

Theoretical perspectives on school inspection

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Introduction

Inspections are now a common thing of everyday life of schools. There is increased interest in knowing more about them. Though inspection seems to be self-evidently transparent or describable in terms of things that inspectors do, the concept itself is more complex than mere describing inspectors' practices. Concerning the theoretical perspectives, the concept could be wedded to or located within four different views or frameworks.

What does inspection really mean? Is inspection seen as a rather naïve form of educational evaluation or a form of control and surveillance? In what sense can inspection be considered as a form of auditing? How far is inspection merely a more subtle and sophisticated form of monitoring and controlling over those responsible for providing education? These are the questions that this paper attempts to find out.

I will begin to analyse the inspection process by looking at it from four different theoretical perspectives: first, as a form of educational evaluation ; second, as an auditing device. Third, I will consider its influence as a 'disciplinary power' and finally I will examine the idea of the new public management and school inspections.

1. Inspection as a form of evaluation

Wilcox (1996: 111) claims that in recent years inspection has increasingly been regarded as a form of evaluation and diagnosis. Inspection is one of the dominant approaches for governments and an elementary requirement for

effective management to evaluate, assess and monitor the outcomes of the various activities in the daily life of organisations by an 'external body' (metaphorically called "external yardsticks" or "extra pairs of eyes").

In this respect, school evaluation/inspection helps to draw a clear and 'objective' picture on the 'health' of education. Suffice to say, inspection means assessing and evaluating the situation of the educational institutions, most of the time based on certain norms or criteria found in the school effectiveness research and school improvement research (SER and SIR).

Wilcox and Gray (1996) claim that governments use school inspection to determine and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of organisational functioning of schools. As stated by one of those responsible for education and schools:

"I intend to take the mystery out of education by providing the real choice which flows from comparative tables setting out the performance of local schools and independent inspection reports on the strengths and weaknesses of each school." (DES 199 lb, cited in Wilcox and Gray, 1996: 30)

At the classroom level, evaluation involves the observation and investigation into both students' performance and learning, and teachers' effectiveness, which involves looking at or assessing both their organizational and behavioural aspect. According to Harris et al (in Wilcox and Gray 1996: 55), organisational or managerial aspect is about everything that teachers do to organize their classroom in order to make teaching and learning possible, and behavioural aspect is about different teaching strategies, or styles.

At the macro level, inspection should provide information and data on how everyday life educational organisations are run and how the different needs of the school members are met. It involves looking at the quality of the service provided by the educational organisations and how the management of resources is handled. Consequently, evaluation results may be employed externally to enable independent judgements to be made about the success /failure of schools, and/or collated to assist parents in making 'informed' selection of schools.

2. Inspection as an auditing device

There is recognition among researchers (Power 1997, Early et al 1998, Wilcox et al 1996) that audit bodies have recently increased across a range of public services. New schemes to realize accountability such as Citizen's

Charters have been created; formal audit and evaluation mechanisms have been installed in a wide variety of fields like the medical field, universities and schools and within financial auditing itself. Indeed, very few people have been left untouched by these developments; increasing numbers of individuals and organisations found themselves subject to new or more accounting and audit requirements. The need to give more and better accounts and to have these accounts checked by auditors has become widespread.

Governments of the 1980s and 1990s showed great interest in auditing alongside inspection and other evaluation mechanisms. This is clearly stated in the Cabinet Office statement, showing both the virtues of inspection and audit:

“All public services should have efficient independent arrangements for audit. As in private businesses, this is essential if they are to be managed well. There is a further powerful stimulus to improvement when those outside a service are able to compare the performance of one body with those others on a clear and consistent basis. Good external audit and inspection expose weaknesses. They confirm the reliability of good internal systems. They help to spread good practice, value for money and raise the quality of service.”
(1991: 38)

Not only financial audits but also the use of other quantitative data concerned with efficiency, quality and performance are implied in this statement. ‘League tables’ of examination results, as noted by Wilcox and Gray, represent perhaps the most familiar example of educational auditing (1996: 115).

