



LITERATURE REVIEW

School inspections: what happens next?

Geoffrey Penzer

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About the author

Penzer Allen

Penzer Allen is a well established management consultancy whose principals are Geoffrey Penzer and Vivienne Allen. Most of its clients are in the education and not-for-profit sectors. It became involved in school inspection in 1993, and during the period to 2005 it helped to run about 1000 school inspections, and a similar number of nursery inspections, on behalf of Ofsted.

Geoffrey, who is the lead author of this report, was himself an inspector and has worked with CfBT Education Trust since 2005 in support

of its inspection services activities (mainly in England but also Dubai). Currently he chairs CfBT's User Impact Forum. The impetus for undertaking a brief exploration of the ways that inspection findings are used, or at least meant to be used, in a range of countries came as part of the effort to learn more about how the potentially beneficial impacts of inspection might be optimised.

Acknowledgement

This work was stimulated and enhanced by challenging conversations with colleagues, in particular Tony McAleavy, CfBT's Director of Education.

School inspections: what happens next?

Purpose and scope

“*Inspection is less widespread in other parts of the world (such as North America) where educational evaluation is more closely tied to the results of student tests.*”

The purpose of this paper is to consider the question: ‘How are inspection findings expected to improve schools?’ in education systems with different inspection regimes. We have assembled and compared information about how the outcomes of an inspection are intended to influence and improve educational performance in a range of countries, considering questions such as What are the legislative requirements?, how are they enforced?, who is responsible? and in what ways do these then influence change in educational practice and policy making?

The term ‘school inspection’ has different meanings in different countries. For the purposes of this report we use it to mean ‘an evaluation of the effectiveness of a school with a significant component that involves external inspectors’ (i.e. it is not only, though it may be partly, a self evaluation). We do not include the evaluation of the performance of individual named teachers within this definition (this being the realm of staff appraisal).

We have considered the post-inspection arrangements in 17 countries (see annex A). One of them (Germany) operates state-based inspection regimes, with variations in practice between them. Most are in Europe, and we have relied heavily for information about them on the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI) Blue Book.¹ Inspection is less widespread in other parts of the world (such as North America) where educational evaluation is more closely tied to the results of student tests. In Australia, school accountability is a state-level function and there are different arrangements, but in general they are currently based on school self-review with, if necessary, the support of an Education Officer.² In this report we draw out some general themes that emerge from countries with an independent

inspectorate and illustrate them with specific examples. The countries are:

- Czech Republic
- Denmark
- England
- Flanders
- Germany
- Hong Kong
- Ireland
- Netherlands
- New Zealand
- Northern Ireland
- Portugal
- Scotland
- Singapore
- Slovakia
- Spain
- Sweden
- Wales

¹ <http://www.sici-inspectorates.org/web/guest/blueBook>

² *Diversity and progress in school accountability systems in Australia*, David Gurr, Educational Policy and Practice

Context

“ *Compulsory quality education for all is the essential foundation required to construct a real Europe of knowledge...* ”

There are no countries where the education of children and young people is not recognised as being important for their well-being and for the future of their society. All countries want their education system to be as good as possible and school inspection, which inevitably comes at a price, should be able to demonstrate that it is worth the cost. It has the potential to deliver on two fronts, accountability and improvement (or, as sometimes stated, control and development).³

Compulsory quality education for all is the essential foundation required to construct a real Europe of knowledge... However the mechanisms needed to measure and promote this quality still have to be developed... quality evaluation in schools takes several forms. Each country has developed an approach that corresponds both to its method of managing and organising its education system and to its objectives. Over and above this diversity lies a growing awareness of the need for quality control and improvement... Quality evaluation in school education is thus at the heart of the objectives for 2010 with which education and training systems have been entrusted...

Viviane Recling⁴
European Commissioner for Education
and Culture, January 2004

The balance between a focus on accountability and a focus on improvement varies from one country to another. For instance, in Northern Ireland the inspectorate's explicitly stated mission is principally to 'promote improvement'.⁵ In the Czech Republic, on the other hand, part of the inspectorate's statutory remit is to perform compliance 'audits'.⁶ In

Portugal, the focus is on 'accountability, control, audit and supervision'.⁷ In England it is 'inspection and regulation in order to achieve excellence'.⁸ Despite these differences in stated purpose, the processes of accountability and improvement anywhere and everywhere are intertwined and, to a significant extent, inseparable.

The optimum balance depends on a range of factors that are country-specific and probably period-specific too, because the development of effective quality systems usually involves a journey. The example of Singapore illustrates the point. The school inspection system used in the 1980s and 1990s emphasised accountability. It contributed to the improvement of academic performance over the years, but led schools to focus too much on examination results. Further, with appraisal being an inspection exercise, improvement was very much externally directed, with little room or motivation for schools to take responsibility for bettering themselves. So a new system was introduced in 2000, based on school self evaluation, with a system of rewards to encourage and motivate, and this is what exists today.⁹ A similar system, in the sense that it is well structured and based on periodically validated self evaluation, is in the process of being introduced in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT).¹⁰

Accountability is important because without it any system risks losing legitimacy and public support. This applies at the level of the state (politicians who vote the budgets and administrators who share them out between schools) as well as at the local level (the immediate community within which a school is

³ *Education Evaluation around the World*, p 26, The Danish Evaluation Institute, 2003

⁴ Preface to Eurydice Report, *Evaluation of Schools providing Compulsory Education in Europe*, January 2004

⁵ <http://www.etini.gov.uk>

⁶ SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Czech Republic, 2009, p 4

⁷ SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Portugal, 2009

⁸ *Ofsted: Who we are and what we do*, Ofsted, 2009

⁹ *The Quality Journey of Singapore Schools*, 3rd APEC Ministerial Meeting, Santiago, Chile, April 2004

¹⁰ *School Improvement Framework*, ACT Department of Education and Training, Canberra, Australia, 2009

“*The issue that arises, central to the concerns of this report, is ‘in practice, what is, can or should be done to encourage and help schools to use inspection findings to improve or, even, to compel them to do so if they do not of themselves try hard enough?’*”

located, the parents¹¹ of pupils and the pupils themselves). A school should be able to show that it is effective and that it makes good and proper use of the resources it is given. In terms of its own self-worth as an institution and the proper professional pride (and hence motivation) of its staff, a school also needs to hold itself to account and know how well it is doing.

