

# SICI

The Standing International  
Conference of **Inspectorates**  
Better Inspection, Better Learning

## The Impact of Inspection

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**Conclusions of SICI's  
reflections in 2018**

**Chantal Manes-Bonnisseau**  
SICI President, November 2018

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# Introduction

The question of the impact of inspection was chosen as the priority theme of SICI's work in 2018. It is not a new preoccupation for inspectors and has already been the topic of SICI workshops, particularly in Sweden in 2011. The question is at the core of the identity of inspectors in a context where external evaluation is developing and being carried out by many actors, not all of them professional educators.

The context in which inspectors work and live is indeed being profoundly modified by many changes which cannot be ignored: the governance of education systems has evolved, multiple actors are in charge of evaluation or improvement and the role traditionally played by inspectorates is being redefined.

- ▶ International comparisons have become an essential source of evaluation of the quality of education systems: PISA, TIMSS / TALIS and others
- ▶ Governance through outputs and results is becoming the dominant model of education systems
- ▶ Greater responsibility is being put on educators
- ▶ Schools are given more and more autonomy and have a duty to give all children access to education and to qualifications.

These changes have led to more accountability and to the development of tools to measure progress and results in all fields of public policies.

- ▶ Education is no exception to this rule. It is observed, studied, monitored, scrutinized and evaluated by a great number of actors, both on national and international level, by specialized bodies and agencies or national representations, Parliament or Courts of accounts. OECD is a central player in this field, the PISA study having become a very influential tool to assess education efficiency and equity in many countries.
- ▶ External evaluation bodies, be they inspectorates or evaluation agencies are therefore not the only actors -public or private- in charge of evaluation and quality assurance in the field of education.
- ▶ In this new environment where external evaluation bodies are more and more numerous, competent on national and international level, what is the new role of Inspectorates?

In 2018, SICI members decided to focus their collective attention on this topic and to share their conclusions within the association and with the public at large by bringing together our analysis and propositions. The publication of a paper seems a fairly good way of gathering common knowledge and of disseminating, within and outside SICI, the unique expertise its members have.

The Impact of inspection thus became the priority theme of 2018 and the central focus of the SICI seminars and workshops from October 2017 to November 2018, each event concentrating on one single aspect:

- ▶ The impact of inspection on education policies – Paris, November 13-14, 2017;
- ▶ The impact on public opinion – Luxemburg, March 26-30, 2018
- ▶ The impact on the performance of schools – Glasgow, September 17-19, 2018
- ▶ Wrap up conference – Belgrade- November 1-2, 2018, Belgrade

This paper will therefore try to address a few questions we have found are the most often asked by inspectors within SICI:

- ▶ What does research say about the impact of inspection?
- ▶ What are the different methods used to measure and assess the impact of inspection in SICI member countries?
- ▶ What are the possible levers and ways to improve the impact of inspections? What examples of good practices can be shared?

# What does research say about the Impact of Inspection?

## 1. Publications

Our first step was to have a clear idea on how much research is being produced on the impact of inspection. A perusal of 235 Journals on Education & Educational Research offered a varied number of sources which produced around 176 relevant articles:

### Publishers

- ▶ Sage Journals – 95
- ▶ Springer-Link – 32
- ▶ Emerald Insight – 20
- ▶ Science Direct – 15
- ▶ Wiley – 14

### Search Engines

- ▶ EBSCO – 66
- ▶ JSTOR – 16
- ▶ Google Scholar – 73

### Other resources

- ▶ ERIC – 165
- ▶ TALIS - The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey
- ▶ OECD - Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment

## 2. Main findings

There are a limited number of studies about the impact of school inspection.

Many of them are published in English and describe systems in a small number of countries which are mainly Great Britain, the Netherlands, Finland, Flanders and a few others such as Germany, Norway or the Czech Republic.

Four main fields are covered.

- ▶ School improvement
- ▶ Student achievement results
- ▶ Side effects
  - intended strategic behaviour
  - unintended strategic behaviour
  - emotional impact on school staff members
- ▶ OECD research: perception of evaluation by teachers

Most researches are methodologically based on surveys or qualitative research conducted on small samples, whose conclusions are consequently necessarily limited. Researchers are aware of this methodological limitation and often emphasize it. Nevertheless, in spite of this drawback, conclusions are the most quoted parts of studies and often serve as the foundation for decision making. It is worth noting though that some very rigorous quantitative studies have recently been written, mainly based on the analysis of student scores.

