

# A review article on school inspections



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Inspection is perhaps the oldest of supervision of teachers and schools. In many countries inspection had its origins in the development of public education as early as nineteenth century. Since that time inspectorates have generally developed in both size and scope, although it is fair to say that there have been period reversals in their fortunes as indicated by the degree of professional, public and government support received.

As the provision of education has increasingly come to be seen as a prime responsibility of local and national government it has inevitably become part of the political process. At the present time inspection and inspectorates are highly on political agendas and associated in many countries with radical reform. For examples, changes in inspectorates are taking place in more than half the member countries of the European Union and even in America, a country where traditional inspection has never found a secure place, programmes are underway experimenting with inspection or variants of it (Carron and DeGrauw, 1997).

What is inspection and what is its purpose? Inspection in its most general sense may be defined as the process of assessing the quality and the performance of institutions, services, programmes or projects by those (inspector) who are not directly involved in them and who are usually especially appointed to fulfill the responsibilities (Wilcox, 2000). Inspection involves visits made by inspectors, individual or in teams, to observe the institution, services etc concerned while they are actually functioning.

As to the purpose of inspection, the author will consider the case of the English and Dutch national inspectorate. Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) in

England, inspection contain three principal functions; checking on the use of public funds, provision of information for central government, provision of advice to those responsible for running educational establishment (Wilcox, 2000). The Dutch Inspectorate of Education is responsible for the inspection and review of schools and educational institutions. This includes; assessing the quality of education offered in schools, reporting publicly on the quality of individual institutions, reporting publicly on the educational system as a whole, encouraging schools to maintain and improve the education they offer, providing information for policy development and supplying reliable information on education (Dutch Inspectorate of Education, 2005).

In the recent years many countries have re-examined their inspection system in the face of demands that their schools should be made more transparently accountable for the outcomes and standards which they achieve. Inspection, however, is never only an instrument of accountability that has always assumed, as a potential consequence, the improvement of the school inspected (Matthews and Sammons, 2004).

The purpose of this review article is to answer a specific question about school inspection;

Does school inspection improve quality of education?

Do teachers perceive inspection as an instrument for school improvement?

However, the widely believed corporate slogan of ‘improvement through inspection’ is less robust in response to criticism. A number of literatures have argued that inspection has only made limited contributions towards

school development and improvement (Taylor Fitz- Gibbon 1996; Lonsdale and Parsons 1998; Fitz-Gibbon 1998), while others suggest that despite a body of contemporary research within the field inspection contribution to school improvement remains moot and attributed the improvement as a result of internal efforts. The focus of this review article is to provide detail examination of whether school inspection actually improves quality of education. Special attention will be given to these two categories of authors with diverse opinion on whether school inspection does or does not improve quality of education. In this article, because of the volume of literatures available on school inspection reference will be on England Inspectorate of Education specifically the activities of Ofsted. In the next section, the position of the two groups of authors on school inspection and school improvement will be presented along each other. But before that, we would to look at what actually constitute school improvement.

## **1. 1 Definition of School Improvement**

It is a very flexible concept as it may mean different things to different schools. The key principle to school improvement is that improvement is generated from within, and is not a top-down approach to change. Van Velzen, Miles, Ekholm, Hameyer and Robin (1985) defined school improvement as ‘ a systemic,

sustained effort aimed at change in learning conditions, and other related internal conditions in one or more schools, with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively’. Hopkins, Ainscow and West, (1994) develop this definition further by placing more emphasis on

student outcomes and strengthening the school's capacity to manage change.

## **2. 0 Link between school inspection and improvement from the two sides of the authors**

This section is essential to present some important arguments through the eyeglasses of the two categories of authors on whether school inspection actually have any bearing on the improvement of schools.

### **2. 1 Inspection judgment and recommendation**

Matthews and Smith (1995) provide a lucid example of this in their study. They claim that inspection promotes improvement at both the national and school level. At a national level it is argued that one of inspectors' responsibilities is to use information collected through inspection to provide advice to the Secretary of State or to the Ministry of Education. The implication is that this advice is then used to formulate policy to direct national improvement efforts. This is a perfectly feasible argument, but it is based on the assumption that the information collected is reliable, and gives a true picture of our schools.

The validity and reliability of the judgment from the inspection process become essential. Gray (1995), for example, questioned the effectiveness of the ways in which schools, particularly those serving disadvantaged area, were being judged. Since the judgment of the inspection process is the basis for whatever advise to be given for state provision of resources for support on improvement. Fitz-Gibbon (1998) pointed out in the case of England, that OfSTED has failed in its responsibility to be accurate in its judgments. Fitz-

Gibbon uses ‘ a fairly average group of schools’ to illustrate the point. The average value added scores of the group of YELLIS schools fall largely in the middle half, between the lower and upper quartiles over a four-year period, except during the year of inspection. This use of YELLIS assessments which compare pupils’ attainment at two different ages indicates that in general the schools produced average progress.

