

A CONTINUUM OF APPROACHES TO SCHOOL INSPECTIONS: CASES FROM EUROPE

Rossitsa Simeonova, Yonka Parvanova

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (Bulgaria)

Martin Brown, Sarah Gardezi, Joe O'Hara, Gerry McNamara

Dublin City University (Ireland)

Laura del Castillo Blanco

Regional Government of the Autonomous Community of Extremadura (Spain)

Zacharoula Kechri, Eleni Beniata

Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (Greece)

Abstract. School inspection systems have undergone a transformation in response to the changing social and economic scenarios across Europe. However, two major approaches can easily be identified that also define the two ends of the continuum of the approaches to school inspection. On one end is a high stake sanctions oriented inspection while on the other end is the low stakes advisory inspection. The elements that contribute to the rigour of school inspection include governance arrangements, statutory powers of the inspectorate including powers of sanction, the forms and frequency of inspection visits, the level of emphasis on school self-evaluation and action planning for improvement; and availability of support services for the schools. The current paper presents four cases from Europe: Bulgaria, Ireland, Greece and Spain (Extremadura) describing how school inspection is organised in these countries as defined in the governing legislation and to which end of the continuum their inspection system is tilted in the light of that case's performance on the above indicators. Towards the end, this paper makes a comparison of the cases and suggests why the relationship of trust and respect between inspectors and the inspected is stronger in some cases and how developing inspection systems can benefit from analysing the established systems.

Keywords: continuum; high stakes; low stakes

Introduction

Prevailing school inspection systems in Europe have evolved tremendously over the last decade depending on the societal (feedback) and decision making needs across the countries. Systems have been striving to achieve a balance and cohesion across different mechanisms that have developed over time to meet the demands

and expectations of stakeholders working within schools and in the wider school community. However, there are two dominating approaches to school inspection across Europe which represent two ends of a kind of school inspection continuum: namely high stakes, sanctions oriented inspection and low stakes advisory inspection. There are several factors that tend to position each system on this continuum including governance arrangements, statutory powers of the inspectorate, roles and responsibilities of the school inspectors as in the legislation; the forms and frequency of inspection visits, level of emphasis on school self-evaluation (SSE) and action planning for improvement and availability of support services for the schools (NIAR). Every inspection system has a varied combination of these mechanisms that defines its character and helps to place that system on the inspection approach continuum.

The paper at hand aims to present a comparative analysis of the inspection systems of four countries – Bulgaria, Ireland, Greece and Extremadura (one of the autonomous communities in Spain henceforward will be referred to as Spain) – on the basis of the above mentioned factors. The purpose of the study is to explore the extent to which each inspection system is tilted towards one end of the continuum or the other. The paper commences with a review of literature to determine the dominant trends that shape the current systems of school inspection, the various tasks and activities that inspectors are generally involved in and the level and forms of support offered by the inspectorates.

Methodology

The overarching methodology used in this study is desk research grounded in an evidence-based qualitative analysis of the key source documents regarding school evaluation policies and practices in these four countries. Document analysis may serve multiple purposes but mainly it provides information about the background of the research as well as verification of findings from other sources (Bowen, 2009). Bowen sums up the overall concept of document analysis as a process of “evaluating documents in such a way that empirical knowledge is produced and understanding is developed” (2009). We employed thematic as well as direct analysis of the text to access the literal and surface meaning (Punch, 2005) using O’ Leary’s (2014) two major techniques: Interview technique and content analysis. In interview technique, a researcher uses text as a respondent or informant. The researcher asks questions and then explores answers in the text for document analysis while in content analysis, the researcher notes use of particular words, phrases and concepts. The information gathered through the documents is organised according to the following themes: governance arrangements for inspectorates, statutory powers of inspectorates, the roles and responsibilities of school inspectors, forms and frequency of inspection visits, emphasis on self-evaluation and improvement planning and availability of support services for the schools. To ensure authenticity and reliability of the data and to form overarching themes for the analysis, documents of government and regional education bodies are consulted.

Based on the afore mentioned themes each national research team has prepared a country specific report on the role and responsibilities of inspectorates of education in the light of their legislation and regulations.

Literature Review

The global spread of neoliberalism has changed the way governments control the public services including education and laid emphasis on the decentralization of power to give autonomy to school to take decisions for the optimum allocation of resources and ensure better learning outcomes. Moreover, after the European economic crisis of 2008 improvement in educational standards has emerged as the fastest driver of economic productivity and competitiveness (Baxter & Hult, 2017; Brown et al., 2016). Therefore, there is a widely perceived need for quality assurance systems that retain traditional 'regulatory rigour' whilst leading to academic excellence through school improvement in the shortest possible time (Baxter & Hult, 2017).

A wide range of approaches to school inspection are in operation across Europe, as inspection is, according to Clark (2017), a 'critical weapon in the armoury of states' that allows the governments to maintain control of Educational provision from a distance. Brown et al. (2018) however, identify two distinct camps. On one end, there are inspectorates driven by reliance on hard data, concerned primarily with monitoring and accountability and imposing sanctions on schools not meeting standards e.g. Ofsted, Swedish School Inspectorate and Netherlands Inspectorate of Education. On the other end, we have models of school inspection that are 'more focussed on a variety of data sources, interested in school self-evaluation and more concerned with collaborative improvement' as in Scotland and some parts of Central and Eastern Europe. These contrasting approaches, with most other systems situated somewhere between them, represent two ends of the continuum of school inspections regimes: high stakes sanctions oriented inspection and low stakes advisory inspection.

