

SICI Workshop Bratislava June 2013 (24.05.2013)

Starter Paper on Inspection and Innovation

Background

Inspection has been an important and established part of the education systems of many European countries stretching back at least to the start of the nineteenth century. The precise nature and purpose of inspection reflects the traditions and policies of each country and changes over time. For some inspectorates their main purpose is to ensure compliance with legal and policy requirements, while others are more explicitly directed towards improvement and capacity building. The prime focus of the inspection process also varies. Sometimes the teacher is the key actor, while others adopt approaches which centre on the school and its overall effectiveness. In recent years, partly as a reflection of the emergence of international comparative performance data such as the OECD's PISA assessments, there has been a growth in inspection activity and a re-examination of the role which inspection can and should play in raising educational quality and standards of achievement.

These developments in inspection should be seen in the context of transformational changes in economies, societies and global relationships partly driven by technological innovation on an unprecedented scale. The OECD publication, *Trends Shaping Education 2013*¹, helpfully examines the forces which are shaping twenty-first century economies and societies and which also pose significant and sustained challenges for school education. Technological advances are changing fundamentally the nature of both work and leisure and contributing to societal shifts already affected by migration and demographic change. The skills required of the twenty-first century workforce are changing and increasingly associated with the creative use of technology. Far from being immune to such forces, education lies at the heart of any response to this challenging context. Twenty-first century teachers must help to equip future generations to thrive in an environment of fast, continuous and fundamental change and must themselves capitalise on potentially far-reaching implications for teaching and learning.

At the same time, across the world, there has been a growing acceptance of the importance of school education for individual and collective wellbeing, social cohesion and economic success. The politics of education have moved centre stage and many governments now promote innovation in education in pursuit of competitive advantage and to better meet the twenty-first century needs and challenges of their citizens.

Trends shaping education

“Countries throughout the world...are engulfed in rapid economic and social change. Everywhere, education is seen as the main way of enabling individuals and nations alike to meet these changes”.² This quotation from the English National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education chaired by Sir Ken Robinson highlights the extent to which education is inextricably linked to changes in the economy and in wider society.

¹ *Trends Shaping Education* OECD 2013

² ‘All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education’, DfEE, 2000

The nature and extent of these changes have been well documented in the OECD's publication, 'Trends Shaping Education 2013'³. It identifies five areas where wider social, economic and technological changes have direct relevance for education.

Globalisation is giving rise to broader, deeper and faster connections across countries and continents leading to both increasing interdependence and greater competition. Patterns of migration are leading to greater ethnic and cultural diversity in national populations. Global economic power is also changing with significant new players challenging established hegemonies. Environmental issues are also becoming increasingly influential as weather patterns shift and pollution crosses national boundaries.

Societies are also undergoing transformational change. Urbanisation is increasing with the expectation that by 2050 around 85percent of the world's population will live in cities. The demographic balance in many populations is changing as people live longer and birth rates fall. Ageing populations bring new challenges in terms of increasing dependency, particularly health related, and reducing tax revenues. Increasing inequality has resulted in higher levels of relative poverty. Improving safety and security by being tough on crime are high on the political agenda. Civic participation and well-being are also key issues in modern societies.

The world of **skills and work** is also undergoing rapid change. The continuing difficulty of reconciling family and working life, unequal representation of women in higher level jobs, and a persistent gender wage gap are all features of many countries. "Skills have become the global currency of twenty-first century economies. Without sufficient investment in skills, people languish on the margins of society, technological progress does not translate into productivity growth, and countries can no longer compete in an increasingly knowledge-based global economy. As transport prices have fallen and trade barriers are lifted, a substantial share of the production of basic goods has been taken over by developing countries with lower wage costs. This has tended to drive OECD countries seeking to maintain their competitive edge towards the production of goods and services that require high levels of knowledge and skill, creativity and innovation. Growing investment in research and development, increasing numbers of patents filed, as well as the increasing numbers of researchers across the OECD area all reflect this shift."⁴

The modern **family** is also changing. Children's life chances are shaped and influenced by the conditions into which they are born and develop. On average across OECD countries, child poverty has continued to rise slightly. Despite this, children's expectations of success – their hopes and dreams for school and career – are rather resilient. As measured by the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), students from more disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely than before to expect to earn a university degree. However, the importance of social background in shaping attainment remains pervasive.