However, all fourteen schools in the study were placed into special measures and deemed to be failing. Fitz-Gibbon suggests that the reason for this is that inspectors are making inaccurate judgments about progress and the effectiveness of the school. This argument suggests that the government may be basing national educational policy on inaccurate data (Fitz-Gibbon, 1998; Fitz-Gibbon, 1996) obtained through potentially unreliable methodologies (Wilcox and Gray 1996). If this is the case then priorities for improvement may be incorrectly identified and important opportunities missed. Luginbuhl, Webbink and De Wolf (2009) also emphasized the problem of non-random selection of schools to be visited can produce what they called endogeneity bias in the estimates of the impact of school inspections. In fact this was one of the control methods in their study. Though they reported in their findings that school inspection visit improve school performance after one year of inspection visit.

## 2. 2 Preparation for Inspection

At the school level, Matthews & Smith (1995) highlight the importance of the preparation period before inspection contributing towards school improvement. School buildings may be given a new look, new interactive

displays of the pupils' work mounted and efforts made to ensure a high quality of lesson preparation and marking by teachers (Gray & Wilcox 1996). Gray & Wilcox also noted that the higher levels of stress and anxiety experienced by teachers during this period, arguing that both positive and negative effects of inspection are likely to be relatively short lived and normality will be returned after the inspection is over. If the positive aspects do outweigh the negative influences, the scope for improvement before inspection appears to be limited, being at best unsustainable and short term in nature, and therefore accounting for only minimal effects on student outcomes. It should be noted that most of this studies were case study with low strength of generalizability and of limited scope.

## 2. 3 Implementation of action plan

Considering the improvement that a school makes as a result of inspection, Matthews & Smith (1995) argue that the formulation, production and implementation of an action plan are a source of improvement. Some important assumptions must be made when exploring the contribution that an inspection generated action plan can make towards improvement. First, accurate information about the school must have been collected and relevant key issues identified. Second, inspector's definition of what constitutes effectiveness is valid, and that inspectors have the skills and knowledge necessary to identify and communicate improvements that are suitable in a particular school context. If these assumptions are accepted the levels of improvement generated will be dependent on the school's internal capacity for improvement (Hopkins et al 1994) and the extent to which the school implements the action plan (Gray and Wilcox 1995; Wilcox and Gray

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1996). However, the absence of cordial relationship between the team of inspectors and the school is also not supporting.

### **3. 0 School's perception of improvement**

There may be some discrepancy between a school's perception of improvement and the actual improvement achieved but many schools seem to find inspection a useful tool contributing towards their development, especially when there is moderate overlap between the action plan and the school development plan (Earley et al., 1996). However, they reports that the majority of schools found that their own school development remained unchanged or slowed down in the year after inspection. This complex and often contradictory evidence is typical of the literature exploring the relationship between OfSTED and school improvement.

### **4. 0 Teacher's perceptions and reactions to inspection**

The buildup period Teachers have had to get used to a situation where inspection is a part of their everyday professional lives (Wilcox and Gray 1996) and there are many reported cases of fear, stress and associated negative perceptions towards the process of inspection (Grubb 1999). Thomas (1995) has drawn attention to a variety of issues including the burden that some schools find the volume of documentation for the inspection to be done. Jeffrey and woods (1996) emphasized the emotional impact school inspection was having on an already ' demoralized' profession. Despite these perceptions the literature reports that most relationships with inspectors are positive (Wilcox and Gray 1996; Brimblecombe et al 1996; Kogan and Maden 1999), often developing from a starting point of mutual respect (Russell 1996).



Gray and Gardner, (1999) reported also in his study where they thoroughly examined the model of inspection being practiced in Ireland. The results suggest that most school principals in Northern Ireland consider the inspection programme to be professional and supportive. However, there are clear reservation about the extent of anxiety induced by the inspection process, the amount of time necessary to prepare for the inspection and the inclusion of lay persons in the inspection team. Teachers' feelings of anxiety and stress appear to be at their worst during the build-up period to inspection. Brimblecombe and colleagues (1996) suggest that the thought of inspection is worse than the actual inspection itself. They also report that the way in which senior management teams prepare their staff for inspection can determine how prepared for the event they feel (Shaw, Brimblecombe and Ormston 1995).

Considering hierarchy and position in the school, Chapman (2002) reported in his study that there is a relationship between hierarchical position within the organization and teachers' perception of Ofsted. Teachers' perceptions of the process become less positive as one moves closer to the classroom. A middle manager felt that the inspectors failed to identify important issues within the school. Teachers reported that strategies such as 'naming and shaming' and intensive monitoring through lesson observations are 'unnecessarily inhumane', perceiving them as a barrier rather than facilitator to improvement. These studies were largely suffering methodological problems. For example, Chapman (2002) studied ten schools that were placed in Special Measure or in challenging circumstances. This affects the generalizability of the study to other schools.