The strength of both approaches to school inspection is determined by the degree of presence of several features such as, governance arrangements, statutory powers of inspectorate, role and responsibilities of the school inspectors as in the legislation; the forms and frequency of the inspection visits, level of emphasis on school self-evaluation and improvement planning; and availability of support services for the schools¹⁾. The varying combination of these features contribute towards the accountability pressure (Altrichter & Kemethofer, 2015) and make them either high or low stake inspection.

Inspection of education, as Ozga et al. (2013) explain, is a governing practice and inspectors are viewed as policy implementers and shapers (Baxter, 2017; Barber, 2004). With such a significant profile and role, a key question is who governs and leads the inspectorate. For the governance of inspectorates a range of different models are prevailing internationally; in some countries for example, Australia, Denmark and Ireland it is under the auspices of the Ministry of Education while in

some, the inspectorate is an autonomous body reporting directly to the parliament as in England where Ofsted is a non-ministerial government department reporting to Parliament. Likewise, ERO in New Zealand is a school evaluation department outside the Ministry of Education. Barber (2004) asserts that an inspection system independent of government is most effective as it allows government to be held to account, in addition to the education service itself, whereas, when the inspectorate of Education is situated within the Ministry of Education there is a strong likelihood of conflict of interest and inspectors' valid reporting on the education policies may get diluted. In countries where inspectorates operate outside of the ambit of Ministry of Education relish greater autonomy and probably more objectivity exists.

The authority that tasks the inspectorate with the responsibility for governance of Education is streamlined in every country through legislation. The statutory powers of inspectorates usually include that inspectors can enter schools, early childhood and other educational services and are entitled to receive such information as they consider necessary for the purpose of inspection. Working for any inspectorate puts the school inspectors in 'a position of influence'²⁾ and confers upon them 'enforcement powers' and 'powers to inspect' (Ofsted, 2009)³⁾. The Education Review Officers Code of Conduct²⁾ maintains that 'Review Officers are statutory officers designated under Part 28 of the Education Act 1989, and they exercise powers of entry, investigation and reporting through the various sections of that Part of the Act'. Similar statutory powers are stated in the inspectors Code of Practice, DES (Ireland) (2015)⁴⁾.

An Inspector shall have all such powers as are necessary or expedient for the purpose of performing his or her functions and shall be accorded every reasonable facility and co-operation by the board and the staff of a school or centre for education.

A person who obstructs or interferes with an Inspector in the course of exercising a power conferred on the Inspector by this section or impedes the exercise by the Inspector of such a power commits an offence and is liable – to conviction and fine⁴⁾.

The regulations for inspectorate not only define the powers vested in them, their various sections also describe the roles and responsibilities of the inspectors as well. The role and function of the inspectorate as an agent for accountability and improvement has changed considerably since its inception which dates back to the 19th century (Brown, McNamara and O'Hara, 2016b). Nevertheless, there are certain features that are common in almost all inspectorate to a lesser or greater extent such as, setting standards and quality criteria for school inspections; evaluating schools by gathering evidence while onsite and making use of the information about students achievement; producing school inspection reports highlighting strengths and areas for improvement and giving recommendations; and encouraging schools to engage in self-evaluation to complement the findings of external inspection and develop targetted school improvement plans (Brown, McNamara & O'Hara, 2016a; Brown et al., 2016b; Brown, 2013).

As per their inspection regulations various inspectorates, being the largest depositories of empirical data, involve school inspectors in a number of other tasks over and above the one mentioned above. In many countries, inspectors review curriculum and syllabus and contribute towards curriculum development and are responsible for teachers' accreditation and monitor in-service training. The supervision of test and examinations and the development and maintenance of a database related on the education system are also included in their professional repertoire. The overarching findings published in national or Chief Inspectors' Reports may become national priorities thereby stretching the role of school inspectors from policy implementers to policy shapers.

In most of the inspectorates there is now a greater emphasis on 'school self-evaluation (SSE) as requisite part of the inspection and school improvement process' (Macbeath, 2006; Nevo, 2001). Even in the high stakes inspection systems such as Ofsted, SSE is regarded as a part of the school's continuous review and improvement process (Ofsted, 2009). This is a means of giving autonomy to schools to evaluate their performance either against their National Standards or the criteria defined by the inspectorates and to set targets for their improvement. In this way, the evaluation function is given to the school with external evaluation taking the shape of inspecting schools' approaches to evaluation (OECD). In many countries, schools are bound by regulation to carryout SSE and prepare action plans for school improvement e.g. Australia, Scotland and Ireland while there are countries where self-evaluation is not a requirement such as Greece, Italy and Mexico (NAIR) though action planing for improvement is obligatory. In instances where inspectorates prescribe tools and templates for SSE and action planning, they maintain a controlling influence on school practices.

All inspection frameworks or codes of practice allude to 'support for schools' through quality feedback, both verbal and written to all the stakeholders.

'One of the central ways in which we evaluate, advise and support is by visiting and conducting inspections in schools ... We disseminate, through discussion and publication, the findings of our evaluations and we publish advice as to how the work of education providers and the learning of pupils/students can be improved' (DES).

Inspectorates have developed support materials as well as guidelines for schools to carry out self-evaluation for example, *Effective Internal Evaluation for Improvement*⁵⁾, *Looking at Our School*⁶⁾ and *How Good is Our School*⁷⁾. The dedicated websites of inspectorates have all relevant tools, guidelines and publications that help schools to understand the expectations and inspection practices as well as give them access to national reports to raise their awareness about the research and innovation in education in their country. Further, as in Ireland and the UK, the inspectorates make recommendations to professional development services for teachers in the country to update their in-service training programmes in light of inspection findings.

