

## Do Teachers Want to Work with Inspectors? The Monitoring Programmes

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### Abstract

The emerging dichotomy between control and support/monitoring, which takes place when the performance of inspection at schools is at stake, was crucial to the definition of our goal: knowing the perceptions of teachers and inspectors regarding the relationship between them and the impact of this relation in the collaborative work that they must undertake in the context of the monitoring programmes. The methodological option, of a qualitative nature, comprised a case study involving five school clusters. We used questionnaires and semi-structured interviews as data collection instruments. Data were analysed through content analysis and descriptive statistical analysis. In total, the study involved 130 participants, including teachers and inspectors. The research results show the contradictory nature of the multiple activities under the responsibility of this inspection body, which means that inspectors are not always well received by teachers, even if the activities have a different nature from the evaluation and control ones.

**Keywords:** *inspectors of education, teachers, monitoring, content analysis, Portugal*

### Introduction

Inspection is not a strange practice in most countries in the world. It arose when public education was created and used fundamentally to safeguard equitable education for all citizens, ensuring that those responsible for education followed the same rules and fulfilled similar programmes.

Several world education systems have been driven to develop improvement processes that allow the quality standards of education to be raised and student results to be improved, in praise of competitive environments sustained by the superiority of economic and business rationality, which seem to be opposite to a humanised education environment. However, the debate about the best way to achieve this goal continues to be discussed, and many countries have been introducing inspecting bodies in their education systems as a way to stimulate the improvement of the quality of the service offered (Gaertner et al., 2014), with an emerging trend for the admission of this agency being noted (Quintelier et al., 2020).

The contexts in which inspection works vary widely from country to country, requiring a careful analysis of the history and cultural backgrounds of the different contexts if the objective is to frame and justify it. However, education and inspection policies are no longer limited to national contexts and are part of a new European political community, manifested through associations such as a Standing International Conference of Inspectorates of Education (SICI) and shaped by guidelines that arise from international associations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In order to contribute to the development and affirmation of each inspection body, SICI aims to support the development of institutions and the inspectors' professional skills; promote and support partnerships and cooperation between inspection systems; and actively participate in the international debate on the evaluation and improvement of quality in education (SICI, 2016).

The functions of sharing, developing, improving, and cooperating with SICI may not be sufficient in themselves, forcing the design and achievement of more ambitious goals, justifying the internal impulse to improve services (Grek et al., 2013). Assuming a stronger role, this association claims its place in a new political space in the European Union as an expert organisation, recognised by the different international agencies for providing added value by offering experience in the practice of evaluating education, comparing and analysing data of key aspects of European education (SICI, 2016).

In this context, through the Bratislava Memorandum (SICI, 2013), SICI reveals the concern with balancing the traditional roles of inspection and the new roles associated with it in an attempt to approach and monitor the work carried out by teachers in the classroom because, as they claim, "innovation will only be successful if it is embraced by teachers" (2013, p. 3). At the same time, it reinforces the importance of the impulse for change and improvement coming from within each school, from its educational actors, and not from the imposition of an external force (SICI, 2013).

Moving away from approaches of neoliberal influence, in 2012, the Portuguese inspection system – *Inspeção-Geral da Educação e Ciência (IGEC)* – created an activity that focuses on a collaborative, relational and holistic methodology: the activity of monitoring educational action. This activity calls for authentic dialogue that helps each institution and each educational actor in a personalised way. It is based on a systematic and collaborative process of exchanging ideas and knowledge, feelings and actions regarding innovation and the creation of learning spaces, in a process where feedback is dynamic and bidirectional and results from shared experiences where the associated imposition of the hierarchical structure is eliminated.

### **The Activity of Monitoring Educational Action**

As part of the activities it develops, the Portuguese inspection system has been implementing work methodologies that encourage the intervention of the school staff in the design and implementation of policies aimed at school improvement and the educational success of the students through monitoring educational action.

This activity seems to be a need to support change in the sense of improvement, as far as it has some specificities in the practices they develop and the relationships they establish between elements of the school community, and between the school and the context, which become unique institutions that require specific monitoring work. This activity intends to work with a symbiotic relationship between schools and inspection instead of intervening in it. It was developed with respect for the autonomy of schools, and it aims to follow the work carried out there, triggering a constant reflection on practices to achieve an effective improvement in the quality of the learning and students' results.