The importance given to centrally overseen and managed accountability has tended to grow in countries where more management functions and operational independence have been devolved to the schools themselves. It is seen as one way to ensure that common minimum standards are assured in all schools, irrespective of where they are. This is understandable but may raise concerns around the independence of some inspectorates from political influence or direction. In such cases is it always possible for inspectors to report ‘without fear or favour’? The seriousness of such issues is felt differently in different countries and the ways in which it is addressed vary.

Improvement is a less easily defined concept than accountability both because it is more subjective and because improvement in one area may come at the expense of missed opportunities for improvement in others. When school managers are given an accurate and perceptive evaluation of their institution, they receive a tool they can use to direct their effort to where it has the greatest impact on the education provided. Whether they do so is something of an act of faith. The issue that arises, central to the concerns of this report, is ‘in practice, what is, can or should be done to encourage and help schools to use inspection findings to improve or, even, to compel them to do so if they do not of themselves try hard enough?’.

Post-inspection improvement can also be looked for at a whole system level. If a common problem is identified through inspection of many individual schools, the best way to address it might be through some change in national

education policy. We do not explore that avenue in this report, though it is an important one and there is evidence¹² that in some countries the results of evaluation work are not used by policy makers as well as they might be. Nevertheless, most inspectorates publish a range of thematic reports as well as reports on individual schools, in order to inform a range of stakeholders (such as policy makers, teacher educators, teachers themselves, school managers) about the overall situation in an area of the curriculum, national trends, and so on.

¹¹ Throughout this report, ‘parent’ should (as appropriate) be taken to refer to all carers and guardians of school children as well as to biological and adoptive parents

¹² Gérard Bonnet in *Education Evaluation around the World*, pp 53–64, The Danish Evaluation Institute, 2003

Variations

“ In some countries, for instance, there are strong cultural/ideological beliefs in the centrality of parental choice in determining how children should be educated, and that the market forces so developed are themselves powerful pressure for school improvement.”

National inspection systems sit at various points on a number of spectra related to system structures and inspection practice. One such spectrum has already been mentioned, from inspection being located within the Government department responsible for education (and potentially used by that department directly as an instrument for implementing policy), as in Flanders and Ireland, to an inspectorate totally independent of Government, as for instance in Sweden. Other interrelated examples, of direct relevance to the ways in which inspection findings may be used to achieve improvement, are:

- Inspection findings can be published and made widely available (in whole or in part). This is the normal arrangement. However, in some countries (such as Germany) they are confidential to the inspectorate and the institution inspected. In others (for example, the Czech Republic), some types of report (those evaluating the quality of a school's education in general) are made available to the general public whilst others (legal and financial checks) are confidential to the school. In Hong Kong the school can decide whether or not to make its report public but, having once decided to do so, it cannot reverse the decision next time it is inspected.¹³
- Inspection reports can (at least formally) be written principally for the Government, for the institution itself (either headteacher or governors/owners), or for other stakeholders (such as parents and students). Many inspectorates claim to report to wide audiences, which makes selection of the best register in which to write tricky.
- Follow-up action to address weaknesses identified during inspection can be enforced (either by the inspectorate itself, if it has been given such powers or by the Government) or it can be left entirely to the inspected institution's own judgement and decision.

- Wherever a particular system sits on the spectrum from compulsion and enforcement to trust and *laissez faire*, the tools used to encourage improvement may to varying degrees involve guidance or explicit direction, and carrots or sticks.

The origins of the variability in the use of inspection outcomes often have deep cultural or ideological roots that go well beyond the inspection process itself.

- In some countries, for instance, there are strong cultural/ideological beliefs in the centrality of parental choice in determining how children should be educated, and that the market forces so developed are themselves powerful pressure for school improvement. England is an example. This elevates the importance of ensuring that parents have clear and accurate information about how a school operates and performs, and of the role of inspection in this process. Parents, it is argued, can then select the school that most closely meets their wishes and take steps to influence whichever school they choose (although in many circumstances they may not in reality have a significant choice) to change and develop in the directions of which they approve.
- In other countries, parental choice (in the sense of being able to select the school to which they send their offspring) is not seen as such a driving force, because children are generally expected to go to their neighbourhood school. Market forces are not stressed and the state, whether centrally or through its regional or local government, bears the responsibility for ensuring that the education provided in its schools is good. For example, the *Spanish Organic Law of Education* (2006) states that a key responsibility of the inspectorate is to 'Ensure the fulfilment of the basic conditions that guarantee the equality of all Spanish citizens in the exercise of their rights and obligations in educational matters, and their

¹³ *External School Review: Information for Schools*, p 11, Quality Assurance Division, Education Bureau, Hong Kong, 2009

linguistic rights, in accordance with the applicable provisions'.¹⁴

- It is often suggested that the prime responsibility for ensuring that a school provides a good standard of education rests with the school itself, and not with the inspectorate. In some countries, such as Germany,¹⁵ this primacy means that inspectors avoid anything that might be interpreted as advice or even criticism. In others, Ireland for instance,¹⁶ there are few such inhibitions, whilst accepting that the decisions about what to do rest, ultimately, with the school itself.
- Whatever the educational structures may be, whatever governance and democratic accountability arrangements apply and whatever market, funding or other pressures come into play, learning and teaching are always human activities that depend on the

skills, commitment and morale of all who are directly involved – whether as teachers or students. Their emotional reactions to inspection and its aftermath are as critical as cold logic in determining whether any improvements transpire. Thus issues of ethos, respect, and professional pride as well as others relating to training and qualifications all have a bearing on how inspection findings can make their proper contribution, and such issues often play out in different ways in different countries.

Given the range of contextual factors that can influence the design and delivery of inspection systems it is perhaps not surprising that there is variability between the countries included in this study. It is, however, difficult to find relationships between inspection systems positions on the various spectra and effective use of inspection findings.