Inspection frameworks and websites provide comprehensive information about the forms and frequency of the inspections visits. In almost all OECD countries evaluations by school inspectorates tend to be required every three to five years. The frequency of visits depends on the types of schools covered; there may be different return cycles for primary or secondary schools. Most OECD countries have regulations that require lower secondary schools to be inspected regularly which implies assuring quality of education provision long before students actually sit for any standardised assessment.

Based on purpose, there are several forms of school inspections but the most common are cyclical, subject inspections, incidental, differentiated or follow through and thematic. The differentiated inspections are characterised by ‘targeting inspection resources to potentially failing schools’ based on the findings of analysis of documents, previous inspection reports, and/or student achievement results (including self-evaluation documentation) submitted to the Inspectorate (Erhen et al., 2015). There is a big debate about the utility of differentiated inspection in school improvement which is beyond the scope of this paper but it is worth noting that, as compared to cyclical inspection differentiated inspections put more “accountability pressure” on schools because they expose them to potentially being subjected to ‘special measures’ (Altrichter & Kemethofer, 2015). In contrast, thematic inspections do not put pressure on individual schools as they are concerned with the broad topics of teaching and schooling such as use of ICT in classrooms or the effectiveness of inclusive education in schools. Incidental or without notice inspections can be very stressful for schools and are predominantly supervisory in nature.

Regardless of its form, school inspections are consequential (Altrichter & Kemethofer, 2015). In the case of schools that are above the threshold level, inspection may simply re-orientate their school improvement endeavours but for the low performing schools it may result in sanctions. These sanctions can range between increased inspection visits, financial fines and in very adverse cases, withdrawal of school license, teacher or headteacher suspension or removal or even school closure.

The next section of the paper provides a review of the prevailing inspection systems in Bulgaria, Ireland, Greece and Spain in the context of the features that help place any system on the continuum of approaches to school inspection.

Findings

Governance arrangements

In all four countries, the management structure and mechanisms of school inspections vary greatly. School inspectors were introduced in *Bulgaria* for the first time in 1878 as officials, subordinated to the Secretary of Education, were made responsible for executing control, external evaluation and support of schools and teachers in respective regions of the country. School inspection and supervision has been changed with the new *Preschool and School Education Act*)⁸⁾ introduced

in 2016 and some of its elements are still developing. Inspection has become a part of ‘quality management’ of the education system. A new body has been established – the *National Inspectorate of Education*, subordinated to the Council of Ministers, instead of the Secretary of Education. With this new regulation, the National Inspectorate has emerged as a powerful regulatory authority.

For varying reasons such as the demographics of *Ireland*, and unlike other countries such as Austria and Spain, there are no regional level inspectorates in Ireland. All decisions relating to the role, function, management and administration of inspection together with associated evaluation frameworks are implemented at a national level under the patronage of the Department of Education and Skills (DES).

The inspection of schools in *Greece* mainly through the evaluation of teachers ceased in 1982 when the institution of the "Inspectors" was replaced by "School Advisors" (Law 1304/82). However, the Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs (MERRA) which is the national policy maker in education planning and the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP) that works under MERRA, plans and organizes programmes for school improvement at a national level, announced a new Law 4547/12-6-2018⁹⁾ in 2018 about the decentralization of the educational system. In the first phase of the implementation of this law, there are now Regional Centers of Educational Support ("PEKES") run by Regional Directors of Education (PDE). Every Regional Center of Educational Support ("PEKES") will have the Coordinators of Educational Work (former School Inspectors/Advisors), who have to facilitate the implementation of the national educational policy as decided by the MERRA and recommended by the IEP and participate in the evaluation process of schools¹⁰⁾. However, this new policy is still in the process of settling down, but one point is clear, namely, that regulation and school inspection is to be regionalized and run by the PDE.

In the case of *Spain*, the Ministry of Education has overall responsibility for education at national level. The Department of Education and Employment (*Consejería de Educación y Empleo*), as part of the regional government, is responsible for regulating and implementing education and training in each region. The Inspectorate of Education's functions, responsibilities and main organizational procedures are described in the Education Acts for autonomous communities.

Statutory powers of inspectorate

In *Bulgaria* the *Regulations for kindergartens and schools' inspection*¹¹⁾, issued by the Secretary of Education and enforced in December 2016 specifies that ‘*the aim of the inspection is to determine the level of accomplishment of the state educational standards and to formulate an evaluation of the strengths of the educational institutions' activities and of the aspects that need improvement*’. It is stated that inspection consists of three interrelated activities: 1) *gathering information* about school's or kindergarten's activities based on specific indicators; 2) *evaluation* – comparing gathered data with the criteria set by the National Inspectorate;

3) *support* – providing recommendations for improvement of inspected schools or kindergartens. Former *Regional inspectorates of education* (RIE)¹² are transformed into *Regional departments of education* (RDE) and their authority and functions do not differ significantly to the ones RIE have previously had. They have supportive and control functions over the schools in the region, providing support for implementation of guidelines for improvement provided by the National inspectorate or other relevant governing bodies. This regulation also gives power and authority to the inspectors to enter a school, observe its operations and review documents.

In the case of **Ireland**, with the implementation of the Education Act of 1998 (Government of Ireland), inspectors were given a legislatively defined function: ‘The functions of an Inspector shall be: to support and advise recognised schools, centres for education and teachers on matters relating to the provision of education...’ – Government of Ireland, Education Act, 1998, section 13 (3). By law, an inspector has all such powers as are necessary to extract information about how well teaching and learning is organised in the school and the quality of school leadership and management and curriculum provision and shall be accorded every reasonable facility and cooperation by the schoolboard and staff. During the course of inspection, inspector(s) will talk to staff, the board of management, students and parents, will attend classes and look into school documents and students’ work. The results of the visit will then be written up and discussed with the school, after being presented to the relevant stakeholders. The results are published on the DES website¹³.