In this regard, the monitoring activity appears quite innovative as the object of the intervention is not defined in the first place, as happens with the other activities of IGEC. It places Portuguese inspection in a new position where the methodology allows regulation through shared instruments that positively involve schools and their actors. Thereby, the desire is to fulfil that specified in the Bratislava Memorandum and contribute to creating a positive and constructive image of the IGEC, but is this achieved?

## **Research Methodology**

The methodological option, of a qualitative nature, comprised a case study involving five school clusters in 19 public schools in the north region, selected from among those that had been intervened under the Monitoring programmes in the year immediately preceding our data collection. We used questionnaires and semi-structured interviews as data collection instruments. Data were analysed through content analysis and descriptive statistical analysis. The study involved 130 participants, including 125 primary school teachers and 5 inspectors (Ia, Ib, Ic, Id, and Ie). The General-Inspector chief selected the inspectors from among those who had more experience in Monitoring programmes. The categorisation we reached from the content analysis of the interviews was organised into five interrelated dimensions. Each includes a set of categories that contribute to the deepening and clarifying of the issues addressed in each main dimension. Namely: (1) general image of the School Inspection: Inspector's prestige; the impact of inspection action; inspectors' responsibilities; main inspected areas. (2) Interpersonal relationship: teachers'/inspectors' relationship. (3) Inspectors' job management. The collected data were triangulated, allowing for more in-depth analyses.

## **Results and Discussion**

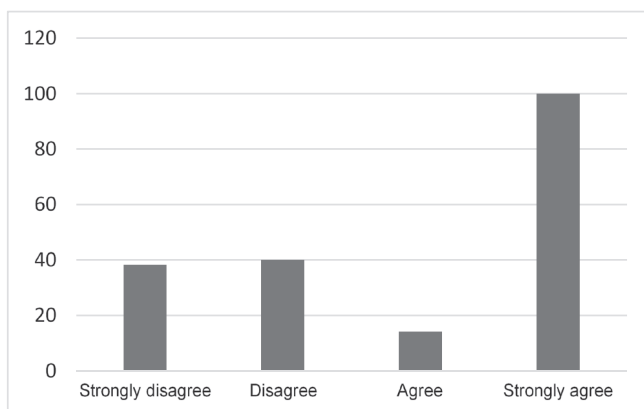
### **Between perceptions and feelings: what do teachers think about school inspection?**

To know the representations of teachers concerning inspection work from a generic perspective, we started by asking them if they recognised prestige in work carried out by inspectors. The answers are not obvious from the teachers' perspective, and positions are quite divided. While 43.9% of teachers say they do not recognise prestige in the work of inspectors, 56.1% have a different opinion and claim to recognise it.

Teachers' opinions are divided when it comes to recognising prestige in the work of school inspectors, and the division continues when we ask them about the impulse that this body can bring to the improvement of the quality of teaching. On the one hand, 49.5% of participants say they do not recognise inspection's driving capabilities for higher quality education; on the other hand, 50.4% claim to recognise them.

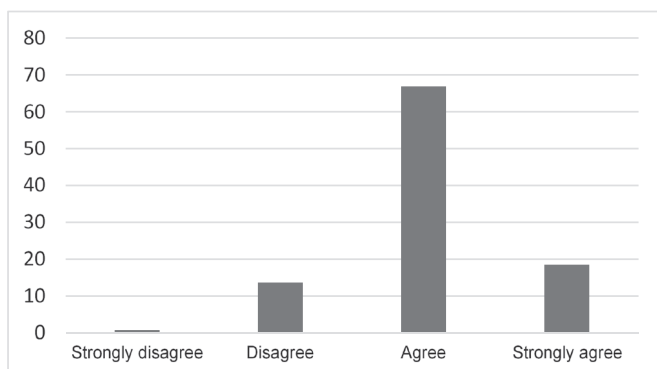
Given the uncertainty of positions presented by teachers, it is not surprising that the perceptions related to the trust they place in inspectors are also divided.

As shown in Figure 1, more than half of the teachers (54.2%) say they distrust the work of inspectors as they are unaware of the nature of their action: if it is of a controlling/evaluative nature or support/monitoring. Teachers recognise the existence of multiple roles in the performance of inspection duties, which generates feelings of distrust.