¹⁴ SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Spain, 2009

¹⁵ SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Hessen, 2009; SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Rhineland-Palatine, 2009; SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Saxony, 2009

¹⁶ SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Ireland, 2009

Inspection outcomes

“If progress is not made, the ultimate sanction is to ‘report’ the school to the body (usually a Government department) that has the authority to fine it or to close it down.”

How are inspection outcomes used to improve education provision? In general, two situations can arise after an inspection, which differ in the steps that are needed immediately following it. The first is when inspection uncovers a statutory failure (this may range from unsafe buildings to a major failing to cover a prescribed curriculum). The second and most common situation is where inspection identifies areas in which a statutorily compliant school could nevertheless improve. Many inspectorates grade schools in some way, but others (for instance in Spain) do not ‘aspire to classify schools but [rather] to help them know themselves more deeply’.¹⁷

Failure

This is a stark term which, in many inspection regimes, is carefully avoided. We use it here to mean those situations when inspectors decide that some element(s) of what they have discovered in a school are so far removed from what they should be that urgent action is required to rectify them because the school cannot be allowed to continue as it is.

- Sometimes making the required improvements is easily achieved – the school recognises and accepts where it has failed and can immediately do what is needed to correct the problems.
- More often, almost by definition, improvement is not easily achieved until the reason for the failure is addressed. This may be any combination of incompetent leadership, lack of resources, insufficient or untrained staff, environmental or social factors in the school’s area, etc.

In some regimes, inspectors identify such causes of failure, in addition to its nature, as clearly as possible in their reports. Whether or not this is the case, the usual practice is for inspectors to return to the school after a relatively short period in order to check progress in overcoming the shortcomings. Often they find evidence of some improvement,

but they may nevertheless decide to organise frequent return visits until the original problem has been demonstrably corrected.

If progress is not made, the ultimate sanction is to ‘report’ the school to the body (usually a Government department) that has the authority to fine it or to close it down. These are drastic steps, normally taken with great reluctance and as a last resort.

The widespread practice of increased frequency of inspection for failing or even simply ‘weaker than average’ schools (see Annex A) may be an effective one in some circumstances but it may have a negative side effect in tending to reinforce a notion of ‘inspection as punishment’ (Vass and Simmonds, 2001). It is possible that this may increase the tendency of schools to focus on ‘passing’ their next inspection rather than on learning from the previous inspection and using it as a catalyst for improvement. Such a focus on ‘doing well’ could lead to distortion as a school puts its best foot, as distinct from its everyday foot, forward and may in extreme cases lead to deception (hiding known areas of weakness from inspectors). It gets in the way of inspection as a collaborative activity between professionals and encourages inspection as a competition between school and inspectors.

Areas for improvement

As noted above, most inspections find that a school’s performance is acceptable overall but that there are areas of relative weakness where improvement is desirable. The approaches used to prompt such improvement are varied, illustrating both the complexity of the task and the cultural and systemic differences between countries that make any search for ‘universal’ answers a futile one.

As a general rule, four steps are needed to achieve improvement:

- First, school governors, owners, management and teaching staff need to be persuaded

¹⁷ SICI European Inspectorates’ Profiles: Spain, 2009

“*Inspectors have three tools to use when persuading a school that their judgements are sound ones.*”

and convinced that the conclusions of their inspection are valid, accurate and balanced, and that they encapsulate the most important issues for the school to address.

- Second, the school needs to obtain, or be given, the resources it requires in order to make whatever changes are desirable. By resources we do not mean just money, but also access to the skills and advice it needs and – if required – to training for its staff or, indeed, new staff.
- Third, staff at all levels in the school must be motivated to alter their ways of working, and to have the self-confidence to take the risks which change and development programmes inevitably involve.
- Finally, there need to be effective systems of encouragement and reward for the school as an institution and for its staff as individuals when they embark on, and successfully conclude, effective beneficial changes; there need to be sanctions to hand if they do not.

Accepting the conclusions

In most countries the situation whereby inspection conclusions may have been accepted purely because the expertise and authority of the inspectors was unquestionable has passed and schools feel at liberty to question those inspection judgements they disagree with.

In some countries (such as Ireland, the Netherlands and Wales), a school's comments on the inspection report are published, and it is clear that glowing reports are seldom if ever contested whilst critical ones are seldom accepted without some kind of comment implying that the inspectors got it wrong (or, at the least, failed to give full credit where it was due). A small survey of recent Irish reports published early in 2009, undertaken as part of this study, showed that just over half of schools chose to publish a response, and less than half of these responses were convincing in demonstrating that the school understood the inspectors' concerns and were energetically addressing them.

None of this is at all surprising – indeed, anything else would defy human nature. But it highlights a real problem – namely that institutions tend to be disinclined to give credence to reports that are unfavourable and, consequently, to respond positively to them – which gets addressed in various ways.

- Inspectors have three tools to use when persuading a school that their judgements are sound ones. The first is their demeanour throughout the inspection – if all they do is impressive and redolent of the highest possible professional knowledge, understanding and acuity, their conclusions stand the best chance of acceptance. The second is their oral explanation of their conclusions during and (especially) at the end of the inspection. The third is their written report – the clarity of its argument, the persuasiveness of the evidence it marshals and the timeliness of its publication. Getting all these aspects right might be considered *the* professional challenge of inspecting. It is not realistic to expect it to be fully met in every respect other than exceptionally. Inspectors are human too.
- It is now commonplace (though not universal) to organise inspection round the institution's own self evaluation. This has many virtues, chief of which is the requirement for each school itself to reflect on the quality of its work and to bring school leaders themselves into the inspection process. The exercise has huge potential value when it is done seriously and honestly, and it does not depend on inspection for its effectiveness. Occasional inspection (and in some countries, such as Denmark, 'occasional' means 'very infrequent')¹⁸, it is argued, is all that is needed to check and to keep a school accountable or focused on the provision of excellent education. In a perfect world this should work. If inspection highlights weaknesses that have already been identified by the school itself, there should be no disagreement; however, it may also lead to schools being less inclined to accept the judgements made by inspectors if the self evaluation itself is adjudged inaccurate by the inspectors.