In **Greece**, the current Law 4547/12-6-2018¹⁴, has introduced a regionalized supervisory and support system through PEKES and the Educational Coordinators who will participate in the evaluation process of the work of school units but there is not much clarity as yet about the statutory powers of the inspectorate. However, while detailing the roles and responsibilities of the Coordinators of Education Work it is mentioned that they will provide the necessary tools and expertise to schools and towards the end of the year send to the schools the assessment reports stressing the fields to be improved and give recommendations for school improvement as well as CPD for teachers. From this, it can be assumed that this law allows them to visit schools and observe teaching and learning and carry out document scrutiny. According to a UNESCO Report (2017) in Greek educational reality there are neither ‘standards’ to be achieved nor inspections being carried out. In addition, the collection of educational data is rather un insightful and slow. The publication of educational statistics is something that takes place occasionally. Therefore, only once this law is fully enforced can the new statutory powers of the inspectorate be implemented, and their effectiveness assessed.

The Organic Law of Education¹⁵ in **Spain** provides a general legal framework for the Inspectorate, detailing its aims, functions and powers, but models of organisation and operation are quite different in the autonomous communities and outside the control of the Ministry of Education. In Extremadura, the Inspector-

ate of Education's functions, responsibilities and main organizational procedures are detailed in the Extremadura Education Act¹⁶⁾. This establishes that Inspection shall contribute to education quality and equity improvement. The Inspectorate by law is required to participate in the evaluation of the education system and, in particular, in actions by the Agency of educational evaluation of Extremadura in the terms determined by regulation. The inspectorate ensures compliance with the standing provisions and the principles and values of the education system. The Corps of Inspectors according to the Education Act has a dual function: to oversee the activities in schools, to which they have free access, and to examine and assess academic, pedagogical and administrative documentation and to interview anyone in the school, including the management team, teaching staff, students and parents.

The roles of Inspectors as defined in legislation

The National Inspectorate in **Bulgaria** was established in mid – 2018, under the *Regulation No 15/8.12.2016 for Inspection of kindergartens and schools*, and has developed and tested inspection criteria¹⁷⁾. In the Preschool and school education act, inspection is defined as a '*process of developing a total, independent expert evaluation of the quality of education a kindergarten or a school provides at a certain time of its activity and defining guidelines for improvement*'. The definition refers only to assuring accountability and does not mention if inspection has a function in supporting school improvement. However, it is expected that the National Inspectorate will provide clear guidelines for school improvement and regional departments of education will support schools in their implementation in practice.

*Regulations for the structure and functions of the regional departments of education*¹⁸⁾ issued by the Ministry of Education and enforced in February 2017, describe the role of the Regional Departments of Education (RDE) as regional bodies of the Ministry of Education. The term 'inspection' does not appear anywhere in the document, instead it refers to *control* and *checks* but this appears to mean members of RDE will have rights to entry and investigation in schools. While the suspended *Quality management regulations No. 16/8.12.2016*¹⁹⁾ gives the details about school improvement planning and the role of self-evaluation in this. The RDE, as mentioned above, has an important role in monitoring and supporting schools' self-evaluation and improvement planning. Schools are expected to decide development strategy and prepare a 2-year action plan which are supposed to be accepted by school's Pedagogical council and approved by the school Community Council (parental body for civic control and supervision of school management). School improvement measures need to address the guidelines provided to the school by the National Inspectorate after total inspection.

After the promulgation of Education Act 1998 (**Ireland**), the school inspectors' fundamental role has been to support and advise schools however, with the changing trends in educational supervision, the demands on their advisory role has grown dramatically. For example, in 2012 DES Circular Nos. 0040/2012²⁰⁾ and

0039/2012²¹⁾ required all primary and post-primary schools to conduct self-evaluations starting in the academic year 2012/2013. Moreover, the process of SSE was also to be in accordance with the inspectorate-devised SSE guidelines²²⁾. In light of this circular, the inspectorate in Ireland was required not only to redevelop frameworks for school inspection and but also guidelines on school-self-evaluation and improvement planning. This task of school capacity building to carryout SSE and school improvement planning to meet the legislative requirements has been added to the advisory role of a school inspector.

The Inspectorate in Ireland is not just a policy implementer, it has its role in policy making as well. For example, the Irish Inspectorate recognised issues relating to lack of data informed decision making (DIDM). This resulted in the redevelopment of the SSE guidelines referred to above (2016)²³⁾ emphasising DIDM and it has become a national priority along with Assessment for Learning. Both DIDM and AfL practices are at the core of the new Junior Cycle Curriculum.

In the case **Greece**, MERRA has introduced a regionalized educational system in which education units will be supported by interdisciplinary scientific teams; it also imposes the planning and evaluation of school work as well as a new selection system for educational management staff i.e. the Coordinators of Educational Work who will be responsible to support school improvement plans and school self-evaluation process.

In this new system, Regional Centers of Educational Support (PEKES) are the regional units while Educational Counseling and Support (KESY) and the Centers for Sustainable Development (KEA) are the local ones to support and supervise the school planning and self-evaluation. The Coordinators are the members of the PEKES. Each member of the PEKES is responsible for providing direct support to a number of school units on scientific and pedagogic topics. Each school's teachers together with the Principal should discuss the proposals and ideas in order to decide on the annual priorities for improvement. Every school unit shall prepare a collective draft and at the end of the academic year, its final evaluation which will be notified to PEKES. The Coordinators of the PEKES will continuously support the schools by providing the necessary tools and expertise while at the end of the year, they will draw up and send to the schools the assessment reports stressing the fields to be improved, proposing solutions and taking initiatives for training courses which will reinforce the teachers of a certain area sharing common needs.

