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# METHODS AND MODALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL INSPECTIONS

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## A BOOK REVIEW

Ehren, M. C. M. (Ed.). (2016). *Methods and modalities of effective school inspections*. London: Springer International Publishing.

In many European educational systems, there has been a tendency to decentralize the authority of decision-making from the central government to the school level (Hopkins et al., 2016). Together with this increased autonomy in decision-making, central governments are holding schools accountable for monitoring and improving their own educational quality (OECD, 2013). From this perspective, it is not surprising that there is currently increased demand on education mechanisms to strengthen systems for school accountability. The importance of inspections has therefore intensified over the past decade, particularly in Europe (Ehren, 2016). The main purpose of school inspections is the goal of accountability (Glatterhorn, 2008). Inspectorates examine a school's compliance with legislative requirements, regulations, and duties and also provide information about the quality of teaching and the learning climate at the school. In relation to accountability, a school inspection leads to a judgement which may have punitive consequences or (financial) rewards for the school or its staff. In addition to this accountability perspective, growing evidence indicates that school inspections can be a key feature of school improvement as the identification of a school's strengths and weaknesses can be viewed as a lever for developing educational quality (Penninckx, Vanhoof, De Maeyer, & Van Petegem, 2016; van Bruggen, 2010). Despite this ambition, research indicates that school inspections only encourage effective school improvement under specific conditions (Ehren, Perryman, & Shackleton, 2014).

The aim of *Methods and Modalities of Effective School Inspections* by Melanie Ehren, reader in Educational Accountability and Improvement at the University College London, is to provide a timely overview of the evidence base of effective school inspections in order to delineate important conditions for improving the quality of education in inspected schools. This book highlights timely issues concerning worldwide educational reform movements and takes up critical questions of importance for contemporary inspectorates of education. Such questions include: How effective are school inspections nowadays? Do they meet the current expectations of schools and teachers? What positive effects do school inspections have on schools and teachers? What unintended consequences can be discerned? How can differences in effects and side effects of inspections explain improvements in schools? The fact that this work strives to summarize this knowledge is evidenced by the extensive list of studies that have been selected and synthesized. Through this methodology, readers are provided with a fully comprehensive overview including current research and perspectives. Before offering insight into the essential conditions of effective school inspection frameworks, the book discusses issues of validity in school inspections in relation to school effectiveness research. Ehren also uses data from a comparative study across six European inspection systems (the Netherlands, England, Sweden, Ireland, Austria, and the Czech Republic) (Ehren, Altrichter, McNamara, & O'Hara, 2013) to compare the different characteristics of effective inspection systems. This approach has the advantage of building bridges between theory and practice as the standards in these inspection frameworks could be matched to the objectives of any other inspectorate of education.

The book itself is divided into three main parts and subdivided into six individual chapters preceded by an introductory chapter about the fundamental principles and purposes of school inspections. In the beginning of this introductory chapter ("Introducing School Inspections"), Ehren brings clarity and focus to the theme by introducing a summary of the major elements of school inspection systems in Europe. She describes similarities and differences among systems based on the frequency of visits, potential consequences of inspections, and reporting of inspection findings. Next, the author describes the different goals and functions of school inspections (control, improvement, and liaison). Although many inspectorates of education are responsible for accomplishing all three goals, Ehren focuses on the conflict between the accountability and improvement purposes of school inspections as there is growing awareness that these two perspectives are conflicting rather than complementary functions. After all, as it might be difficult for schools and teachers to trust inspectors to honestly disclose their weaknesses, the thin line between inspectors' supportive and evaluative roles can be very

confusing when suggestions for further improvement are coming from the same voice that is evaluating the schools' educational quality (Penninckx & Vanhoof, 2015). No other potential problem areas for developing trust and safety between schools and inspectors are specifically mentioned, although it is not a secret that consequences for failing schools can be severe. According to Ehren (2016, p. 7), proponents of sanctions assume that "schools will be more determined to learn and improve and to conform to inspection standards and react on inspection feedback if they have something to lose when failing." In response to this opinion, reference can be made to malpractice by schools in high stakes environments, such as window dressing activities and fabrication of materials (Penninckx et al., 2016).