¹⁸ SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Denmark, 2009

“In some inspection systems there is an imbalance in the evidential standards required.”

- The publication of inspection reports, usually seen as highly desirable for reasons of transparency and accountability, may increase the pressure on schools to act defensively when criticised. Those regimes where reports are kept in confidence between the inspectorate and the school (such as Hesse, Saxony and Rhine-Palatinate in Germany) may avoid the issue.
- In some inspection systems there is an imbalance in the evidential standards required. Any serious criticisms have to meet a higher evidential standard (beyond reasonable doubt), than complimentary comments (balance of probabilities). This may be perceived as a way of winning a school's agreement by generosity in order to make acceptance of the more serious criticisms more palatable. This is the *realpolitik* of inspection.

Another facet of *realpolitik* relates to how long a headteacher has been in post. It is possible that a newly appointed head is more likely to find criticism acceptable and helpful than one who has been in post for many years (who may well feel such criticism personally), and is less likely to react defensively.

Obtaining the resources

Making improvements always involves opportunity costs and may incur financial costs too. Juggling resources is a task for a school's management (not inspectors) but clearly inspection results need to be presented in ways that recognise the real constraints on action that any school faces, whilst at the same time encouraging the school to overcome more of the constraints than it may instinctively feel that it can. Timing can be an important factor – both how soon after an inspection the report is finalised so as to build on any momentum established by the inspection itself, and whether the developments required happen to coincide with, for instance, the current national funding priorities.

School owners and governors have an important role in ensuring that an appropriate

level of resourcing is made available. A key element of this is often ensuring that the school has access to good professional advice when considering and planning the changes it needs to make. In several countries provision of such support is built into the inspection regime (for instance, through the Curriculum Advisory and Support Service in Northern Ireland, School Improvement Teams in Hong Kong and through the SBA in Saxony).

Another approach is to make improvement support tools readily available to schools. For example, the Education and Manpower Bureau of the Government of Hong Kong has produced an 'On-line Interactive Resource on Enhancing School Improvement through School Self Evaluation and External School Review'.¹⁹ This has considerable potential because it encourages a school to be reflective – asking, for example, which of the following descriptions best reflects its response to having been externally reviewed:

- To breathe a sigh of relief that it's all over and carry on as before (complacency)
- To reject the external review's findings as not applicable to this school (denial)
- To dutifully carry out the suggestions made by the external review team (compliance)
- To reflect critically on suggestions and evaluate future development (pro-activity).²⁰

Motivating staff

Occasionally the implementation of improvements may depend mainly on people who are not the staff of the school (for instance, when repair or modification to the fabric of the building is needed), but in the overwhelming majority of cases development in the environment for learning has to be driven by teachers and other staff who interact directly with pupils. One way or another, the ways that they do their jobs have to change. Although it may in some instances be possible and indeed necessary to enforce such change, it is infinitely preferable for it to be achieved voluntarily and with enthusiastic, informed, professional commitment.

¹⁹ See www.hk.sitc.co.uk

²⁰ Ibid

“Again the ultimate responsibility for staff morale rests with the school and, in particular, its head, but the way an inspection is performed and the way staff perceive it have a direct impact on the nature of their response to its outcome.”

Again the ultimate responsibility for staff morale rests with the school and in particular, its head, but the way an inspection is performed and the way staff perceive it have a direct impact on the nature of their response to its outcome. None of the descriptions of the inspection regimes considered here imply that the issue of enhancing staff morale and self-esteem, and hence their enthusiasm to embrace the changes necessary for improvement, has been designed into the process as an important requirement. Hong Kong probably comes nearest to achieving this by encouraging schools to take account of the views of all teachers when considering how to respond to external review findings.²¹

This is not to say that staff morale is completely ignored. In England, for instance, providing helpful feedback to individual teachers on the quality of their work, when teaching is observed by an inspector, is specifically required by Ofsted.²² In Scotland, reports are structured so as to present ‘Key Strengths’ at the start of the report and ‘Improving the School’ as ‘Main Points for Action’ at the end,²³ something that staff generally find more comfortable than reporting them the other way round. However, treating all school staff (not just the headteacher) as a particularly important constituency for the overall conclusions of an inspection, to be persuaded and engaged, is something else. It is not a straightforward issue to address because of the need to avoid subverting the normal and proper lines of management and communication within a school. But it is not obvious that, in most places, it is being consciously addressed.

A system of rewards and sanctions

Virtue ought to be its own reward, but basing arrangements for post-inspection school improvement on this belief alone is a significant risk. In most of the countries we have looked at, the rewards that have evolved relate to the outcome of an inspection, not to the way a school uses its inspection to help it to develop and improve. They comprise a

mixture of increased freedoms, good publicity for the school and enhanced professional standing (which may in turn lead to some financial benefit), in particular for headteachers. Singapore goes further, and has a highly developed system of well publicised awards for successful schools as an integral part of its school excellence model, in which inspection also is embedded. Sanctions, for the most part, are the obverse of the rewards – increased oversight, disappointing publicity and damaged reputation. The degree to which what has evolved can be called a ‘system’ varies.

Examples of increased freedoms are: increased autonomy in areas of school governance (Portugal) and less frequent and/or less intense inspection in the future (e.g. Wales, England, New Zealand). Increased oversight generally means more frequent and/or more rigorous inspection and closer day-to-day external oversight. The reward for a weak school that improves is a reduction in oversight but, apart from virtue, there is usually little direct reward for a coasting school that moves out of its comfort zone in order to improve, let alone for a good one that works hard to get even better.

²¹ The next phase of external school review, Quality Assurance Division, Education Bureau, Hong Kong, 2008

²² *Conducting School Inspections*, pp 19–20, Ofsted, 2009

²³ See reports published at www.hmie.gov.uk

Discussion

“Continuous improvement is something schools should aspire to, irrespective of any externally imposed requirements for self evaluation or inspection.”