Power (1997: 2) has some difficulty in imagining a society without any checking at all, a society of “pure trust” (the polar opposite of “pure control”) where all accounts are taken at face value. For the author, this is equally difficult to conceptualize. Accordingly, there has been a veritable ‘audit explosion’ and a great emphasis in the ‘audit society’ in Britain and elsewhere. As argued, the need of audits arises from a radical reinvention of government in recent years (Power 1997: 17).

This has been informed by two opposing tendencies (or a subtle combination of these): devolution and decentralization on the one hand; and their control from the centre on the other. He also suggests that the greater emphasis on the ‘audit society’ is a reflection of the lack of trust of the professionals who provide the service (quoted in Earley, 1996: 172).

On this view, it is understood that through audits, governments and governing authorities try to monitor professionals and reduce the autonomy and power of experts (like teachers, doctors and others). This is very similar to the idea of “taming” the “wild animal”. In short, it is an explicit attack on professional autonomy and control. There is a low trust in these experts and their self-regulatory or self-evaluation mechanism. It is believed that the best way to regulate and monitor these professionals and their practices is to have an external body, an audit that can make impartial judgements or objective assessments.

Clearly, when looking at aspects of auditing, we can tell that auditing is incorporated into the inspection process itself. The idea of auditors examining financial and other resource documentation is, for instance, similar to tasks carried out by inspectors. Wilcox and Gray (1996: 116) wrote that inspection in reality as a whole is a reminiscent of an auditing process, with the handbook audits detailed prescriptions representing the auditors’ manual.

3. Inspection as a Disciplinary Power/Panopticon:

Inspection history has more than 150 years; the testing of pupils, the assessment of teachers, and enquiring into the ‘state’ of schools were the foci around which the inspection pivoted. As inspection developed over time, these aspects of inspection became three different elements and today represent separate activities: pupil assessment, teacher appraisal and school evaluation.

School inspection is basically about school evaluation. In that, it is teaching, rather than the individual teacher, which is evaluated, and learning generally, rather than that of specific pupils.

Not only was inspection instrumented in the beginning of the introduction of the public system of education, but also in various kinds of institutions like factories, schools, barracks and prison, where large numbers of subjects were being brought under control. Michel Foucault’s argument (1977) is that such institutions developed from the mid 18th century with the emergence of the modern conception of government and the state. The rise of the new institutions generated a birth of procedures having common characteristics constituting what Foucault called disciplinary power. He says that disciplinary power.

“Instead of bending all its subjects into a single uniform mass, separates, analyses, differentiates them and carries its procedures of decomposition to the point of necessary and sufficient single units.” (1977: 170)

Foucault continues his point, saying that unlike the disciplines of the past which operated through ‘the majestic rituals of sovereignty of the great apparatuses of the state’; discipline power consists of ‘humble modalities’ and ‘minor procedures’. Its success ‘derives... from the use of simple instruments: hierarchical observation, normalising judgement, and their combination in a procedure, which is specific to it - the examination.’ (Foucault 1977: 170)

In his study, Foucault also found that the inmates of disciplinary institutions were maintained under constant surveillance and supervision through hierarchical observation. Foucault adds that hierarchical observation was ensured through the very architecture of schools, prisons, hospitals and the like - the whole forming a ‘spatial nesting of hierarchical surveillance’. According to Foucault, the aim of the new architecture was to ‘permit an internal, articulated and detailed control.

That is to render visible those inside ... to transform individual to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them.’ (ibid: 172)

In addition to hierarchical observation and the new architecture, normalising judgements are part of disciplinary systems. They are concerned with the regular assessments made of individuals against sets of norms and standards. These ensure a pervasive form of social control within institutions.

3.1. The Role of Examination :

Examination is an essential element of disciplinary power. It is the combination of hierarchical observation and normalising judgements. Examination, as defined by Foucault, ‘is a normalising gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish (1977: 172).’ It is recognised that it is a widespread technology, generally used in diverse disciplines such as education, medicine, psychiatry, and the clinical and social sciences.