This area of research seems to be attracting more and more interest in quite a few countries and a number of publications of great quality recently published are an important source of inspiration for this paper.

From the point of view of inspectors, it is important to collect as much relevant evidence as possible in order to explore the impact in depth and in order to do so, collaborate with researchers as closely as possible. SICI is now strengthening links with academics specializing in the area of inspection in order to collect as much relevant evidence as possible and build a solid rationale on the issues linked to its missions.

# How is the impact of Inspection assessed and measured in SICI member countries?

## 1. An empirical approach to measure impact on policy makers and public opinion

Observation of practice in different countries tends to show that there is no existing objective scientific method or list of established criteria to measure the impact of inspection on policy makers or on public opinion.

The workshop in Paris was organized so as to allow researchers, policy makers and field actors from different countries to exchange on the subject of impact on policy makers. Field visits allowed participants to meet with different heads of institutions whose work was impacted by thematic inspection reports.

The participants stressed that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to measure impact as a whole, on a general level..

The most striking impact of inspection is thought to be brought about by reports, thematic or annual. In the Netherlands, the annual report stressing the attainment gap in the education system of the country had a direct and strong influence on the minister in charge. In France, the reports on the prevention of early school leaving have had great influence on policy making in this field; in Flanders, the responsibility for schools in pupil guidance changed profoundly, among other things as a result of a thematic report on pupil guidance centers.

So, it appears easier to evaluate the impact of specific analysis produced by inspectorates in some chosen instances.

Their influence can vary greatly according to a number of factors: whether the topic of the report is urgent or not, who orders and publishes the report; the scope of the subject addressed: the more focused it is, the greater the possible impact will be. It also often happens that reports do not have an immediate impact on legislation or policy but feed the collective reflection in the midterm or the long term.

The impact on public opinion is even more difficult to quantify although the question of the public image of inspection has always been a very important preoccupation for the profession. There is no global research study on public opinion at large but a lot of documentation on the way inspection is perceived by teachers and policy makers.

The evolution of the public perception of inspection and inspectors is very well analyzed in the book SICI is about to publish on the history of inspection, written by former inspector and member of the executive committee, Adrian Gray.

It stresses the important fact that inspection has always had to be explained and justified. A particularly difficult time was the last two decades of the twentieth century, when inspection was so unpopular with teachers that many refused to let inspectors in their classrooms. Inspections were then perceived as pitiless control mechanisms, and were more feared than encouraged. Inspection was therefore perceived as useless by policy makers, encouraged by OECD's negative judgement:

*In the early 1980s inspection indeed appeared to have lost its way and was actually being abolished in some countries from Greece to Iceland, or in Hungary in 1985-6, where OECD thought inspection had largely been about 'watching over schools' and 'their stringent compliance with regulations.'<sup>4</sup> Dissatisfaction with inspection led to its abolition. Or it had ceased to function as such, as with secondary inspections in Ireland. In the early 1980s school inspection appears to have lacked vigour and to have been poor at articulating its own impact. In some countries, systems had changed very little in many years.<sup>2</sup>*

The development of school autonomy at the end of the 1990s, followed by the growing influence of international comparisons such as PISA, introduced a shift of perception of the importance of inspection. Indeed, policy makers agreed that more autonomy of schools also implied not less but more accountability through reinforced external evaluation.

This is what Jacqueline Baxter defines as "governing at arm's length"<sup>3</sup> before she continues to alert on the fact that states are still trying to define what is the right mix for governing schools at a distance.

In the last chapter of his book, dealing with the present period, Gray stresses the development of inspection in the early 2000s, led by three main drivers: OECD, the EU and SICI.<sup>4</sup> Today, SICI has 37 members and Eurydice found a central inspectorate in 27 countries out of 31.

Inspection therefore is now generally considered as necessary, which does not mean that it is much more popular or that it is seen as a central player in all countries.

This was one of the conclusions reached by the workshop held in Luxemburg in March 2018 on the subject of Impact on public opinion.