A great deal of the recent development in school inspection, internationally, has been in establishing systems and practices to link external (inspection) and self evaluation, working on the basis that perceptive self evaluation is probably the best and most secure foundation for school improvement. The arrangements developed in Hong Kong, recently reviewed by John MacBeath,²⁴ are a clear example of this approach. However, the specific practices by which the results of evaluation (whether ‘self’ or ‘external’) can best be used to create substantially improved provision for learners have so far received less attention. At best this is work in progress. Continuing to use Hong Kong as the example, its recently revised External School Review approach²⁵ has been designed to be ‘improvement-oriented’ and a key area of interest to reviewers will be the ‘measures taken to follow up suggestions made in previous review reports’.

Continuous improvement is something schools should aspire to, irrespective of any externally imposed requirements for self evaluation or inspection. Successful institutions in any walk of life are not complacent, resigned or defensive. They are realistic and reflective. They recognise that improvement is never mechanical or something that can be achieved on autopilot, and that it demands the expenditure of consistently creative energy. They base their plans and actions on evidence and research. They have clear goals and are prepared, when necessary, to take calculated risks. They find ways round difficulties and they do not look for excuses. They seldom stand still.

The original motivation for the work behind this report was to discover the ways that inspection services in different countries have developed to feed inspection insights helpfully into improvement processes. Those who

organise inspectorates have a clear concern for educational quality. The evidence we have reviewed suggests however, that the conflation of ‘inspection’ and ‘improvement’ roles can lead to tensions, for example:

- To a significant degree, the requirements of *accountability* and *improvement* are in tension with each other. Accountability looks outward from the school (towards government and other stakeholders) and aims to be an objective process. Improvement may be *measured* objectively (have pupil examination results improved?), but it is achieved subjectively, by the particular people who work in and attend the school, with their own particular strengths, weaknesses, motivations etc. There is a tendency to expect inspection to be all things to all people. The evidence reviewed for this study suggests no one has yet found a way to achieve this and that doing so will be difficult. Perhaps more to the point there is little evidence of a properly grounded, evidence-based effort to resolve the conundrum.
- Many inspection systems are, in themselves, rigorous and sophisticated. In a perfect world, where people’s reactions and actions are controlled by cool reason, they might support school improvement effectively. In the real world, something more is needed to translate inspection outcomes into school improvement. Excellent school leadership may be key to this but it could be argued that that truly excellent (as distinct from ‘merely’ committed and competent) school leadership is the exception not the rule.
- One other way in which inspection can enable schools to improve is through the general insights it generates and which are often published in thematic reports. In other words, what helps might be the evidence

²⁴ *The Impact Study on the Effectiveness of External School Review in Enhancing School Improvement through School Self-evaluation in Hong Kong*, John MacBeath, Quality Assurance Division, Education Bureau Hong Kong, July 2008

²⁵ *The Next Phase of External School Review: Information for Schools*, Quality Assurance Division, Education Bureau Hong Kong, September 2008

“Using inspection in this strategic way might be the best way to effect improvement.”

about what has worked in other schools, or is found generally to work. Individual inspections and reports are important because of their contribution to this larger evidence base in addition to their impact on the individual schools inspected.

- Insofar as this line of argument holds, then the role of the inspectorate in ensuring that general conclusions are drawn and disseminated widely and persuasively is a key one. In some regimes (for instance, Slovakia) inspectors provide in-service training for teachers. In others (such as England), some inspectors are practising teachers (including headteachers) who may take back the general lessons from inspection to their own schools.
- A second consequence, if the argument holds, is that the planning of a national inspection programme should be influenced, at least in part, by its role as a system-wide research tool. Except in the cases of ‘failing’

schools, where clear and explicit statements of what is wrong and what needs to be done to put things right are likely to be a requirement, it may be that, as in the Subject and Survey division of the English inspectorate, reports should be written in terms of ‘these are the things that work well in this school because...’ and ‘these are the practices and processes that fail to work because ...’. Good use of the word ‘because’ generally makes for illuminating and helpful reporting.

- Perhaps, therefore, decisions about which schools to inspect should be determined partly by a view about which have most features from which others can learn. Using inspection in this strategic way might be the best way to effect improvement.

Conclusion

“School inspection has the potential to be a powerful force for good and can be used to drive school improvement.”

School inspection has the potential to be a powerful force for good and can be used to drive school improvement. However, the tensions generated between its roles in providing accountability and in supporting improvement can impact on the mechanisms through which improvement arises from inspection. The inter-relationships are subtle and context specific and need to be addressed appropriately, country-by-country. There is no universally ‘right’ approach because of the differences between the systems being inspected. However, whilst this study found little evidence of deliberately designed systems to turn inspection into improvement it is likely that inspection systems that work well in translating inspection outcomes into school improvement deliberately address the following issues. They:

- Clearly express the extent to which the inspection system focuses on ensuring (legislative) accountability rather than being a mechanism for improvement. This includes acknowledging when inspection is being used as a mechanism to drive changes in standards or curriculum.
- Consider how inspection messages are reported, including the role of inspection in disseminating wider, generalised messages of evidence of effective practice.
- Acknowledge the roles of different agents in both accepting and mediating inspection messages – school leaders, governors, teaching staff and external advisers.
- Understand the role of rewards and sanctions and their link to using inspection outcomes for school improvement rather than reactions to ‘passing’ or ‘failing’ inspection.
- Reflect on the relationship of the nature and frequency of inspection or monitoring visits on a schools approach and reaction to inspection.

Annex A

Czech Republic²⁷

The mission of the Czech School Inspectorate is, on the level of individual schools, 'to assure external evaluation in a three year cycle aimed at provisions for education in schools recorded in the Register of Educational Facilities as stated by law'. The inspectorate carries out 'inspections', which focus on the quality of education, and two kinds of 'audit', which check (i) that the school complies with all relevant laws and decrees and (ii) that it makes good use of the financial resources with which it is provided.

Inspection reports are published: reports on audits (called protocols) are confidential to the school and its 'founder' (the legal entity responsible for it). The inspectorate also publishes thematic reports on the basis of summarised findings resulting from the inspection of particular subjects and analysis of the findings. The intended audiences are:

- **Reports:** school management; school founder; parents; wide public
- **Protocols:** school management; school founder
- **Thematic:** decision makers; wide public.

