Research indicates that inspection models tend to be adapted when education accountability systems mature. Schools and their stakeholders develop evaluation literacy and innovation capacity to improve education on their own and thus have less need of being driven by top down inspections and reform initiatives (see Barber, 2004). Despite this a recent McKinsey report (2010) sparked a debate in many European countries about a lack of improvement in many education systems across the continent. The report argues that the education systems in many countries are "good" but fail to improve to "great" as schools are not aiming for higher achievement and fail to innovate their teaching and learning. In order to make this final but difficult phase "from good to great" various inspectorates of education (e.g. the Netherlands and Northern Ireland) have begun to experiment with polycentric inspection.

The theory underlying polycentric evaluation is that good schools can only further improvement not simply by pressure from external inspection but by collaboration between clusters of schools, communities and the inspectorate through the process of collaborative evaluation. Therefore school inspections from a polycentric perspective are external evaluations of schools and of interdependent networks of different actors who use knowledge, information and other resources to influence schools. This mode of inspection is implemented by
officials outside the school with a mandate from a national/local authority, by: (1) coordinating visits to all schools and stakeholders in the network; (2) examining the quality of collaboration between schools and stakeholders in the network; (3) taking into account the perspective on school quality from the schools and the various stakeholders in the network; (4) quality assuring the networks self-evaluation of recommendations made previous polycentric inspections. The purpose of which is to: provide feedback to schools and stakeholders; disseminate good practices; and ultimately, to agree upon a shared agenda for change within the polycentric network.

This paper reports on the first phase of an Erasmus + project which is seeking to evaluate the capability of polycentric inspection and school network collaborative self-evaluation as tools in improving schools from good to great.

The authors argue that studying examples of polycentric school inspection models which have only recently been introduced in countries such as Northern Ireland, will introduce attendees to a little explored yet increasingly important aspect of European school inspection.

The project upon which this study is based set itself the task of explaining:

- how inspection organisations can inspect networks of schools/stakeholders (e.g. how to include relevant stakeholders in visits, how do roles of inspectors change);
- how can the need for centralized and standardized frameworks of Inspectorates of Education be matched to a need for adapting to local issues and concerns;
- which interventions are effective in motivating a network of schools to improve, and what are the underlying theories of change;
- if polycentric inspections are more effective in the improvement of both low and high performing schools, compared to centralized school inspections.

Drawing from the experiences of four European inspection systems – England, Bulgaria, The Netherlands, and Northern Ireland, this paper therefore will:

a) provide a conceptual framework within which to understand polycentrism as it applies in inspection theory and practice;

b) contrast this mode of inspection with more commonly understood types of inspection;

c) develop a working definition of polycentric inspection;

d) examine the contributions of this mode of inspection to a wider reflection on the impact of existing modes of inspection within the four case study countries;
e) outline the next steps in the research and in particular highlighting how the concept of polycentric evaluation might best fit into the four national contexts represented in the project.

Method

Methodology The element of the study presented used a multi-phase convergence research design consisting of four distinct stages. The first stage took the form of an examination of literatures in the field of inspection and related areas. It includes an overview of studies on the mechanisms of impact of inspection systems similar to the four cases in the project under discussion. In addition a review on typologies of governance and inspection systems has been conducted which has resulted in the development of key indicators of polycentric inspection models. Studies on social networks for complex problem solving and knowledge exchange, processes of institutionalization (e.g. through coercive isomorphism, mimetic processes and normative pressures (Meyer 1977) and effective governance of schools were also examined. At a conceptual level some consideration was given to exploring the manner in which a realist informed review approach that ?focuses on program mechanisms?. (And) can help reveal why and how interventions work and can yield information to inform policies and programs? (O’Campo et al, 2011) might be employed. This mechanism which draws extensively on the ?Realist Evaluation? theories of Pawson (2005) was successfully applied in a recently completed project examining the impact of School Inspection in six European Countries (ISI TL). In this project the program theory allowed the researchers to create a lens with which to analyse six European inspection systems and ultimately to posit a series of hypotheses relating to issues such as impact, pressure, stakeholder involvement, and unintended consequences of school inspection (Ehren et al 2013). While some elements this approach were employed the approach was not necessarily being appropriate for the topic under discussion. Overall this review has allowed the authors to learn about potential mechanisms of impact in the national contexts under discussion. The second stage, through a series of qualitative interviews with inspectorates of education and other members of the polycentric network in each country, provided an analysis of antecedent variables affecting polycentric inspections in the four case study countries. Finally, the third stage an in-depth investigation of the emergence of a polycentric network in Northern Ireland over the past number of years. Drawing on the common antecedent variables identified and theoretical framework developed this ?mini case study? was developed as a method for testing the emerging understanding of polycentrism.

Expected Outcomes

The core conceptual position underpinning this project is that polycentric inspection models are different from the traditional centralized inspection models insofar as they seek to adapt their evaluation schedules and frameworks to local contexts of schools working in partnerships (with other schools and their stakeholders) to improve, and to local problems that are addressed in these partnerships. Inspection schedules and frameworks facilitate the creation of these networks, and generate, validate and disseminate the context-specific knowledge about improvement that is developed in these networks. The paper explicitly draws a distinction between polycentric and social networks. In essence it will argue that polycentricity is about the governance, steering, control and regulation of schools and the method whereby an education system becomes more polycentric in giving more actors an active role in the steering and regulation of schools. We also discuss key questions that have emerged about the role of the Inspectorate in this context that can be equally applied to all modes of inspection. For example, as with the perceived benefits of school inspection, do the networks gradually take more control of the agenda for improvement following a polycentric inspection? The experience of actors in the case study polycentric network in Northern Ireland, where, in some instances: the networks increasingly take a more active role in defining the inspection agenda; and the inspectorate quality
assure the networks own self-evaluations of inspectorate recommendations would seem to support this contention. Finally, we also ask what determinants should be used to decide which Network should be inspected? We conclude that if Polycentricness in theory is about the use of inspection resources (networks of schools using inspection resources in their collaboration), the emergence of inspection of/through networks has resulted in a reconceptualization of the position of the Inspectorate as agents of change within each country.

References


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