## **5.0 Improving classrooms through inspection**

The school inspection framework examines classroom practice in detail, paying close attention to the quality of teaching and learning provided. The proliferation of research evidence suggests that variation in effectiveness occurs not only between schools, but also within them (Sammons, Thomas and Mortimore, 1997; Creemers, 1994). Fullan (1991) argues that educational change is dependent on what teachers ‘think and do’ while Reynolds (1999) suggests that what happens at the classroom level in terms of teacher practice appears to be important, and can make significant contributions to school improvement.

One of the essential responsibilities of the school inspection is to provide advice and ensure professional development of teachers. Recent research suggests that what the teacher does in the classroom is three to four times more important in terms of pupil outcomes than what happens at whole school level (Chapman, 2000). This implies that teachers are crucial to raising educational standards. If teacher’s valuable skills and knowledge are not developed or harnessed effectively then schools only have a limited capacity for school improvement. It may be argued that the more that teacher’s skills and knowledge are developed through Professional Development, the greater the effect they may have on student outcomes because of these increased skill and knowledge levels (Joyce, 1991). Chapman (2000) also pointed out in his study professional development is one of the responsibilities of the inspectors. Among authors that demonstrated sufficiently in their studies are Fullan (1991) and Hopkins et al.

(1994) that Professional Development and School Development are inextricably linked together.

Barth (1990) argues that probably nothing in a school has more impact on students in terms of skills development, self confidence, or classroom behaviour than the personal and professional development of growth of their teachers. There is also much research evidence for example Munro, (1999) concludes that when teachers are involved in systematic learning designed to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the learning process, there is a direct impact on the display of effective teaching behaviour in the classroom and therefore on student performance. Though, these studies largely ignored other extrinsic factors of motivation that also play some significant roles in getting teachers well with their job. The key to raising educational standards is improving teacher performance in the classroom through the development of teaching and learning. Therefore, it is arguable that inspection reports and recommendation on Professional Development play an important role in enhancing and promoting quality in teaching practice which in turns has a major bearing on the learning outcomes (Chapman, 2000).

If school inspection is to realize its full potential it must not only evaluate classroom processes, but also change them for the better. There are two major opportunities for inspectors to encourage change at the classroom level. First, at the school level by indicating issues of teaching and learning as ‘ key issues’ for action. This could result in the school preparing an action plan aimed at improving teaching and learning. The limitation of the existing model is that improvements in teaching practice may only occur through the

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action plan where teaching and learning has been identified as a weakness, as in the case of inspected school (Aris, Davies & Johnson, 1998). The absence of teaching and learning related issues from the key issues for action does not indicate that teaching is perfect and therefore cannot be improved. For example in an English Inspectorates of Education, the only situation where teaching and learning could not be improved in a school according to OfSTED's definition of teaching and learning would be when every lesson observed was awarded a grade one. In reality this appears unlikely, therefore another lever to generate improvement at the classroom level is necessary (Perryman, 2002).

Perryman (2002) also concluded in his study that teachers and governors live in fear of going into Special Measures and it is seen as something that needs to be survived. This has the consequence of schools struggling to come out of Special Measures and making changes that can be short-term and cosmetic. Documentation is manipulated, perfect lessons devised, displays created, meeting records augmented and briefings rehearsed. Teachers conspire to unite against an external enemy. The school is presented in its best light, as the inspection system invites a fabricated performance (Ball, 2003) rather than an honest appraisal. Because of the fact that the inspection is of performance and not of reality, schools do not get the intervention and support they really need.

The second opportunity for school inspection to improve classroom practice at the classroom level is through the mechanism of individual feedback to teachers on teaching performance. Brimblecombe et al. (1996) pointed out that inspection feedback affects Teachers' intentions to change their

teaching and that any feedback, whatever its nature, is better than none in respect to teachers' intention to change. Fiedler, Earley and Ouston (1995) also indicate the importance that teachers attached to both verbal and written feedback as a contributor to school development. Lesson observations during the inspection must identify areas for improvement in individual teachers' practice and recommendations for specific changes to the teacher's practice must follow (Visscher and Coe, 2002). This model for classroom improvement also has limitations. It relies heavily on three factors. First, the ability of the inspectors to identify areas for improvement. Second, to interact and communicate effectively with the teacher. Third, the teacher must be willing to listen to the suggestions and implement the recommendations.