Technological development and, in particular, the impact of ICT are having a profound effect on all areas of twenty-first century life. The world is connected in ways which can both empower and threaten individuals. Social networking is transforming daily life, enhanced by the increasing and pervasive influence of portable devices.

As the OECD publication makes clear, these trends, individually and collectively, have profound implications for education and education in turn impacts on the trends themselves. Yet the OECD reported in 2008 that schools had not changed significantly.

³ OECD op cit

⁴ OECD op cit

“..many of today’s schools have not caught up as they continue to operate as they did in the earlier decades of the 20th Century. How can learning within and outside schools be reconfigured in environments that foster the deeper knowledge and skills so crucial in our new century? To succeed in this is not only important for a successful economy, but also for effective cultural and social participation and for citizens to live fulfilling lives.”

Changing Policy Agenda

At the same time there has been a significant growth in the impact of comparative international performance (e.g. PISA, PIRLS, TIMMS) on education policy. The results of these studies have challenged complacency and provided new policy insights or even policy borrowing as countries sought to learn from practice in the most successful countries.

Against this background of increasingly powerful forces shaping education policy across the world, governments have become significantly more active in finding ways to influence school systems. The emphasis has shifted from an assumption that more investment in education would be self-evidently positive to a focus on ensuring improved outcomes for young people and an increased focus on equity.

Three broad and overlapping policy approaches have emerged. First, an increased emphasis on improved management, leading to an emphasis on effectiveness, planning, self evaluation, value for money (vfm), and various forms of measurement, audit and control. Second, what is sometimes referred to as ‘New Public Sector Management’, leading to a move from focus on inputs and process to outcomes, greater diversity of schools, subsidiarity, devolution of decision making and an emphasis on accountability to stakeholders. And third, greater competition between schools, leading to demand-led responsiveness, strengthened ‘customer voice’ and explicit marketisation, creating an impetus to improve partly through an existential threat to the school itself.

More recently, attention has moved from attempts to influence education from the outside to a realisation that “If the quality of education cannot exceed the quality of its teachers” (McKinsey 2007)⁵ then deep and sustained educational change will to a significant extent depend on how far teachers are themselves engaged in the change process and have the necessary capacity to make it happen. ‘Teachers Matter’⁶, a 2005 report from the OECD, drew together a wide body of research evidence which suggested that teacher quality was one of the most significant factors affecting successful student learning and this represents the policy direction most likely to lead to substantial gains in school performance. Similarly, in 2007 the McKinsey Corporation published a highly influential report⁷ which reinforced the centrality of teacher quality in the world’s best performing school systems. It claimed that, over three years, learning with a high-performing teacher instead of a low-performing teacher can make a 53 percentile difference in student achievement. That report memorably concluded that the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.

The OECD, together with Education International, has now held three international summits on the teaching profession; the most recent being held in Amsterdam in April 2013. These summits are all predicated on the assumption that the key to high quality education lies in high quality teachers.

⁵ World’s Best Performing Education Systems, McKinsey Corporation 2007

⁶ Teachers Matter, OECD 2005

⁷ McKinsey Corporation 2007 op cit

Similarly, a European Commission Staff Working Document⁸ included amongst its conclusions the following two statements:-

“The teaching professions now face rapidly changing demands, which require a new set of competences.”

“Europe’s teaching professions have an exceptional impact on education”.

The evidence and argument above suggests the centrality of high quality teaching to successful learning and this in turn requires skilled and well-educated teachers who continue to grow and develop professionally throughout their careers.

Implications for Inspection

The international policy agenda seems to be focusing increasingly on new ways of influencing classroom practice directly. Inspection has been seen as one of the ways in which governments influence or even control what is happening in schools. Does this new emphasis on the teacher have significant implications for inspection itself?