The French expert identified mainly three characteristics of the examination. First it exercises, as reported by Wilcox and Gray, a disciplinary power which, while invisible itself, makes compulsorily visible those who are subjected to it and at the same time ‘holds them in a mechanism of objectification.’ Second, the procedures of examination situated individuals

in a network of documentation as part of a «meticulous archive» which captured and fixed them.

As a result the subject became a describable, analysable object. This, in turn, made possible the comparison of individuals and the determination of population distributions. Third, examination and its documentary techniques make each individual a “case”:

“It is the individual as he may be described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very individuality who has to be trained or corrected, classified, normalised, excluded, etc.” (Foucault 1977, quoted in Wilcox and Gray 1996: 119)

The examination provides, as explained by Foucault, ‘the pinning down of each individual in his own particularity... and clearly indicates the appearance of a new modality of power in which each individual receives as his status his own individuality, and in which he is linked by his status to the features, the measurements, the gaps, ‘the marks’ that characterise him and make him a ‘case’. (Foucault 1977: 192)

3.2. Disciplinary Power and Management Control:

Nowadays, disciplinary power has become an apparent element of management; analysts see it as a vehicle to promote organisational efficiency and control. In education, for example, Ball argues that appraisal has become a major mechanism in the reconstruction and disciplining of teachers:

“Disciplinary power extends the logics of quality control and performance indicators into the pedagogical heart of teaching. It brings the tutelary gaze to bear, making the teacher calculable, describable, and comparable.” (Ball 1990 Wilcox and Gray: 159)

According to Wilcox and Gray, disciplinary power has also been extended from an exclusive focus on the individual to that of the school. Not only must teachers be reconstructed and disciplined but so also must the schools in which they function. Inspection is now seen as a major means of monitoring the school practices and exerting a controlling influence. They also note that hierarchical observation is built into the very structure of inspection systems.

It is understood that inspection is the examination of a whole school resulting in a multiplicity of normalising judgements made by applying criteria, rating scales and judgement-recording statements.

The outcome, as described, is an account of the school cast in the various descriptors of institutional 'good' and 'evil' such as: strengths and weaknesses; success and failure; effectiveness and ineffectiveness; efficiency and inefficiency. Following the view of Foucault, inspection creates a school as a case with its associated dossier or 'record of inspection evidence'. It effectively locates an individual school on a continuum of cases ranging from the 'excellent' and successful' to the "failing".

Gray and Wilcox find that an inspection is disciplinary in two senses. It requires a school to undergo an exacting discipline, which extends over a period considerably longer than that of the inspection week:

"Compliance is the most straightforward: is the school performing as it should? OFSTED inspectors focus explicitly on compliance. Patterning is subtler and has been referred to... as league-table thinking." (See Earley 1998: 172)

Inspection may also lead to a school being 'disciplined'. Thus those who are associated with any weaknesses identified in an inspection always risk censure not only by those within the school community but also by those outside the school. Major shortcomings are exposed and expected to be remedied.

In the extreme case of a 'failing' school there is not only the likelihood of public opprobrium but also an additional period of surveillance and a possibility of eventually being closed (the closure of Hackney School in 1995 is a point in case) or taken over by an "educational association".

3.3. Inspection as Gaze/Panopticon:

The word Panopticon is employed as a metaphor to refer to the permanent visibility of subjects achieved through disciplinary power. It was first introduced by Bentham and then employed by Michel Foucault in his analysis of prison and inmates. Literally, the Panopticon was conceived of as a circular architectural structure, composed of cells each containing an inmate. The cells were so arranged that they and their inmates could be kept under constant surveillance.

In their analysis, Wilcox and Gray conclude that OFSTED could be seen as the new inspection Panopticon which keeps some 25,000 school 'cells' and their teachers 'inmates' under surveillance. OFSTED's 'gaze' is focused on schools through the instrument of the handbook. Educationalists, particularly

head teachers, as reported by Mathews and Smith, consider OFSTED inspection handbook as the best book' on school management which has ever appeared from official sources. It is well-polished mirror in which to reflect the performance and procedures of all areas of school life. Besides there is some evidence as illustrated by Mathews and Smith (1995: 26) that the handbook is being used as a tool for school self-evaluation and a vehicle for staff and management development. Indirectly, the professionals begin to regulate their behaviours in line with the requirements of the handbook and the inspection framework.