Reports and protocols are discussed with the head of the school and comments, as appropriate, are added to the report when it is published. Schools are obliged to take measures to correct identified shortcomings within a timescale specified by the inspectorate, and to report on the actions taken. The inspectorate performs a follow-up inspection to check that the actions have been effective. If the necessary measures are found not to have been taken, the school may be fined (a sum up to about £50,000 in the case of gross financial deficiencies). If the school continues to fail to rectify its deficiencies, the Chief School Inspector can request that it be removed from the Register of Educational Facilities.

Denmark²⁸

The vision of the Danish Skolestyrelsen is to be 'an inspiring counterpart to all who work with strengthening of the quality within schools in order to offer the pupils the best possibilities to develop socially, academically and personally'. It monitors individual private schools, takes part in international research and assists the quality assuring of the Folkeskole done by municipal boards. It works to strengthen an evaluation culture. To a large extent the evaluation it carries out is desk-based, using the information and evaluation conclusions passed on by the schools. Quality assurance in Denmark is to a large extent based on self-evaluation, decentralisation, local social control, a mixture of formal and informal elements and parental influence. External and imposed control has been given a low profile.

England²⁹

The English Inspectorate (Ofsted) has a wide remit to inspect a range of state-funded or regulated services for learners of all ages, not just schools and other educational institutions. By a considerable margin, it is the largest inspectorate considered in this report. It is formally independent of all Ministries and reports directly to the UK Parliament. Its work is entirely concerned with regulation and inspection: it does not offer either advice or training.

At the time of publication schools are inspected on a five-year cycle (though this is changing to a risk-based régime that will mean the best schools are inspected less frequently). All schools are expected to undertake self-evaluation, and this is a starting point for inspectors. Following its inspection, a school receives an overall grade (on a four point scale). The report, which is published, is written in a language and format that makes it suitable for a wide audience, including teachers, parents

²⁷ SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Czech Republic, 2009

²⁸ SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Denmark, 2009

²⁹ SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: England, 2009

and learners. The lead inspector also sends a letter to all pupils in the school to explain the main conclusions to them.

Schools are required to distribute their inspection report to all parents. They are expected to address the issues identified in the report, and their progress and effectiveness in doing so is one of the features examined at their next inspection. Schools receiving the lowest grade (4) are deemed to require 'special measures' or may be given a 'notice to improve'. They, and a proportion of schools receiving grade 3 (satisfactory), receive monitoring visits from inspectors or another inspection after a much shorter period than the normal three years. The results of such monitoring visits are also published. If schools do not show the necessary signs of improvement, the sanction of enforced closure is available.

In addition to individual school inspection reports, Ofsted undertakes a wide range of thematic studies. Some recent titles are: *Learning: creative approaches that raise standards*, *Citizenship established? Citizenship in schools 2006/09*, *Personal, social, health and economic education in schools*. The Chief Inspector publishes a detailed annual report on all Ofsted's work that is submitted to Parliament. A new framework for inspection of schools in England will be introduced from January 2011.

Flanders³⁰

The Flemish Inspectorate advises on institutional accreditation, inspects institutions and undertakes other tasks as required by law or on the instruction of the government. Its ambitions are to contribute to socially and democratically inspired education, to provide reliable statements about the quality of education in individual institutions and to generate accurate information about the overall quality of education. In short, its focus is towards the accountability end of the accountability/improvement spectrum.

Inspections themselves are based on a CIPO framework (Context, Inputs, Process,

Output) and at every stage inspectors go through the four steps of data analysis, examination, interpretation and deliberation. Inspection reports are published. They conclude with advice that can take one of three forms – favourable, limited favourable and unfavourable. In the first of these, the institution is given a clean bill of health. In the second, the institution is allowed to continue but required to make specified improvements within a given period. This is assessed in a follow-up visit. If the advice is unfavourable, the institution has a defined period in which to overcome its shortcomings: if it does not do so (as determined in another inspection) its recognition will be withdrawn.

There is no formal requirement for the Inspectorate to produce thematic reports, though it sometimes does so. However, the Ministry can commission investigation into specific topics and this influences the emphases given to individual inspections. For example, in the current school year the accent is on language policy.

Germany³¹

Germany comprises 16 federal states and inspection is organised at the state level rather than as the responsibility of the Federal Republic. The arrangements in three of the states (Hesse, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony) have been considered in preparing this report. Whilst there are clearly some differences, the general approach is to be non-judgmental and purely evaluative (diagnostic and analytic). Inspectors do not give advice, nor do they 'grade'. Schools decide for themselves, on the basis of the evaluations, what actions are required to make improvements. The Inspectorates do not apply sanctions when performance is weak. Reports are not published.

There are two interesting and unusual features in Rhineland-Palatinate, quite possibly replicated in other states, that illustrate the low key, collaborative mindset of the Inspectorate.

³⁰ SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Flanders, 2009

³¹ SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Hessen, 2009; SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Rhineland-Palatinate, 2009; SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Saxony, 2009

The first is that it has links with higher education institutions 'in order to stay in touch with educational research on school evaluation and development'. The second is that its reports give considerable weight to the evaluations derived from a range of stakeholders (such as students, parents and teachers); they are not dominated solely by the views of the inspectors themselves.

Hong Kong³²

The Quality Assurance Division of the Hong Kong Education Bureau is responsible for external school review. The system has been vigorously developed in recent years, and is integrated into a 'school development and accountability framework' designed to underpin continuous improvement. External review is thus 'improvement oriented', 'school specific' and 'focused'. This means that the timing and duration of the review and its team composition are flexibly tailored to meet the circumstances of the school.

Likewise, external review reports are tailored to the school, and so there is variation in structure and reporting approach from one review to another. Reports include the school's response to the findings and must be released to relevant stakeholders by the school but they are not uploaded onto the Education Board's website. Whether or not to publish a review more widely is a decision for the school, but if it decides to publish it must do so in full, and undertake to publicise all future external reviews similarly. Schools are not allowed to use the reports in their own publicity.

A particular feature of the Hong Kong practices is that the views and involvement of *all* teachers are sought and encouraged. There are online questionnaires for them to complete and schools are strongly encouraged to collect and incorporate their reactions to the draft report in the official response released with the report.