The 2010 McKinsey Report, “How the World’s Most Improved Systems Keep Getting Better”⁹ suggests that different clusters of interventions are appropriate for different stages in improvement. Thus the move from poor to fair, fair to good, good to great, and great to excellent all require different types of intervention to secure progress. The report talks about prescribing improvement but unleashing greatness. McKinsey believes that inspection should take on different forms and purposes according to the existing characteristics and performance of an education system. Essentially the move for external inspection is from being an agent of compliance and driver of improvement through to being more of a partner with the school and a knowledge broker or mobiliser.

In a similar vein, a paper presented to the SICI General Assembly in 2009¹⁰ talked about the plasticity of inspection. Inspection is often associated in the public mind with a rather narrow set of activities which involve notions of compliance and audit. In fact, it is a very plastic concept which takes and has taken many forms and which can serve many different purposes. What is the range of the potential contribution of inspection to education policy?

- **Enforcer.** In contexts where expectations of schools are explicit and enshrined in laws, regulations or detailed policies, then inspection can be used to promote compliance.
- **Assurer.** Inspection can and should provide assurance that the ways in which the intentions of public policy and associated resources are being put into practice meet expectations. That simple idea begs many questions and can range from compliance with defined standards through assessments of the competence of individuals to more subtle ways in which expectations are operationalised. However, the essence remains, however interpreted.
- **Mitigator of risk.** An increasingly common role for inspection is as a mitigator of risk. The definition of risk can vary from those associated with serious service failure, such as in child

⁸ Supporting the Teaching Profession for Better Learning Outcomes, EU Commission 2012

⁹ How the World’s Most Improved Systems Keep Getting Better, McKinsey Corporation 2009

¹⁰ The strategic role that inspection can play in delivering better public education, SICI Dublin Paper, Donaldson 2009

protection services, through to wider interpretations of underperformance in relation to potential or aspirational goals – the risk of complacency.

- **Catalyst.** Inspection is often seen as something which injects energy into a situation which, left to itself, would remain static or unwilling to change. Sometimes this may take the form as inspection as a kind of ‘cattle prod’ or, more positively, as a source of inspiration or awakening.
- **Knowledge broker.** Inspection can bring wider perspectives to bear, drawing on experience from having evaluated many different settings and approaches and introducing fresh insights from research or scholarship.
- **Capacity builder.** An emerging role for inspection relates to its ability to build capacity by: modelling processes of evaluation which will endure beyond the period of the inspection itself; by helping to establish improved ways of working through professional dialogue which takes place within inspection activity; by identifying and publicising examples of good practice from which others can learn and so improve their practice; by .
- **Partnership builder.** Inspection, by explicitly looking outwards, can help to open perspectives towards working with parents or other services and help to establish new and more integrated ways of working with stakeholders and across professional boundaries.
- **Agenda setter.** By focusing on impact and outcomes and identifying areas where improvement is needed, inspection can contribute directly to policy formulation at the establishment, local area and national levels. That may relate to questions of resource provision or use through to more fundamental debates about strategic direction.
- **Preserver/creator of the space for innovation.** One of the main inhibitors of innovation can be the concerns which parents or education managers might have about ‘experimentation’ with young people. Inspection can help to create the space for a school to innovate by building confidence that the approach is well managed and potentially beneficial.

The above list is not comprehensive, nor are the contributions which it identifies mutually exclusive. Many inspectorates would seek to contribute to all or most of them in some way. At the same time inspection can be seen as an inhibitor of innovation, giving approval to what it values and taking responsibility away from the school. Too often, debate focuses on the specifics of what inspectors are perceived to do rather than on how inspection fits within the ‘gestalt’ of public policy and practice. At its heart is the fact that, as Malcolm Sparrow¹¹ has pointed out, inspection operates in that area of state activity which is about imposing obligations rather than delivering services. That is, inspection concerns itself, either implicitly or explicitly, with requiring deliverers of services or citizens themselves to conform to certain expectations. Because of this, inspection will always have to overcome a degree of scepticism or even resistance. Its authority must therefore derive not just from its own credibility and from doing what it has traditionally done, but from wider political support. Its activities may well give rise to opposition or controversy and all inspectorates have to be very conscious of the need to operate within a clear authorising environment.