A sign of this relatively weak visibility can be seen in the lack of public reaction to the reforms recently implemented in several countries where inspection institutions were abolished or profoundly reorganized (Luxemburg, Germany, Albania to name but a few recent examples). It is also revealed by the minimal press coverage inspection annual and thematic reports get in many countries, although OFSTED, the Netherlands and Scotland represent notable exceptions.

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<sup>1</sup> OECD, *Review on Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks for Improving School Outcomes: Hungary*, 2010, p.48

<sup>2</sup> *European school inspection and evaluation*, by Adrian Gray : *History and Principles*, Chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> *School inspectors :Policy implementers, Policy Shapers in National Policy Contexts* ; J Baxter, Springer, 2017

<sup>4</sup> *European school inspection and evaluation*, by Adrian Gray : *History and Principles*, Chapter 6.



## **2. A more systematic approach to measure impact on the performance of schools: the development of surveys before and after inspections**

The quality of schools having become the main focus of inspection, it has naturally been a priority to build adequate tools to measure its efficiency and to find ways of improving its impact. It is worth noting that this aspect focuses a lot of attention from the academic field and some very rigorous and insightful research is being produced, such as this study from Bristol University, which OFSTED considers very rigorous<sup>5</sup>.

The workshop organized in Glasgow by Education Scotland in September 2018 was extremely helpful to take stock of the very important steps SICI members have taken to raise to this challenge in the last decade or so.

The conclusion we reached is that the quality and sustainability of the impact on the performance of schools depend on two main factors:

- ▶ The professionalism of inspection processes and of inspectors: in this respect, the existence of common frameworks, explicit criteria of quality, made public and properly explained, has been a great improvement. The great care brought to the recruitment, training and induction processes of inspectors is also an essential evolution. Ireland pointed out a number of actions taken to strengthen this approach: setting clear standards, building a new quality framework, organizing follow through inspections, providing guidelines to schools for self-evaluation and a guide to inspection describing all the inspection models, working hand in hand with government to support a "school excellence fund", develop professional training for teachers and school leaders.
- ▶ The capacity of school leaders and staff to receive and understand the results of the inspection, to accept and reflect on them and to work on the improvement paths that are pointed to them. This appropriation of the inspection process is appearing more and more as a condition to increase the efficiency of inspectors' work. One example was given of one school which required significant improvement and in where the head teacher used the findings from inspection effectively to drive change and improvement. This shows that schools can receive difficult and challenging messages from inspection and use them to make improvements
- ▶ One example of a badly-performing head teacher who used the results of inspection to change showed that improvement sometimes goes through tough decisions that inspection helps make.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cmpo/migrated/documents/wp287.pdf>: How should we treat underperforming schools? A regression discontinuity analysis of school inspections in England.

Another positive aspect of the workshop was to give a few members an opportunity to explain how inspectors are developing the collection and analysis of data as part of their everyday work.

Ireland, Malta and Scotland presented three different types of surveys aimed at monitoring the education system and at identifying the areas of progress that can be focused on.

Malta conducted a school survey on the impact of external review on the school and the area most concerned. The results showed that the average rating of the impact of an inspection was 3.10 on a scale of 5. The two areas where inspection was perceived as useful were the self-evaluation capacity of the school and the learning experience in class. Two other themes were graded 2.57 (impact on professional development) and 2.6 (impact on classroom practices). Another conclusion of the survey was that impact is perceived more positively in primary schools and in public schools.

Negative feedback was also given, particularly on the fact schools do not know what to expect when they are inspected.

These results need to be analyzed with great caution since it is difficult to separate external evaluation from other factors which influence schools.

The survey was nevertheless helpful for the inspectors in Malta to understand what they need to improve, based on solid information.

In 2013, Ireland introduced post whole-school evaluation (WSE) and quality-assurance surveys of principals and teachers. In 2016, optional on-line quality assurance questionnaires were issued to all principals, teachers, chairpersons of boards of management and chairpersons of parents' associations.

Scotland is improving the use of survey questionnaires sent to schools after an inspection in order to collect evidence of the impact of inspection and asks a number of questions: Scotland is also developing survey questionnaires sent both to parents and to schools before and after an inspection in order to collect evidence on the impact of inspections and asks a number of questions:

- ▶ How effective is our inspection process?
- ▶ What are the changes inspection drive in schools?
- ▶ How do inspections contribute to improvement in a given school?