Ireland³³

The Irish Inspectorate is a division of the Ministry of Education and Science and the Chief Inspector is a member of its senior management team. The Inspectorate's main functions are evaluation of the education system, providing advice to the education system and contributing to the formulation of education policy.

The Inspectorate undertakes a range of inspections in order to produce both thematic and individual institution reports. All reports are published, and schools have the opportunity to provide their own comments on their report, which are published at the same time. The reports make recommendations, and the Inspectorate's advice-provision function is fulfilled at least in part by inspectors in the course of their inspections.

To a greater extent than in most other inspectorates, inspectors have a responsibility for the direction of schools and in this sense are not entirely 'independent'. This is not, of course, to say that they cannot be objective. The arrangement means that follow-up to an inspection, and monitoring whether a school takes the advice it has been given, falls naturally to the inspectors who have the institution concerned within their 'patch'.

The target audiences for all reports are many and various – school patrons, school principals and their staff, relevant administrative sections of the Department of Education and Science, parents and the wider public. In addition, composite and national thematic reports are for politicians and policy makers, teacher educators and the press.

Netherlands³⁴

The statutory purpose of the Dutch Inspectorate is 'to evaluate and to stimulate the quality of education and to inform all parties concerned on the quality of education in general and in individual institutes'. Schools

³²The next phase of external school review, Quality Assurance Division, Education Bureau, Hong Kong, 2008; www.edb.gov.hk; www.hk.sitc.co.uk

³³SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Ireland, 2009

³⁴SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: The Netherlands, 2009

that do not comply with national regulations are called to account and the Inspectorate points out the ways in which quality improvements can be achieved. However, the Inspectorate has no formal advisory role in relation to the institutions it inspects.

If a school displays serious weaknesses, the Inspectorate implements a more intensive inspection regime and may, eventually, report the school to the Minister of Education. All reports are published, and the Inspectorate acts as a source of information about educational quality nationwide (partly through inspection of individual schools and partly through separate thematic inspections) in order to inform policy making and management. Examples of recent themes are: Care for pupils; Social cohesion; Waiting lists in special education.

Following an inspection, there is a phase known as ‘intervention’ during which the school has to take action to improve the identified shortcomings and the Inspectorate monitors its progress in doing so. If the school fails to improve, the Inspectorate can increase the pressure by more intensive monitoring (undertaking a Quality Improvement Inspection) or, ultimately, by imposing sanctions.

New Zealand³⁵

In New Zealand, the Educational Review Office fulfils the role of an inspectorate. Its mission is ‘to provide external evaluation that contributes to high quality education for all young New Zealanders’ and it is required to provide assurance to Government about its investment in education. The Review Office reviews all schools, the timing of a review being determined using a ‘Chain of Quality’ (see below). All reports are published.

At the end of a review, a judgement is made about the quality of the school concerned using the Chain of Quality.

- If the Review Office has serious concerns, it recommends Ministry of Education

intervention and will arrange the next review within 12 months. Even if it believes a school can make the necessary improvements without Ministry intervention, serious concern triggers a 12-month review period.

- If the school has less serious weaknesses and the Review Office is not confident that it will be able to overcome them, whilst believing that it should be able to do so, the review period will be 24 months.
- The ‘normal’ situation is a review period of three years.
- However, if a school has demonstrated competence in self review and has a track record of good performance so that there is no perceived risk to the quality of education, a review period of four to five years may be recommended.

Each year the Review Office publishes a set of thematic Education Evaluation Reports intended to give parents, teachers and officials information about the system as a whole and how it is performing. For example, in the current year titles have included: Readiness to implement the New Zealand curriculum; Managing professional learning and development in secondary schools; and Quality of education and care in kindergartens.

Northern Ireland³⁶

The inspectorate in Northern Ireland has a clear and explicit mission to ‘promote improvement’. Its vision is for the inspectorate to be highly regarded and influential, dedicated fully to the education and well-being of all learners. Its organisational values are truth, dignity, service and example. It has long recognised that the greatest chance for sustained improvement occurs when a school has established a positive culture and commitment to self evaluation and professional growth and so it has produced a range of literature designed to assist self-evaluation at whole-school and subject levels. It has involved a group of schools in piloting a major new handbook of guidance, ‘Together

³⁵ www.ero.govt.nz

³⁶ SICI European Inspectorates’ Profiles: Northern Ireland, 2008

Towards Improvement', which is available to all schools.

Nevertheless, there can be a firm hand within the velvet glove where the grading and written text of a report indicate that it is necessary. The most likely consequence is a follow-up inspection and possibly the inclusion of the school in a special support programme (provided by the Education and Library Board's Curriculum Advisory and Support Service).

As well as full institutional and follow-up inspections, there is a parallel programme of thematic inspections. All are published. A feature of the régime is that all types of inspection are planned in a co-ordinated and proportional way, giving schools an opportunity to influence areas of their work which inspectors consider. In other words, it is not just individual inspection events that are intended to promote the improvement of a particular school at a specific point in time, but the entire inspection milieu, continuously.

Portugal³⁷

The mission of the Portuguese inspectorate is strongly biased towards accountability and control (to guarantee quality, equality and justice; to control, audit and supervise; to contribute to accountability; and to provide information to support policy makers and underpin public opinion).

After an external evaluation by the Inspectorate, a school is also expected to build up a Development Plan aimed at overcoming the weakest aspects that were found. Such a plan is submitted to the school assembly and to the Regional Services of the Ministry of Education. If the performance is good, a school is given greater autonomy. Schools that succeed are awarded autonomy contracts that enable them to manage an increasing number of areas of school governance. Schools are not able to sign an autonomy contract before they give evidence that they are performing above minimal standards.

The inspectorate does not implement a system of follow-up inspections of poorly performing schools, but such schools are monitored and supported by the Regional Services of the Ministry of Education. Such schools must present an improvement plan with objectives and goals to be achieved.