Given a background of economic restriction allied to continuing pressure for educational and wider public service reform, **what are the implications for inspectorates and inspection?**

A key question lies in the extent to which inspection might itself be seen as a luxury which consumes, either directly or indirectly, resources which might be better devoted to front-line services. In a very constrained resource environment, it is inevitable and appropriate that hard

¹¹ The Character of Harms, Sparrow 2008

questions should be asked about inspection. That means that inspectorates must be very clear about their purposes, sparing in their use of resources and rigorous in measuring their impact. Learning from what makes the greatest impact on outcomes for learners and focusing attention on key dependencies are likely to be central to the way that inspection can add value in the future.

More specifically, the following features seem to characterise effective inspection.

- **Having high credibility.** Inspectorates cannot rely on their established position to provide a protective shell in a harsh economic world. If they are to survive, both individual inspectors and inspectorates as a whole must demonstrate that they are equipped to make a difference for learners. That will require a capable workforce and high quality inspection activity.
- **Occupying a clear niche.** Inspectorates will need to be very clear about their 'unique selling point'. That must lie in the use of external evaluation to identify strengths and weaknesses and to bring about change for the better. The scope and nature of activity will vary across time and countries, but a clear understanding of the particular contributions of inspection to adding public value will be essential everywhere.
- **Focusing on risk.** The business of education encompasses multiple outcomes and myriad activities. The task of inspection is to ensure that outcomes for learners are improving, so inspection activities must focus upon those aspects which make the greatest difference to those outcomes. Key dependencies must be examined and understood. Risk must be analysed and deconstructed in ways which will pinpoint areas requiring action. All of this requires a good and current understanding of what makes public services generally, and education in particular, effective and responsive.
- **Being agile.** Inspectorates must be highly sensitive to the environment within which they operate. While the 'toolkit' of inspection must be deployed in ways which meet current demands, inspection is not a fixed way of working which is simply applied to any circumstance. It is a flexible set of processes which should be combined in different ways for different purposes. Similarly, inspectorates must be configured to meet current needs but also must be ready to reconfigure themselves and develop their staff in ways which will meet changing circumstances and expectations.
- **Knowing who is the 'customer'.** An environment where there is an increasing emphasis on localism and customer satisfaction poses particular challenges for inspection. Inspection has many potential customers – including individual learners and their parents, the teachers and other professionals who work with them, employers and the broader community, representatives of the democratic process and their officials. It is important to know who are the 'customers' for any particular activity and what it is that the 'customer' needs. Satisfying educational professionals is not the same as satisfying politicians or parents. Indeed, inspection is inevitably exposing the 'secret garden' of education to public scrutiny, so there are dangers in focusing too directly on satisfying a professional or even a parental audience. Expectations of those who are experiencing a service may well be different from those who deliver it, and those of a more detached citizen will be different again. Inspection must be very careful about tests of 'customer satisfaction' as evidence of effectiveness.
- **Communicating clearly.** The purposes and outcomes of inspection, including examples of good practice, need to be clearly articulated and communicated in ways which meet the needs of the intended audience, both professional and lay. Many, but not all, inspectorates publish reports, often using 'plain language' which can be understood by a non-professional reader. In England, inspectors go further and write directly to young people with the key findings of the inspection of their school. More widely, findings from the external evaluation of schools conducted at national level are routinely published in over one-third of European countries.

- **Promoting and using self evaluation.** In 2001 the European Parliament and Council issued a circular advising member states to establish quality evaluation systems and a framework that balances school self-evaluation with external evaluation. Increasingly achieving such a balance has become a central part of national policy in many states across Europe and beyond. Such an approach is associated with building capacity for improvement at school level and enables greater proportionality in external inspection. In Estonia, for example, all schools are obliged to undertake their own internal evaluations while a small team of inspectors can give general advice in support. In the UK all of the separate country inspection regimes explicitly promote self evaluation.
- **Wider involvement in inspection.** While inspection demands its own knowledge, skills and experience, the inclusion of serving headteachers or teachers on inspection teams can add important fresh perspectives to the process. It can also serve as powerful professional development in its own right.