The **Spanish** Constitution of 1978 provides that "the public authorities shall inspect and approve the education system to ensure compliance with the laws" (art. 27.8)²⁴⁾. In Spain, it is planned that each educational administration regulates the structure and operation of inspectorates in their respective territorial areas. According to the Education Act, the role of the inspectors is to supervise and control the operation of the centres, services and educational programmes; advise and oversee the school management, teaching practice and improvement plans in schools; pro-

mote and disseminate educational experimentation, innovation and research; and ensure compliance with the educational policies.

The Master Action Plan for the Education Inspectorate in Extremadura 2017 – 2020 is a three-year plan that includes “supervising, controlling, evaluating and counselling the organisation and operation of schools”, as one of eleven regular actions, which shall focus, among others, on the development of plans that contribute to school success. The Education Inspectorate Action Plan for School Year 2018 – 2019 includes among inspectorate’s regular actions, in the first, second and third term to “supervise, counsel and evaluate the School Plan for Improvement” in all state schools. Thus, during the first and second terms all district inspectors must check whether the Plan for Improvement is included in the School Educational Plan moreover, the inspectors also need to check whether measures derived from the analysis of previous year final evaluations results, have been included in the School General Annual Plan. When schools do not include the Plan or the measures, inspectors usually offer guidance, feedback and even training.

During the third term, inspectors also supervise the implementation of the tests at some specific schools, which is determined by the regional administration, and correct a sample of them. This action carried out by all district inspectors gives the Inspectorate the opportunity to control the implementation and check the actual level of students’ performance.

Frequency and forms of school inspection visits

In **Bulgaria**, according to the *Regulations for inspection of kindergartens and schools*, the National Inspectorate of Education will carry out total single school inspections every five years to evaluate *the quality of education provision* in Pre-schools and Schools while the regional Department of Education will conduct *checks and controls*. These checks and controls can be on-going or thematic. Hence, the inspection visits by the national Inspectorate are cyclical while RDE’s visits are both cyclical and differentiated. In the regulation an indirect reference is made to RDE visit in response to a complaint or signal (incidental inspections of schools).

In **Ireland** cyclical school inspections are conducted once in five years but there are various forms of differentiated inspections as well that include, incidental inspection, thematic inspection and subject inspections. Primary schools are inspected²⁵⁾ on a cyclical basis in line with annual inspection targets. A school report is prepared on each primary school on average every five years following a detailed school inspection. Specialist subject inspectors undertake subject inspections in post-primary schools²⁶⁾. An evaluation report on the teaching of a particular subject is given to the school. Inspectors may also visit schools in a number of other contexts, for example, the monitoring of special programmes that may be in place in that particular school. Whole School Evaluation has been introduced to secondary schools to complement other types of inspection.

The Evaluation Support and Research Unit (ESRU) of the Inspectorate is responsible for evaluating aspects of education provision through thematic or programme evaluations. At post-primary level these include Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, Leaving Certificate Applied and the Junior Certificate School Programme. The success of these programmes has been evaluated and the Inspectorate has published reports giving full details of its findings.

In **Greece**, as the system for regionalized support and supervision is still to be established but it says that RDE will evaluate the Coordinators for Educational Work who will participate in the evaluation process of KESY, KEA and schools. There is no clarity how frequently the Coordinators for Educational Work will visit schools to evaluate their performance and who else will be part of this process.

There seems to be two forms of inspection visits carried out by the regional inspectors in **Spain** every year. The regional inspectors are supposed to visit schools in the first and second term of the school year to monitor if the school improvement plan is included in the School Education Plan and during the third term, they have to participate in the final evaluation of all primary and secondary schools as external evaluators. This means that they visit every school at least twice a year though the duration of their visit may vary depending on the objective of the visit.

Level of emphasis on school self-evaluation and improvement plan

In the case of **Bulgaria**, the regulation for quality management requires the schools to have a written plan for improvement developed for a period four years with a two-year action plan based on the findings of SSE. As the *Regulation No 16/8.12.2016* which emphasized is currently suspended the implementation and use of school self-evaluation (SSE) and thus the validity of the school improvement plan cannot be guaranteed in the absence of systematic SSE.

In **Ireland**, according to the regulation all schools are expected to write an SSE report (evidence-based, of course) and draw up their school improvement plan in its light.

According to the OECD (2018), in **Greece** in 2016 – 2017, a new system of SSE was successfully piloted. Based on this pilot compulsory SSE is being introduced across the school systems. The developing regionalised education system in Greece, so far has not made it obligatory for schools to carry out self-evaluation and therefore, there is a mixed trend in schools about action planning for improvement. Some schools have whole school improvement plans while some develop action plans for specific education programmes.

In the case of **Spain**, schools are expected by the legislation to conduct self-evaluation and incorporate a school improvement plan in their Annual Educational plan which is monitored by the inspectorate. The inspectors are also required to check whether measures derived from the analysis of previous year final evaluations results, are specified in the School Annual Report or not.

Availability of support services for the schools

Regulation No 16/8.12.2016 on quality management (Bulgaria) that was expected to have details regarding how National Inspectorate and Regional Department of Education would support schools met resistance from teachers and leaders due to a number of reasons. Firstly, it did not provide clear indicators and criteria for quality evaluation and school self-evaluation and expected schools to develop their own; and secondly, the quality management regulations do not define a mechanism for follow-up and supervision of school improvements implementation after a period of time; and thirdly, no formal support system for schools has been developed to help them cope with the requirements of the new regulation. School principals had to form a school team for self-evaluation and provide the training, but this training was offered by various private training organizations with no common syllabus or law-set requirements. The unrest among school staff led to the suspension of the regulation and to ongoing debates about how it should be changed and implemented in practice.