Shaw et al., (1996) have carried out one of the few studies investigating the relationship between OfSTED inspection and change at the classroom level. They examine teacher intentions to change practice and their perceptions of the inspection process. They accept that intention to change practice may not necessarily equate with actual changes in practice. It is noted that while this is not a particularly satisfactory situation it provides a suitable starting point for future research into this area. Their findings report that just over one-third of the teachers surveyed intended to change some aspect of their professional practice as a result of OfSTED inspection, with teaching style and method (especially relating to differentiation) being the most likely aspect of practice to be changed. These reported changes are directly related to inspection observations and interactions as the questionnaires were administered after inspection but before the publication of the report.

Low (1998) described the extent of implementation of inspection recommendations one-year after inspection, and teachers' responses to their associated discourses, opportunities for 'real' change in the classroom were then commented on. He reported that only one of the seven case study schools had substantially implemented inspection recommendations related to teaching and learning, while three had demonstrated some implementation, and the remaining three either limited or no implementation of the recommendations. Low (1998) reports of one case study school, that OfSTED's views about the quality of teaching and learning. It has not penetrated the classroom and teachers still maintained their right to determine the scope of teaching and learning.

This experience supports the view that OfSTED only has a limited impact on change in the classroom, and that teachers are maintaining their professional integrity despite an external attempt to reduce their knowledge and skills to a technical level. This argument may also suggest that the 'oppressive' of an inspectors orthodoxy (Brighouse and Moon, 1995) is being avoided by teachers rejecting OfSTED's values continuing to practice what they believe to be 'best practice' in their own classrooms. Finally, it is also worth noting the opposite possibility of teachers choosing to reject sound advice based on experience gained from the inspector's observation of a large number of lessons in a range of contexts. In the next section, we explore from the two perspectives of the Dutch and English Inspectorate of Education the impact of school inspection on schools.

## **6. 0 The impact of inspection (English Inspectorate and Dutch inspectorate of Education) on schools.**

Considering the progress from the policy level, OfSted has provided the mechanism to thoroughly audit schools and increase their accountability to all stakeholders. It has also challenged and encouraged a wider debate on sensitive and difficult issues such as educational failure, rural and urban education and the limiting nature of low expectations. However, one of the core purposes of OfSTED, 'improvement through inspection' is a major weakness in the system. The literature suggests that inspection has made only minimal contributions to changing teachers' practice (Brimblecombe et al 1996; Brunel University and Helix Consulting 1999; Chapman 2001; Shaw et al, 2003; Wilcox & Gray, 1996). These limited changes can only have had negligible impact on classroom processes, and therefore ultimately negligible input to school improvement (Perryman, 2010; Perryman, 2002). These articles have argued that despite OfSTED's success at implementing the accountability agenda, to date, it has failed to provide the stimulus for significant sustained educational improvement in our schools. However, most of these studies are not far from methodological problems which by one way or the other affected their generalizability. It should be noted that these studies control for observable differences between schools that are inspected and those that are not. This approach has the disadvantage that the estimate effects can be biased by unobserved differences between schools. In addition, these studies only estimated the effect of school inspections one year after an inspection except Perryman (2010) who made follow-up of school under challenging circumstances for three years.

Research Intelligence, the newsletter of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2001) also supports this argument suggesting it is difficult to attribute improvements in statistics mainly to OfSTED inspections for a number of reasons. Firstly, the improvement to the educational system precedes OfSTED inspections by several years and secondly, in Scotland where OfSTED does not operate and a different inspection system is in place a similar pattern of improvement is found. BERA goes on in their publication to call for a thorough study to be conducted which endeavours to identify the contribution of inspection and other factors to the raising of national standards.

In the Netherlands, Dutch inspectorate of Education is directly carries out two types of inspections which are differ in intensity. The less intensive version (SRT) takes approximately one day and the more intensive version (IST) takes two to three days. Luginbuhl et al., (2009) demonstrated the effectiveness of Dutch school inspection visit in contributing to the improvement of standardize scores of primary school. They employed two major approaches in their study in controlling for an inspectors' bias in selecting schools to be visited. Their main findings are that school inspection lead to better performance of schools. It was confirmed that in the first two years following an inspection, test scores increases from 2% to 3% of a standard deviation. Also, Luginbuhl et al., (2009) reported that the more intensive school inspection produces larger improvements in school performance than the less intensive ones.



## **7. 0 Conclusion**

It become clearer that school inspections not only make schools accountable but also aim to provide recommendation for improvement. How much this is achieved is largely dependent on the institutional context in which the model of inspection operates. For example, about English Inspectorates the current model for classroom improvement has some limitations. It relies heavily on three factors. First, the ability of the inspectors to identify areas for improvement. Second, to interact and communicate effectively with the teacher. Third, the teacher must be willing to listen to the suggestions and implement the recommendations. Much has been written about the possible alternatives to the current inspection system that maybe do more to promote school improvement (Ferguson et al 2000; Learmonth, 2001). It was noted that a more effective system of evaluation would require both internal and external perspectives (Hargreaves, 1995). Further research is also needed to indentify the sustainability of the emerged in schools shortly after school inspection.