As a result of the internalisation of the disciplines of the handbook in this way, the OFSTED 'gaze' is maintained between inspections -surveillance effectively becomes continuous.

There is at least one important reason for the relevance of Foucauldian concepts in this matter. When looking at the exercises of inspection and surveillance, we realise that there are similarities to be found in both activities. Both involve one or more activities as described by Christopher Dandeker (1990: 37): (1) The collection and storage of information about people or objects, (2) the supervision of the activities of people or objects through issuing of instructions or the physical design of the natural and built environment. In the context, architecture is of significance for the supervision of people- as for instance in prison and urban design; (3) the application of information gathering activities to the business of monitoring the behaviour of those under supervision, and, in the case of subject persons, their compliance with instructions.

4. School Inspection and the New Public Management:

Organisations in the public sector have undergone radical changes over a number of years in the United Kingdom, and in many other countries. These changes have been broadly described as the 'new public management' (NPM hereafter) (Hood, 1991, 1995), 'the new public sector management' (Hoggett 1991, Reed 1995: 45), or 'the new managerialism' (Farnham and Horton, 1993 quoted in Reed 1995: 45). According to Hood (1995: 94), NPM involves a different conception of accountability, with different patterns of trust and distrust hence a different style of "accountingization" (word used by Hood, which, I think, means accountability). Hood (1995: 94) captures the central features of the new public management as:

“Lessening or removing differences between the public and the private sector and shifting the emphasis from process accountability towards a greater element of accountability in terms of results.”

In reforming, remodelling, and extending market forces into the public domain such as education and health, and privatising many public services such as the provision of electricity, gas, telecommunications, railways, and water, public services, it was argued, would become more responsive to the choices and preferences of individual consumers. A market system was also seen as more efficient than bureaucratic forms of organisation, which tended to aggregate choice and waste public resources (Kirkpatrick and Lucio 1995: 1). Various writers (like Kirkpatrick and Lucio 1995, Du Gay and Salaman 1992, Ouston et al 1998, Broadbent and Laughlin 1997) agree with the point that many of the reforms of the last two decades were based on an implicit project of remodelling the public sector along the lines of a commercial enterprise.

According to Du Gay and Salaman (1992), the dominant image of an enterprise culture in which the needs and demands of sovereign consumers in the market place, was ail-pervasive during the 1980's has since led to a «reimagination» of what public services are and what their purpose is:

“In the public sector ... there can hardly be a school, hospital, social services department, university or college in the UK that has not in some way become permeated by the language of enterprise. Enterprise has remorselessly reconceptualized and remodelled everything in its path. Ostensibly different ‘spheres of existence’ have fallen prey to its ‘totalizing’ and ‘individualizing’ economic rationality - from the hospital to the railway station, from the classroom to the museum, the nation finds itself translated. ‘Patients’, ‘parent’, ‘passengers’ and pupils are all reimagined as ‘customers’ (quoted in Kirkpatrick and Lucio 1995: 7)

In addition to this process of restructuring, remodelling and reimagining the public sector along commercial lines, government has moved from being a provider of services to focussing on setting policy and standards for services provided by others.

As noted by Kirkpatrick and Lucio (1995: 8), at the heart of the government's critique of public services was the claim that state bureaucracies and the professional occupations working within them served their own producer interests before those of the consumer. They also observe that this critique was motivated primarily by a desire to reduce the costs of public services

and, in so doing, increase efficiency and remove so-called professional and trade union restrictive practices. In this sense, marketisation of the public sector and the rhetoric of quality improvement of public services were presented as “rolling back the power of the state” (see Ouston et al 1998: 113). Equally, it was argued that it is “a strategy for simultaneously increasing aspects of the state’s power while restricting the scope of the state’s actions (Ouston et al 1998: 113).”

