

Setting the stage: Polycentric school inspections and their mechanisms of change

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Building blocks of a self-improving system (Hargreaves, 2012):



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- Clusters of schools (structure)
- The local solutions approach and co-construction (culture)
- System leaders (key people)

The self-improving system currently:



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- National, local and (subject) specialized leaders of education.
- Teaching School Alliances
- Academy Chains

A polycentric system



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- Many centres of decision making
- State is not the sole locus of authority
- State and non-state actors are regulators and regulated in complex and interdependent relations
- Relations change continuously

A polycentric system

- Expected to address failing ‘command and control’ types of regulation
- Acknowledge that no single actor can regulate effectively
- Create conditions for responsiveness

A polycentric system

- Regulation and accountability need to adapt to local context and create the conditions in which schools effectively steer themselves

What is the role of Inspectorates of Education in a self-improving education system?

How can inspections be effective in enhancing school-to-school (networked) improvement and evaluation?

An EU-funded study



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- 4 countries/regions: England, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Bulgaria
- First phase of mapping current practices and developing a theoretical model of inspections in a polycentric context
- Case studies
- Mapping good practices across Europe

School inspections in a polycentric context



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Evaluate and assess the quality and functioning of networks of schools and/or their stakeholders, with the purpose of validating and supporting improvement and decision-making at the local level.

School inspections in a polycentric context



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Examples of such approaches:

- agenda (e.g. standards) for inspection is (also) set by schools and stakeholders
- inspection framework includes standards to evaluate network activities, effective cooperation, and/or meso/macro-level issues
- inspection schedules include visits to all schools/stakeholders at the same time
- inspection feedback is given to all schools/stakeholders; feedback is targeted to, and adapted to relevant actors
- intelligent consequences (e.g. information sharing, persuasion, targeted monitoring)

Example from England



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New practices developing of accountability beyond individual schools:

- Focused inspections of academies in large MATs
- Letter summarizing strengths and weaknesses across individual schools and functioning of the trust
- Redefining quality of (leadership in) schools: school to school support, and support of governing body to schools
- Soft intelligence of RSCs and regional HMI

Example from Northern Ireland



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- Area Learning Communities (ALC) clusters of all mainstream post-primary schools, including special schools with post-primary pupils and further education colleges
- Legal requirement to provide pupils with access to 24 courses at key stage 4.; schools are enabled to secure course provision for students at other institutions within the ALC
- District Inspectors are responsible for a number of schools within a geographical area
- Area Inspection: evaluate the quality of provision in a geographical area, across a number of phases, individual organisation report and composite area report

Example from the Netherlands



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- Networks for inclusive education under new authorities
- Inspections include the effectiveness of the network in providing such inclusive education, using early warning analysis to identify networks for inspection visits
- Indicators for early warning analysis: (1) the amount of pupils who do not go to school, (2) pupils switching between schools within the network, (3) earlier Inspectorate judgments of the school or network, and (4) other signals like news in the media or complaints by parents or other stakeholders, (5) support plan, (6) annual accounts and reports

What can we learn?



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Closing accountability gaps:

- Informal networks are out of scope, focus on large MATs with high risk on structural dimensions (regional spread, growth)
- Limited national data on existing networks
- No framework or clear concept of quality of networks, or their governing bodies
- Limited evaluation of effectiveness of networks or functioning of governing body
- RSC and HMI regions do not overlap
- Limited overview of functioning of the entire system

More info



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www.schoolinspections.eu

See also the IOE's Masters Degree in
'Evaluation, Inspection and Educational Improvement':
http://www.ioe.ac.uk/study/PMM9_IAR9IM.html