After this opening chapter, the author and co-authors dig deeper into the available literature on school effectiveness, the effectiveness of school inspections, and the changing roles and responsibilities of school inspections. In the first main part of this book, "Understanding School Inspection Frameworks," Scheerens and Ehren summarize findings from research on school effectiveness and research on assessment validity and reliability. Chapter 2 starts with a description of the types of standards in inspection frameworks. In accordance with the different functions of inspections (control, improvement, and liaison), systems can emphasize equivalent standards, such as control of input, support of education processes, and evaluation of school output. Next, available research is used to identify conditions that can inform improvement-oriented inspection frameworks. This chapter ends with an overview of different inspection systems across the six European countries (England, Ireland, The Netherlands, the state of Styria in Austria, Sweden, and the Czech Republic) studied by Ehren et al. (2013), based on these aforementioned standards. In the following chapter (Chapter 3), Ehren and Pietsch discuss important notions concerning the validity and reliability of these standards. An important concern is the validity of the measuring instruments. If inspectorates use an instrument for measuring, does it measure what they intend it to measure? Many inspectorates also collect data through observations and interviews and should therefore be aware of subjective, invalid judgements that can lead to unfounded administrative consequences. Further on, the authors point to the trend of schools reverting to inspection templates and the increased risk of window dressing activities, as these and other manipulative strategies by schools lead to invalid and inaccurate assessments. In addition, the authors focus on the standardized nature of these inspection frameworks when in fact schools not only have a wide range of diverse resources, but also house pupils and teachers from a variety of cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. Or as the authors (2016, p. 63) ask themselves, "are all criteria of equal value and importance across all schools?"

The second part of the book, “The Current Evidence Base of School Inspection Research,” introduces the current empirical base about the (positive) effects and unintended consequences of school inspections. In the first chapter in this part (Chapter 4), Ehren summarizes findings from empirical research as well as non-empirical studies, such as think pieces and exploratory studies. These findings may perhaps not provide new insights or understanding to experienced readers, but this summary nevertheless gives a good overview of the existing international knowledge base regarding the effectiveness of school inspections as it includes international studies from the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, Flanders, New Zealand, and Korea. The following chapter (Chapter 5) focuses on different types of unintended consequences. As school inspections may have an impact on school improvement, though this is not necessarily the case, window dressing activities and other forms of misrepresentation by schools and teachers have been empirically proven. It is in this section that the authors highlight possible causes of this strategic behavior and explicitly mention the need for a high trust environment as an important condition for effective school inspections. In Chapter 6, Ehren introduces four mechanisms of change to explain how school inspections may lead to improvement in school quality and student outcomes (2016, p. 134). The book does not provide “straightforward recipes,” but instead offers a coherent overview of different conditions that need to be taken into account when thinking about effective inspection models. After all, educational change and improvement cannot be engineered easily.

Perhaps the most important and interesting part of the book is the final part, “Conclusion” (Chapter 7), about emerging models of school inspections wherein Ehren emphasizes the strength of schools’ localized partnerships. In some regions, schools are stimulated to collaborate with other schools, education colleges, learning networks, and special needs schools. Reflection on the three international examples of partnerships (England, the Netherlands, and Northern Ireland) forms the leitmotiv of this section on the changing role of school inspections in education systems. At the end, Ehren pleads for a shift from the more hierarchical school inspection model we know today to a decentralized model in which an inspectorate of education can be seen as part of an education network. Although the author is a clear proponent of this trend, she once again highlights the need for “high trust education systems” (2016, p. 167).

On the whole, this book should meet the expectations of readers with a certain amount of expertise in the field of school inspection frameworks. It is written in an objectively readable way and does not bother the reader with incomprehensible, redundant, or trivial data. Although this book is excellently positioned to stimulate debate on the reformation of inspectorates and has an extensive scope, among factors that stimulate or hinder effective inspections

individual teacher characteristics and classroom conditions are underexposed. Another limitation to the book is the applicability of effective inspection models in other contexts as other countries may differ in legislative, social, or historical standards. As mentioned above, the author does not always take a position on the topics presented in the book. Instead, she gives a thorough overview of the usefulness of different systems as well as pros and cons of different indicators and highlights the findings of other researchers. This approach encourages the reader to think critically about the issues from various perspectives. Despite its drawbacks, however, the book not only provides the essential standards necessary to improve an inspection system, it also helps identify the essential steps to take in order to increase the improvement of schools as well. As such, it clearly deserves a place on the bookshelf of anyone interested in strengthening mechanisms for school accountability.

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