**Figure 1.** Teachers' confidence in the inspectors' action

More unanimous are the participants' perceptions regarding the kind of work that gives more visibility to the IGEC. When asked about what they considered the main area of activity of this body, the position assumed was clear – 85.4% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the inspection work is mostly administrative/management, far from pedagogical action, as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Teachers' perceptions about the nature of inspections' action

In line with the previous positions, they tend to agree (78.2%) that the inspectors' work is more directed towards helping principals and management staff resolve administrative issues than supporting teachers with their pedagogical practice challenges.

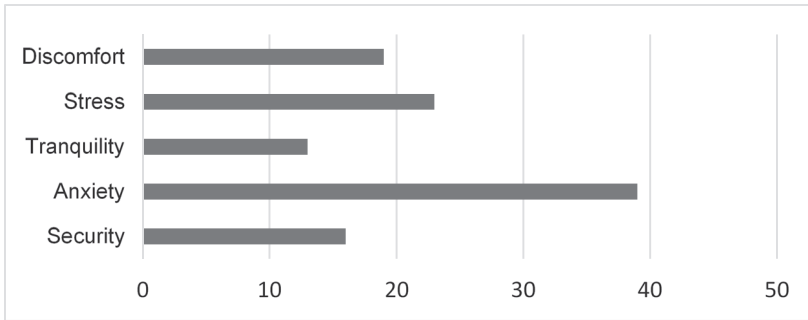
In this regard, and confirming the teachers' position, Id says that the multiplicity of the inspection roles and the different objectives they have also made the way they are understood and welcomed in schools vary. He recognises that the actions that 'teachers appreciate more [are] the monitoring activities' because of the 'support for school work' they provide. However, he warns that the IGEC's mission is very wide and embraces 'more complicated' activities that 'always generate a lot of tension and conflict' and are less accepted by schools. It also assumes the 'role of regulator of the system' associated with the inspection body, which claims to contribute to their decreased popularity within the school community. The inspector reinforces the tension existing around activities such as control or disciplinary action, stating that the 'tension is always on the table' within the scope of these actions.

By analysing some IGEC official documents, we can see that teachers' positions, corroborated by some inspectors, can be justified by the discrepancy that exists between the number of activities developed within the monitoring programme and the number of activities developed within the control programme per school year: 62% of the actions are within the control programme, and only 27% of them are within the monitoring programme. This fact makes it difficult to create a precise idea about the performance of the inspection in a specific activity. It is indisputable that the weight of the number of actions of the control programme influences the way the IGEC is perceived because, according to the objective of each activity, the proximity between actors will vary, as well as the attitude and behaviour of those involved. So, because of this, the ambition to study one activity in an isolated way is a challenging task, as the number of activities and responsibilities associated with this body are many, forcing us to consider the possibility that the way some are perceived and understood may affect the way the others are perceived and understood, too.

To this view, 67.2% of teachers add that, from their point of view, inspection is more focused on finding school failures than on helping schools to improve, and 78.7% consider inspectors to be professionals who are unaware of the real needs of schools as they have been away from teaching for many years, making the objectives and guidelines they propose unreal.

### The relationship between teachers and inspectors: how difficult is it?

Focused on extending knowledge about the relationship between teachers and inspectors, we start by raising information about the teacher's feelings during an inspection visit, as presented in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Feelings experienced by teachers during an inspection visit

As noted in Figure 3, teachers highlight anxiety, stress, and discomfort, despite the highlighted safety and tranquillity. The justification behind this data can be found in the multiplicity of tasks that inspectors are obliged to carry out while performing their duties. Swinging between more controlling activities and others of a greater partnership with schools, the attitude the inspector adopts and the degree of proximity to the school community will also vary, resulting in discomfort or even distrust on the part of those who work with them. It points exactly to this possibility of confusion generated by the multiple tasks that inspectors must carry out in schools: ‘people, schools and teachers, are not exactly aware of what a monitoring or control activity is. They see the inspectors and, if there are inspectors, we all know what happens’. According to this professional, ‘Inspection always has “that weight” and people don’t have a good image about it’ (Ic) and about the purpose of each activity, giving rise to a set of mixed feelings, regardless of the activity.