The feedback participating in a pilot have been greatly encouraging according to the percentages of satisfaction expressed:

- ▶ 90% of school leaders say that, following the results of an inspection, their school has changed and introduced new means of monitoring the progress of students.
- ▶ 95% of school heads say that the quality of the professional dialogue with inspectors has helped them improve the school.
- ▶ 63% say that their school has followed the advice given by inspectors and/or used

specific resources such as « How good is my school »

# What are the possible levers to improve the impact of inspections? What good practices can we share and experiment?

## 1. Engagement of stakeholders

### Schools and Schoolboards in the Netherlands

The Netherlands policy to increase impact is mainly to involve schools and schoolboards by making them more involved in the process and also more accountable for the results. Several measures are considered efficient:

- ▶ Focusing on schoolboards because they are responsible for the quality of education;
- ▶ Publishing reports and the names of weak schools;
- ▶ Differentiating judgements, from weak to excellent;
- ▶ Stimulating a culture of improvement by inviting them to formulate their own ambitious goals;
- ▶ Increasing the involvement of schools in the process by a school presentation at the start, joint classroom observations and interactive feedback sessions.

### Associate inspectors in Scotland and Wales

- ▶ Scotland insisted on the invaluable contribution of associate inspectors to the dissemination of good practices and the impact of inspection. Inspection teams are very often joined by practicing principal teachers, deputy head teachers or head teachers known as Associate Assessors. This practice exists within several inspectorates within SICI: England, Wales and Ireland particularly. According to Education Scotland, this ensures inspectors have current, up-to-date expertise in inspection teams, complementing the experience of inspectors. All members of inspection teams know how important it is to establish and maintain positive and respectful relationships with staff during an inspection. The testimony of several head teachers during the Glasgow workshop confirmed that this organization is judged very positively by inspectors and associate assessors alike as a very useful way of providing professional learning for head teachers and of spreading the advice and resources of inspectors.

### A better professional dialogue.

- ▶ Professional dialogue between inspectors and stakeholders is a very important theme for SICI members. Estyn organized a workshop on this topic in Cardiff in 2016 which explored the different ways to involve local authorities, schools, teachers, head teachers in the process of definition, implementation and evaluation of reforms. SICI members are acutely aware of the necessity for school staff and leadership to

understand and be part of the evaluation process. SICI is currently supporting a cooperation project between four members with different approaches: Scotland, the Netherlands, Lithuania and Estonia. The motive is very clearly to enhance the impact of inspection by improving the quality of the dialogue with schools: *Professional communication is the basis for successful inspection. It can help schools to accept inspection as support for improvement and to encourage them to take action. Good professional communication has increasing importance in times of the changing roles of inspection. Inspectors more and more need to be able to encourage school improvement through communication skills like professional dialogue, explaining data or showing evidence while feeding back inspection results.*

## 2. Professionalism of processes and methods

### **Do two inspectors inspecting the same school make consistent decisions?**

- ▶ In March 2017, OFSTED published a report addressing the question of the reliability of inspections which is, as all inspectors know, constantly raised by schools and public opinion at large.

*This study was designed to be the first step towards collecting a body of evidence on the reliability of inspection practice. It aimed to evaluate how frequently two inspectors independently conducting a short inspection of the same school on the same day agreed whether the school remained good or whether they needed further evidence to reach a secure decision. It therefore tested reliability, not validity.*<sup>6</sup>

The conclusions of this study, whose complete text can be found on SICI's website, are very reassuring and instructive.

<http://www.sici-inspectorates.eu/getattachment/504c4463-6578-44e9-87a5-9db9e4453fe9>

It showed that in 22 out of 24 short inspections, the inspectors agreed on their judgement on the quality of the school. In two inspections, the inspectors arrived at different conclusions.

It also made an attempt at identifying the factors associated with reliability:

*The findings from the methodology inspections lead us to hypothesise that there are four important factors associated with reliability. The first two relate to evidence gathered in this study:*

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<sup>6</sup> A study of the reliability of Ofsted's new short inspections, OFSTED, p3

■ **Triangulation** of the headteacher or senior leadership team's views from the initial leadership meeting against other evidence collected from the inspection is an influential driver of reliability. Agreement on judgements appears to be the result of aggregation of multiple pieces of different evidence supporting the perception that focused lines of enquiry and the collection of different types of evidence lead to greater consistency.