Besides, these changes within the public sector have been used to promote a range of new forms of management control and surveillance, and curtail the autonomy and discretion of the professionals. For this reason, the government has set up regulatory bodies, such as auditing committees and inspectorates, to set and enforce standards of performance as a primary objective, and also ensure those who provide the services conform to the norms, regulations and practices, and to be more accountable to stakeholders for their outcomes. Looking at the new initiatives and mechanisms promoted with the new public management (QC, devolution of power, or empowerment, TQM, etc), many analysts (Kirkpatrick, Davies, Reed, Keele, Sinclair, Zuboff and others) have presented them as a regime of indirect control and self-disciplining.

This is clearly seen in work organisations where quality management is implemented. This suggests, as reported by Reed, that:

“The latter (quality management) generates a centralization of indirect surveillance over individual and collective behaviour, and an intensification of indirect supervisory control over task performance.” (Kirkpatrick and Lucio 1995: 51)

But, what are the implications of the new public management for schools and primary/secondary education?

Like public organisations, state schools have also been exposed to market forces. This has involved the introduction of new forms of management, mainly based on power decentralisation and financial devolution, and an emphasis on competition between schools through league tables and attraction of pupils, and greater accountability to government, parent and public in general. The main driving force for these reforms was to reduce state spending on school education. Improving quality, choice and raising standards in education were equally part of the agenda of reforms. Sinclair and Seifert captured the arguments for these changes:

"The reforms were accompanied by arguments about "quality", "choice" and "value for money" - for example, the White Paper Choice and Diversity (Department for Education 1992) - whereby parents were considered as consumers in a market." (Kirkpatrick and Lucio 1995: 249)

To improve quality and raise standards in the English and Welsh schools, the government has consequently introduced various initiatives such as local management of schools (LMS), open enrolment, governing bodies, financial formula, and the imposition of greater accountability through inspections, audits and quality watchdogs such as OFSTED.

In accordance with Kogan's argument, there are three broad models of educational accountability that serve different purposes: for public or state control, for professional control and self-regulation, and for consumerist control (Ouston et al 1998: 112).

In this context, inspection can be seen as serving two of Kogan's accountabilities. Accountability to the state is accomplished through the annual report of the chief inspector of OFSTED on the school inspections which is based mainly on schools' results (league tables and pupils' tests) and performances made in state education system. Inspection reports and test results also provide information to consumers to support market mechanisms.

In short, the imposition of accountability (results accountability) on schools through external audits (OFSTED) is seen as an organisational technology of the new public management in order to realise more control and compliance with what they think OFSTED expects. As mentioned earlier, the auditors have become part of a surveillance system that professionals incorporate into their thinking. There is an emerging claim that educational professionals are absorbing and internalising the norms and standards, set by inspectors and a change is also observed in their practices.

This happens through a move towards more explicit and measurable standards, as described by Hood (1991: 97) of performance and the implementation of inspection findings and reports and through the preparation for the inspection itself. The framework and the handbook are also becoming a source of guideline and a code of practice followed by teachers and school managers in their daily school activities.

This comment is supported by Ouston's research (1997) that as schools gained more knowledge of inspection, they were more likely to make changes before inspection rather than afterwards. In many cases, OFSTED

and inspection seem, as claimed by Cromey-Hawke, to becoming institutionalised within the teaching profession and to be increasingly valued (see Earley 1998: 138).

It is also found that most of the time, teachers take on the values and languages of the accountability mechanisms and the rhetoric of raising standards and performance, quality assurance and so forth. So, internalising and absorbing the norms and rules, and regulating their behaviours and thinking in line with what OFSTED inspections and government expect from teachers, is the most straightforward result of the New Public Management.

Conclusion

To conclude, inspection in schools can have one of the four facets :

- 1- inspection can be an evaluation mechanism of the quality of the educational processes.
- 2- inspection can be a means of ensuring greater accountability based on the concept of audit culture.
- 3- inspection can be used as a mechanism of monitoring, control and surveillance of the education system based on the Foucauldian /panopticon perspectives.
- 4- inspection can be a strategy or device for fostering and implementing new forms of quality and management control for regulating, disciplining and raising the standards and performances.

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