However, there are two systems for the provision of professional support to schools within the ambit of the Regional Department of Education: the *Department of organizational and methodical activity and control* and the *Community-consultative council*. The former is supposed to provide methodical support to schools to ensure the fulfillment of the obligatory recommendations given to the school by the National inspectorate of education, or to a principal or a teacher by an expert from RDE or the Ministry of Education. Methodical support is provided through consultations, training, sharing good practices, and also through the participation of experts from RDE in school classes and/or different activities for inclusive education. *The Community-consultative council* is a consultative body that holds regular meetings to share good practice with representatives of the NGO sector, school principals, representatives of the Ministry of Education, and other stakeholders and discusses relevant problems of school education in the region, possible solutions and joint actions.

Over the course of the last twenty years, *Ireland* has experienced profound changes to its inspection and SSE arrangements and is quite frequently championed by various trans-national organisations such as the EU, OECD, and the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates as an education system that has embraced what the authors of this report have previously referred to as ‘new school inspection’ (Brown, McNamara and O’Hara 2016a; 2016b; Brown 2013). ‘New school inspection’ allows inspectors to ascertain the quality of education provided in schools and in parallel, at a micro, macro and meso, level allows inspectors to support schools with their quality improvement journey; what might be referred to as a co-professional relationship for improvement. However, the support is offered in various forms and at different levels as described below:

– At a micro level, support is provided in the form of advising schools via the publication of inspection reports or directly, orally after an inspection. The inspec-

torate by request of each school and as resources allow, also advise schools on their SSE processes.

- At a macro level, in collaboration with education support services, the inspectorate as resources allow, also supports schools through the provision of continuing professional development opportunities, provided at regional locations via the National Network of Teacher/Education (Support) Centres²⁷.

- At a Meso level, SSE support is provided through the provision of an extensive set of resources via a dedicated SSE web site that had been developed by the inspectorate. Most significantly towards the creation of a unified culture of SSE in schools, the inspectorate has also created SSE guidelines that are to be used by schools in the areas of Leadership and Teaching and Learning.

One distinctive feature of the Irish inspectorate is that every framework or guide to school inspection is developed in consultation with school leaders, representatives of school management bodies, teachers, parents and pupils/students, and a range of other bodies with whom DES works and co-operates (DES, 2015). This enhances the level of acceptance and ownership of the process by the stakeholders.

In the case of *Greece*, each Coordinator of Educational Work is responsible for providing direct support to a number of school units on teaching and learning and in drawing up and evaluating their improvement plans and doing school units needs analysis. School units are also encouraged to form groups (“schools’ networks”), explore their needs and decide jointly what kind of further improvement they want to pursue; then, they should request the cooperation of the regional support and evaluation units in order to plan and implement CPD for teachers. Teachers’ training is designed and provided by PEKES with the cooperation of the area (sub-regional) Directorates of Education and in accordance with the standards set by the IEP.

However, it should be noted that this is the very first year of the current *Law No. 4547/12-6-2018* and as a consequence, it cannot be evaluated yet. Actually, only PEKES units have been staffed while KESY have only Heads appointed and KEA has not been even established. For the time being, the existing Centers of Environmental Education substitute for KEA. In any case, the members of the PEKES will be provided with an 18-hour training course about how to execute their duties (e.g. school planning & evaluation of schoolwork) properly and effectively.

In the case of *Spain*, the major support services of the inspectorate of education are built around supervising and, where needed, guiding schools in developing and implementing school improvement plans. Additionally, school inspectors, at the end of the school year, write an annual report of the schools that carried out special programmes for educational success based on their own supervisions and the school final report about the programme. These programmes are financed by the Department of Education and are implemented in schools that apply for them, as a means of improvement.

Other schools’ quality assurance and support programmes, include CPDEX – a training programme aimed to improve school performance by analysing teaching

competences – and CALIDEX – a quality assurance programme for vocational training schools, can obtain support and feedback from inspectors, which can be delivered at the request of the school itself.

Discussion and Conclusion

School inspection has, to a remarkable degree, become a significant tool for both encouraging school improvement and enforcing accountability in recent decades. In some countries, this has been achieved through the resurrection and revivification of inspectorates which date back centuries and in others by the creation of inspectorates in countries with no history of inspection at all. Very few countries in Europe and indeed further afield have not developed inspection regimes, a possible exception being the US where testing seems to be still predominant in the governance of schools.

However, that is not to say that all these various inspection systems are the same or even similar. Far from it. Inspection is complicated by many, many issues of local context including, but by no means limited to, the political complexion of governments and the power of teacher unions. We postulated above that inspection regimes could be very roughly divided into those primarily concerned with accountability and sanctions and those concerned mainly with supporting and developing schools and teachers. This is, we admit, a gross over simplification. Systems primarily concerned with accountability perceive themselves to have a developmental function and those mostly concerned with school support and improvement invariably have an accountability role. This led us to propose a continuum, with inspection regimes spread along it, and we analysed each of the four countries in the project, under a variety of indicators, which we argue may suggest where it is placed on this continuum.

Interestingly, during our review of the four cases, we found out that on this hypothesised continuum of approaches to school inspection, all the cases are titled away from the supervisory high stake's inspection end. In the case of Ireland, Greece and Spain, the inspectorate is a part of the Ministry of Education, which, we argue, lowers the centrality of accountability in comparison to cases where this work is entrusted to an external agency as, for example, in the case of OFSTED in England. In contrast, in Bulgaria, the National Inspectorate reports to a council of ministers and thereby can emphasise objectivity and reliability when reviewing education programmes and policies. In short, concerning accountability and governance the Bulgarian National Inspectorate has more authority, at least in theory, but the relatively underdeveloped actual implementation of inspection has made this power largely redundant.