Scotland³⁸

The Inspectorate in Scotland is an agency that operates independently and impartially whilst remaining directly accountable to Ministers, who have emphasised the need for a distinctive contribution to improving the quality of education and raising attainment. The core objective is to promote and contribute to sustainable improvements in standards, quality and achievements for all learners. The Inspectorate seeks to work in partnership with the institutions it inspects and other agencies. Within this broad context, inspection and review are intended to provide external assurance of quality, to verify self evaluation, to identify and promote good practice and to build the capacity for improvement

Inspection reports are published. Follow-through is proportionate and depends on the findings. Where provision is weak, inspectors may return to a school within a short timescale (e.g. 6 months) and may continue to engage with the school over a period of years. If there is no improvement, the inspectorate has the authority to seek an 'enforcement order' from Ministers, but that is rarely if ever required. Where provision is very good, inspectors do not return to a school, other than to see good practice.

The Inspectorate also undertakes thematic work, and recent reports, bringing together information from a range of schools, include: Assessing, recording and analysing learner progress and outcomes; Business education – a portrait of current practice; and Count us in – achieving success for deaf pupils.

³⁷ SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Portugal, 2009

³⁸ SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Scotland, 2009

Singapore³⁹

The external evaluation function in Singapore is fulfilled by the School Appraisal Board – a division of the Ministry of Education. More than in any other country considered in this study, there is a comprehensive School Excellence Model in Singapore that underpins the whole endeavour to maintain and improve educational quality. It is a good example of the need to devise quality systems that are appropriate to the culture of the country concerned. It is hard to imagine such a rational, well thought-out and comprehensive system being implemented in any country in Europe, where pre-conceptions and conservatism (both educational and political) would undermine it.

Schools undertake self evaluation using the structure and categories of the excellence model, and this is validated on a five year cycle by external experts appointed by the Appraisal Board. The outcome of a validation visit is a feedback report intended to be a catalyst for action. The whole process is designed to ensure that schools have a realistic and perceptive appreciation of their strengths and relative weaknesses, and that they take responsibility to address and overcome shortcomings themselves, within the structures provided by the Ministry. 'Failure' is not an option.

The rewards for success in Singapore include a comprehensive set of awards that schools can obtain (set out in a Masterplan of Awards). These recognise a school's achievement in a range of areas (academic value added, physical/aesthetic and character development) at a range of levels.

Slovak Republic⁴⁰

The core mission of the inspectorate in the Slovak Republic is 'to identify the school's strengths and areas for improvement, to find problems that are related to violated legislation

and to order and assign their improvement: and to inform a school provider about unsatisfactory school facilities and problems connected with weaknesses in the teaching'. More generally, the aim is to improve the quality of education in all aspects. One way that inspectors achieve this is through sharing their experiences in meetings with school managers and through in-service training seminars with teachers.

If inspectors discover significant shortcomings in a school, there is a series of requirements that can be specified, with sanctions (from financial penalties to dismissal of the headteacher or de-registration of the school) that can be imposed. In less extreme circumstances, the inspectorate identifies the measures a school needs to take to improve and, after the appropriate period, re-inspects to verify that they have been taken accordingly.

Spain⁴¹

The main aims of the Inspectorate in Spain are to guarantee the observance and application of the laws and to contribute to the improvement of education. The second part is fulfilled by the Education Inspectorate mainly 'by giving advice to, guiding and informing the different sectors of the education community in the exercise of their rights and the fulfilment of their obligations'. Inspections do not classify schools but rather, through analysis of their performance, their successes and their difficulties, help to deepen their self-understanding and identify specific areas where improvement is desirable.

Following inspection, inspectors draft a report that is then analysed jointly with the school governing team before being published. The report is the starting point for a school improvement plan, the implementation of which is followed up by the inspectorate. However, there are generally no economic or administrative consequences for a school

³⁹The Quality Journey of Singapore Schools, 3rd APEC Ministerial Meeting, Santiago, Chile, April 2004; www.moe.gov.sg

⁴⁰SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Slovak Republic, 2009

⁴¹SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Spain, 2009

as a result of an inspection report. Schools are simply 'expected' to overcome their weaknesses as identified through inspection.

Sweden⁴²

Since 1 October 2008, Skolinspektionen (the Swedish schools inspectorate) has been an independent agency. The task of the Inspectorate is to determine whether – and how well – a school or activity is functioning in relation to the regulations set out in the Education Act, school ordinances, national curricula and other national statutes. This involves auditing and assessment at both municipal and school level, focusing on the quality and legal aspects of the operation.

The Inspectorate also prepares and publishes a considerable range of thematic reports. Recent examples include: Teaching of Swedish; Drop-out; and Bullying, harassment and discrimination in schools.

The present situation is one of change and flux because an initial six-year programme to perform full inspections (legal and quality aspects) in all municipalities and schools is just finishing, and a new, more proportionate, régime is about to be introduced. Reports are published, and if failure to meet legal requirements is identified the institution is required to make the necessary improvements. However, a range of changes is under discussion (from the intended recipient of a school's report to whether or not the Inspectorate should produce an annual report drawing together its findings for the year).

Wales⁴³

The mission of the Welsh inspectorate (Estyn) is the achievement of excellence for all in education and training. Its vision is to operate as a responsive, forward-looking and outward-looking organisation that has a growing national profile and increasing impact on policy making in Wales. Its objectives

are (i) to deliver a high quality education and training inspection service; and (ii) to provide independent and sound advice, based on inspection evidence, to inform the formulation and evaluation of policy for education and training in Wales.

Following an inspection, the written report (which should contain clear recommendations for improvement) is shown to the school, which is invited to provide a written response to be published with the inspector's report. Schools are obliged to produce an action plan in response to the recommendations. When an inspection finds that a school is underperforming seriously, follow-up inspections are arranged to check that good progress is being made in rectifying the shortcomings. Otherwise, monitoring how effectively the school's action plan is implemented is the responsibility of its governors and the local authority.

Thematic inspection reports are produced every year. Some are in response to the annual remit given to Estyn by the Minister, others may be commissioned at the discretion of the Chief Inspector. Recent themes have included: Education for sustainable development and global citizenship, Learning provided for young offenders, and Welsh medium/bilingual provision – 14–19 science courses.

⁴² SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Sweden, 2009

⁴³ SICI European Inspectorates' Profiles: Wales, 2009



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