Inspection and innovation

High quality, continuous improvement and innovation are now an integral part of part of educational culture. The challenge for inspection, irrespective of its traditional roles, will increasingly be to promote or work with the grain of innovative educational practice. The relationship between inspection and innovation has been a major theme of recent SICI workshops in Estonia, Portugal, England, and France and at the 2012 General Assembly in Prague.

A number of clear themes emerged from these events.

1. The relationship between external and internal evaluation is central to stimulating improvement. Inspectorates are increasingly emphasising the importance of effective self evaluation as a driver of improvement. But self-evaluation can become self-delusion or worse and must operate within a framework of accountability which both encourages its rigour and validates its authenticity.
2. The importance of focusing on learning, including direct observation of teaching. Innovation is ultimately tested by its beneficial impact on learning. Inspection should always focus on the key relationship of teaching to learning.
3. The need to understand the nature of innovation in the country context. There is no common starting point across schools or countries in terms of the need for innovation or for the shape and direction of that innovation. Inspection must be very clear about the nature of change, and how it is being managed and ensure that its contribution to beneficial outcomes for young people is maximised.
4. The need to be clear about risk as a guide to proportionality in inspection. Evaluation of any kind has an opportunity cost – time spent on evaluation has to be at the expense of other activities. The challenge is to identify what matters and to act on the points of greatest impact or traction.
5. The need for inspection to be flexible and adaptive. Inspection itself can and does take many different forms. If inspection does not adjust to the context but simply lays a predetermined template on whatever it sees then it will inevitably provide at best a partial picture or at worst totally distort reality.
6. The powerful impact of transparency – both positive and negative. Transparency in terms of the why, what, how and outcome of inspection provides a model of the kind of open learning system which is integral to building trust and modelling good practice. However, the ways in which the outcomes of inspection are made public can have perverse effects. The inspection report and its judgements are powerful players in the political arena.

7. The difficulty of influencing perceptions about inspection irrespective of the actual policy and practice. Inspectorates need to be politically aware and to have a media strategy which increases the likelihood of positive coverage.
8. The importance of the teacher and different inspection traditions. While the focus recently has been on the school as the unit of inspection, a growing realisation that the teacher is the key innovation gatekeeper requires inspectorates to adopt approaches which will relate more directly to the classroom.
9. The need to generate and analyse valid and reliable data about educational outcomes. Numerical data are increasingly important as measures of educational success and inspection needs to be very clear about the integrity and relevance of the data which it uses to inform its work.
10. The increasing importance of stakeholder engagement. Education is increasingly responsive to the needs of a wide range of stakeholders, not least young people and their parents. Similarly, inspection must determine the nature of its relationship to stakeholders and adopt approaches which meet diverse needs.
11. The importance of leadership as a driver of quality improvement. Leadership is one of the most important variables in a school's success. Inspection needs to promote the kinds of leadership which are associated with educational success.

All inspectorates are engaged in developing their approaches and becoming more effective. For example, both the Netherlands and England are increasingly engaging in targeted school improvement work. Flanders is piloting new ways of linking to research on quality. Scotland is making use of evidence from inspection to support the overall work of its new improvement agency - Education Scotland. The Slovak Republic is stimulating school quality improvement through self-evaluation and being more pro-active in cooperating with schools, local administration and other stakeholders. Wales is considering moving away from a cycle of inspections and engaging in more capacity-building work.

Questions to consider

SICI is seeking to help member inspectorates to understand the various ways in which they might relate to the processes of educational innovation. The Bratislava workshop is intended to provide the context for such consideration and to allow the drafting of a memorandum to be considered at the General Assembly in Scotland in October.

The groups should **consider the following 5 questions.**

- 1. How far do you accept the argument in the paper ? Have you any suggested amendments or additions ?**
- 2. What are the main implications for education of the lecture by David Istance and the trends outlined in the OECD publication summarised in this paper ?**
- 3. Given your specific contexts and the poster presentations, in what ways should inspection contribute to innovation ?**
- 4. Describe strong examples of inspection helping to drive or support innovation ?**
- 5. What form of memorandum from SICI would be helpful in the work of member inspectorates?**

**Professor Graham Donaldson
University of Glasgow June 2013**