Other than the above, the statutory powers of inspectorates seem uniform across the cases. School inspectors (inspection staff in the case of Bulgaria and Extremadura and Coordinators for Education Work in Greece) have rights of admission to schools, can access their documents and databases, investigate their practices and report to schools and later to higher management. In Ireland, there is more stringent regulation for safeguarding the powers of inspectors because anyone obstructing

inspection is subject to a fine on conviction, but such powers have never been used and it is nearly inconceivable that they would ever be.

The fundamental roles and functions of inspectors are very similar in all four countries but the manner in which they are invoked in the schools can shift their position from the supervisory end of our putative continuum to the advisory end of our spectrum. In Bulgaria and Greece, they are supposed to support schools in self-evaluation and school improvement planning. The Coordinators of Education Work in Greece are also required to coach schools in pedagogical practices. Their role seems quite similar to that of Scottish inspectors who are more of 'professional coaches' than 'external examiners' (NAIR). On the other hand, the role of Irish and Spanish inspectors appears to be more robust. They monitor compliance to laws, supervise and evaluate school practices, educational programmes and student achievement standards. Spanish inspectors while monitoring school improvement plans can guide and train school teams and Irish inspectors provide oral and written feedback (in the form of a published report) and as Altrichter and Kemethofer (2015) suggest, the publication of written report enhances the accountability pressure on schools and shifts inspectorates towards the high stakes approach end of the continuum.

The Inspectorate in Ireland despite its inherent rigour has not faced as much criticism as some of the other inspectorates in Europe. The trust and credibility that any inspection system enjoys among the school stakeholders is largely due to the transparency in the system and clearly laid out mechanisms. In Ireland the forms of inspections and their procedures are available on the DES website. Schools may feel pressurised due to incidental or differentiated inspections but they know and trust the process. Similarly, inspectorates in Spain produce their Yearly Action Plans that detail their requirements in a very clear manner and in consequence, schools expect their termly visits to monitor their improvement plans, standardized tests results and overall teaching and management.

The cases of Greece and Bulgaria are quite complicated especially due to the absence of quality criteria and indicators of good practices. Schools are not sure of the expectations or the standards against which they have to measure their performance. There is a need for the development of a common language and shared understanding between the internal and external evaluators of schools about what quality looks like and how it can be achieved. In Bulgaria, schools have already refused to accept the Regulation No. 16/8.12.2016 and in Greece the PEKES system is only partially developed and also faces a past precedent when schools rejected the whole school evaluation system. Schools' general disregard of the inspection systems in both these countries is mainly due to the introduction of regulations without fully developing the mechanisms to implement them. There is a need to overcome the trust deficit between schools and inspectorates and establish the credibility of the inspection process and inspectors by beefing up the support systems as has been largely achieved in the case of Ireland. Moreover, the transparency of the process, with regards to outcomes and agenda will further strengthen schools'

confidence. Inspection systems in Ireland and to an extent Spain have maintained their rigour, established their credibility and achieved a genuinely co-professional mode of evaluation between the inspectorate and schools (Brown et al., 2018). The emerging inspection systems in the other two countries and indeed in many others can review these successful cases and make the most of their experience.

To finally summarise, this research perhaps highlights two points. The first is that it takes time, patience and continuity of policy, to implement and make acceptable a system of school inspection, which manages to balance the demands of accountability and support for schools and teachers. Of the examples here, Ireland has probably best achieved this, but it has been established by a very gradual movement from the support end of the continuum to something which is still quite low stakes but has a recognised impact on making schools more accountable. The second point is that these four examples are, in our view correctly, seeking to create balanced systems of inspection which hopefully will prove to be effective without resulting in the collateral damage which is associated with high stakes ‘hard-nosed’ inspection.

NOTES

1. Northern Ireland Assembly, Research and Information Service NIAR (2013). Approaches to school inspection (NIAR 521-13). Belfast.
2. Education Review Office (2103). Code of Conduct.
3. Office of Standards and Education (2009). Ofsted inspects – A framework for all Ofsted inspection and regulation.
4. Department of Education and Skills (2015). Code of practice for the inspectorate.
5. Education Review Office (2016). Effective Internal Evaluation for improvement.
6. Department of Education and Skills. (2016d). Looking at our School 2016. A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.
Department of Education and Skills. (2016e). Looking at our School 2016. A Quality Framework for Primary Schools. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.
7. Education Scotland (2015). How Good is Our School.
8. Preschool and school education Act, State Gazette, No. 79/13.10.2015, in force 01.08.2016.
9. Reorganization of the Units for the Support of Primary and Secondary Education & other issues, Law No. 4547/2018, Greek Official Gazette No.102/A/12-6-2018, Athens, Greece.
10. Advancement of the Role of Educators – Establishing rules of evaluation and meritocracy in education & other issues. Law No. 3848/2010, Greek Official Gazette No. 71/A/19-5-2010, Athens, Greece.