The literature includes other studies (Courtney, 2013; Wagner, 2020) whose focus was on the feelings and the emotions experienced by teachers when inspected. The results are unanimous and point in the same direction: positive feelings related to the emotional impact of inspection on teachers are rare. We believe that this reality may damage teachers’ trust and commitment and increase their cynicism and resentment about the inspection process. As Ventura (2006) says, in an educational context, there is a component, usually subliminal, of fear,

which is less and less assumed, but which is nevertheless present in the relationship between those who are supposed to control (inspectors) and those who are the object of control (teachers and non-teaching staff). The word inspection triggers various subconscious fears in most people.

Despite this reality, the understanding that inspectors have regarding the emotional impact of their work on teachers goes in the opposite direction, which can negatively influence the results of their actions. We can see, in this respect, the considerations of the inspectors: 'teachers feel calm and develop the activity with a lot of motivation and determination'. Ib recognises that the 'reactions are not the same in all schools'; in some organisations, teachers may be 'scared by the amount of work they have to produce' and the 'work they will have to do with their colleagues' (Ib). He feels that the inspection, in most cases, 'is well accepted and desired'.

By not considering the possibility of unwanted effects resulting from their presence, inspectors will not consider strategic or facade behaviours that may appear during the inspection visit. For example, the possibility of having artificially planned classes (focused on the inspection frameworks and not on the reality and needs of each school/class) (Jones et al., 2017); or even the possibility of the effect of organisational paralysis, which can greatly damage the teaching/learning processes (Ehren, 2019).

## **Conclusions**

The position assumed by the teachers regarding the impulse of the inspection for higher quality education is not solid, nor does it allow valid conclusions to be drawn. They believe that the inspection action does not help schools improve individually and that inspectors are more concerned with identifying the failures of educational organisations than with helping them improve. For this group of professionals, the significance associated with the inspection work is related to issues of administrative and management nature, and accountability of schools for the work carried out, showing a hard governance style.

The data reveal the existence of a descending graduation line concerning the inspection action revealed to be more intense in the organisational dimension and less accentuated in the pedagogical dimension, reflecting the primacy of the rational/bureaucratic model by overvaluing the hierarchical structure of organisations. The inspection activity ends up having more impact and is more felt by professionals who occupy management positions than by teachers, giving more



visibility to the centralisation of procedures and the formal hierarchy typical of the rational model. However, due to the influence that the inspection involvement level has in schools (OECD, 2013), it would be better if all professionals could participate, regardless of their position, which does not seem to happen.

The multiplicity of functions performed by the IGEC, the weight of control and evaluation activities rather than monitoring ones, and the historical weight associated with the first ones cause the image that teachers create of the inspection work to be influenced. Besides, there is the contradictory (or, perhaps, incompatible) nature of the multiple activities under the responsibility of this body which means that inspectors are not always well received by teachers, generating feelings of distrust and distance. Most teachers claim not to trust inspectors because they do not know the nature and objectives of the activities that bring them to schools. They attest that most actions are not of a pedagogical scope, a reality confirmed by the number of actions planned per academic year. Inspectors recognise that these circumstances influence the way they are received at schools and that the fact that they act mostly in the field of control actions means that their presence is not always desired, even when that is not the nature of their activities.

Teachers' image regarding the inspection activities is strongly influenced by the place of power from which it is triggered. An image that still shows signs of the purposes for which it was created: the control of the state of education. It would be assumed that due to the nature of the new responsibilities that this body has been assuming over the last few years, namely with the rise of monitoring activity, we saw a reconfiguration of inspection, away from the ageing image of a control and regulation body. However, the image presented to us is an image of a hybrid entity that adds new responsibilities while never moving away from the previous ones. In this context, we realise that inspectors tend to act mechanically, even when context and reality call for flexible and adapted actions. We argue that acting in an educational environment requires practices as unique as each reality, as adapted as necessary. As such, a mechanical actuation is not a legitimate response to a dynamic environment. While we understand they have to be regulated by higher orientations due to the exclusively human capacity to evaluate any number of situations and environments, it would be helpful if inspectors were not governed only by what is legally regulated, as if the context were the same in all schools or, worse, did not influence processes and results.

In order for an inspection system to positively influence education and lead to an effective improvement in quality, the changes should be considered a change in culture and not as an imposition determined by external agents. The inspection system must move away from standardised and inflexible behaviours such as

those we see in the scope of this activity and start to consciously and effectively integrate the differences specific to each school, eliminating once and for all the centralising culture of the administration that does not seem to benefit the quality of education.

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