■ The **inspection framework** and the detailed grade descriptors the inspection handbook provides to support inspection judgements are important components in reducing subjectivity. The short inspection framework provides a fail-safe mechanism at the end of the inspection as it allows inspectors to convert to a full inspection if they need more evidence. This adds an additional layer of security that the final judgement given is reliable.

The next two hypotheses were not tested by the methodology study and are therefore offered more tentatively:

- We hypothesise that Ofsted's **quality assurance** procedures provide further assurance that accurate judgements are made by inspectors, although this has proved impossible to test under this methodology and requires further study.
- Similarly, we hypothesise that **inspector training** has a considerable effect on the consistency of inspector practice and judgements, leading to greater adherence to the inspection framework and therefore greater reliability. This factor was similarly not tested in the current methodology inspections and requires further study.<sup>7</sup>

- ▶ This interesting example of how an inspectorate can reflect and work on its own internal evaluation could inspire other similar initiatives in other contexts. They could certainly contribute to building an image of a modern and dynamic inspection body. SICI has made this issue its priority theme in 2020.

### 3. Devising communication strategies

The question of how the voice, messages and recommendations can be heard better is often raised in SICI workshops. Many Inspectorates in Europe are linked to government and are positioned as advisors to the ministers rather than truly independent bodies. This does not mean that their expression is not free; on the contrary, it is expected from inspectors that they produce objective and informed judgements. Nevertheless, they are a body of specialists whose writings are most of the time addressed to policy makers rather than to

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<sup>7</sup> A study of the reliability of Ofsted's new short inspections, OFSTED, p 5.

the general public. This explains perhaps why very few published reports get a lot of media attention, which has led to some reflection on how to improve their impact.

The Paris workshop analyzed the impact of four thematic reports addressing central questions such as inclusive education, child protection, and came to the conclusion that the most influential reports are often those which benefit from a good strategy of communication and a good media coverage.

A few inspectorates are leading the way towards a stronger visibility and some interesting examples are being shared within SICI. It was the topic of the General assembly in Oslo in 2015, which explored a few ideas to better communicate with the press, with parents and with school leaders and policy makers by expressing clear, strong and frequent messages at all levels.

## Conclusion

The choice of the theme of the Impact of Inspection appeared as rather a self-imposed one for SICI.

Indeed, inspectors are not the only players in the field of evaluation and inspection is not the only way to improve schools; it is therefore necessary to clearly identify the added value of inspectorates compared to the many other institutions involved.

The influence of inspectorates depends on their capacity to show the quality of their work and the improvement of the education systems they drive.

*Inspection has a role, not least because of the quality of some of the men and women who serve as inspectors. However, it needs to be much more clearly independent of government and ensure it has a robust evidence base. That evidence base will include evidence from inspections but also needs to include empirical evidence of improvement to learning, teaching and attainment of learners as a result of inspection.*<sup>8</sup>

After one year of collective reflection, a number of conclusions can be tentatively drawn:

- ▶ Inspectorates are adapting quickly to meet the requirements of evidence based governance systems of education, and to account for their own efficiency.
- ▶ Although it is very difficult to list objective indicators, the impact of inspection cannot be underestimated. It is clearly recognized by school heads, local authorities and policy makers who are often inspired by inspectors' expertise and recommendations to conduct change.
- ▶ It also needs to be better monitored and a number of tools are being designed and experimented in several inspectorates in Europe: they are conceived to improve the feedback given by stakeholders to inspectors and to reinforce the internal quality assurance processes.

The sole ambition of this paper is to take stock of the complexity of the question, to outline its varied aspects and to point to the directions taken by inspectorates within SICI to raise to the challenge of having an impact, showing evidence that it has one and finding ways to increase it.

I would like to thank the many people who worked hard to make this work possible: the inspectorates of France, Luxemburg and Scotland, the SICI executive committee and the three trainee inspectors from ESENER in France: Violette Toubeau, Stephane Gay and Nicolas Turquet.

**Chantal Manes-Bonnisseau**

SICI President, November 2018

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<sup>8</sup> Bryce et al (2018) *Scottish Education (5<sup>th</sup> edition)*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.