11. Regulations No 15/8.12.2016 for inspection of kindergartens and schools, State Gazette, No. 100/16.12.2016.
12. Regulations for the structure and activities of the regional inspectorates of education, State Gazette, No. 61/8.07.2003.)
13. Department of Education and Skills.
14. Modifications on Law No. 4547/2018, Law No. 4572/2018, Greek Official Gazette No. 188/A/15-11-2018, Athens, Greece.
15. Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 3 de mayo, de educación (4/5/2006).
16. Ley 7/2011, de 7 de marzo, de Educación de Extremadura (23/3/2011).
17. <https://nio.government.bg/инспектиране/ръководство-за-инспектиране/>
<https://nio.government.bg/инспектиране/критерии/>
18. Regulations for the structure and functions of the regional departments of education, State Gazette, No 13/7.02.2017.
19. Regulations No 16/8.12.2016 for managing quality in educational institutions, State Gazette, No. 100/16.12.2016).
20. Department of Education and Skills (2012a). Circular 0040/2012, implementation of school self-evaluation.
21. Department of Education and Skills (2012b). Circular 0039/2012, implementation of school self-evaluation.
22. Department of Education and Skills. (2012c). School Self Evaluation Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools. Dublin: Evaluation Support and Research Unit Inspectorate. Department of Education and Skills.
Department of Education and Skills. (2012d) School Self Evaluation Guidelines for Primary Schools. Dublin: Evaluation Support and Research Unit Inspectorate. Department of Education and Skills.
23. Department of Education and Skills. (2016a). Circular 0040/2016, Continuing Implementation of School Self-Evaluation 2016 – 2020.
24. Constitución Española (29/12/1978).
25. Department of Education and Skills. (2016c). A guide to Inspection in Primary Schools. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.
26. Department of Education and Skills. (2016b). A guide to Inspection in Post-Primary Schools. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

REFERENCES

- Altrichter, H. and Kemethofer, D. (2015). Does accountability pressure through school inspections promote school improvement? *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 26 (1), 32 – 56.
- Barber. (2004). The virtue of accountability: system redesign, inspection and incentives in the era of reformed professionalism. *Journal of Education*, 185(1), 7 – 38.

- Baxter, J. (2017). School Inspectors as Policy Implementers: Influences and Activities. In: J. Baxter (Ed.), *School Inspectors Policy Implementers, Policy Shapers in National Policy Contexts* (1 – 23). United Kingdom: Springer.
- Baxter, J. and Hult, A. (2017). Different Systems, Different Identities: The work of Inspectors in Sweden and England. In: J. Baxter (Ed.), *In School Inspectors Policy Implementers, Policy Shapers in National Policy Contexts* (45 – 69). United Kingdom: Springer.
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27 – 40.
- Brown, M. (2013). *Deconstructing Evaluation in Education*. Dublin: Dublin City University.
- Brown, M., McNamara, G., and O'Hara, J. (2016a). Teacher Accountability in Education – The Irish Experiment. In: B. Walsh (Ed.), *Essays in the History of Irish Education* (359 – 381). United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brown, M., McNamara, G. & O'Hara, J. (2016b). Quality and the rise of value-added in education: The case of Ireland. *Policy Futures in Education*, 14 (6), 810 – 829.
- Brown, M., McNamara, G., O'Hara, J., O'Brien, S., Faddar, J. & Young, C. (2018). Integrated Co-Professional Evaluation? Converging Approaches to School Evaluation Across Frontiers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(12).
- Clarke, J. (2017). Forward: Inspecting School – Assembling Control? In: J. Baxter (Ed.), *School Inspectors: Policy Implementers, Policy Shapers in National Policy Contexts* (V – VII). United Kingdom: Springer.
- Dimitropoulos, A. & Kindi, V. (2017). *Paper commissioned for the 2017/8 Global Education Monitoring Report, Accountability in education: Meeting our commitments*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Ehren, M.C., Gustafsson, J.E., Altrichter, H., Skedsmo, G., Kemethofer, D. & Huber, S.G. (2015). Comparing effects and side effects of different school inspection systems across Europe. *Comparative Education*, 51(3), 375 – 400.
- Macbeath, J. (2006). *School inspection & self-evaluation*. New York: Routledge.
- Mavroggiorgos, G. (1993). *Educators and Evaluation, published by*. Athens: Synchroni Ekpedefsi.
- Nevo, D. (2001). School evaluation: internal or external? *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 27 (2), 95 – 106.
- O'Leary, Z. (2014). *The essential guide to doing your research project* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Ozga, J., Baxter, J., Clarke, J., Grek, S. & Lawn, M. (2013). The politics of educational change: Governance and school inspection in England and Scotland. *Swiss Journal of Sociology*, 39(2), 37 – 55.

Punch, K. F. (2005). *Introduction to social research: Quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

✉ **Dr. Rossitsa Simeonova, Assoc. Prof.**

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6715-6451

✉ **Dr. Yonka Parvanova, Assoc. Prof.**

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-3627-501X

Sofia University

Faculty of Education

Sofia, Bulgaria

E-mail: r.simeonova@fp.uni-sofia.bg

E-mail: y.parvanova@fp.uni-sofia.bg

✉ **Prof. Dr. Gerry McNamara**

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9725-9304

✉ **Prof. Dr. Joe O'Hara**

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-1956-7640

✉ **Dr. Martin Brown**

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5436-354X

✉ **Sarah Gardezi**

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2234-3704

The Centre for Evaluation Quality and Inspection (EQI)

Dublin City University

Dublin, Ireland

E-mail: gerry.mcnamara@dcu.ie

E-mail: joe.ohara@dcu.ie

E-mail: martin.brown@dcu.ie

E-mail: sarah.gardezi@dcu.ie

✉ **Laura del Castillo Blanco**

Regional Government of the Autonomous Community of Extremadura

Merida, Spain

E-mail: lcbcc@educarex.es

✉ **Zacharoula Kechri**

Dr. Eleni Beniata

Frm. Secondary Education School Advisor of Central Greece

Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, Sterea Ellada region

Athens, Greece

E-mail: zkechri@gmail.com

E-mail: elbeniata@gmail.com