in the form of feedback, opening way for schools to present themselves through self-evaluation, helping schools interpret data, shows a tendency of inspection to improve relationships with schools and relevant stakeholders. The current shifts in policy are calling for inspections to adapt and be flexible within the realm of keeping their professional standards but also moving away from turning education systems into identikit models that do not take into consideration differences in national and international backgrounds and contexts by trying to use the same performativity system and expecting comparable results (Outhwaite & Tabberer, 2017).

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