

Polycentric Audit Approach

Ehren, M.C.M., Janssens, F.J.G., Brown, M., McNamara, G., O'Hara, J. and Shevlin, P.

Abstract

Across Europe schools and other service providers increasingly operate in networks to provide inclusive education or develop and implement more localized school-to-school improvement models. As some education systems move towards more decentralized decision-making where multiple actors have an active role in steering and governing schools, the tasks and responsibilities of Inspectorates of Education must also change. This paper reflects on these changes and suggests 'polycentric' inspection models that fit such a decentralized context. Examples of inspection frameworks and methods from Northern Ireland, England and the Netherlands are provided, as well as a brief discussion of the potential impact of such 'polycentric' models.

1. Introduction

Education systems across the world have seen many reforms over the years and changes in the modalities of governance over time. These developments vary across countries, but common threads are, according to Au and Ferrare (2015), a shift from central government towards more decentralised governance, where responsibilities for governing are increasingly taken up by public-private partnerships, appointed managers and other bodies comprised of state and corporate leaders instead of by elected state bodies. The government still has a role in governance, according to Joseph (2010), but primarily through producing the legislation and regulatory framework which define 'a broader configuration of state and key elements in civil society' (p.5). Theisens et al (2016) similarly talk about a rise of New Public Governance, which followed an era predominated by New Public Management until approximately the year 2000. New Public Governance is based on horizontally organized systems with multiple centres of power which collaborate through networks. Governments are either *actors in* these networks, or they *steer through* networks by creating the arena in which networks operate, such as through establishing frameworks for collaboration, or facilitating knowledge exchange. Systems with many centres of decision-making in which the state is not the sole locus of authority, but where state and non-state actors are both regulators and regulated in a set of highly complex and interdependent relations are called 'polycentric' (Ostrom *et al.*, 1961; Black, 2008), as opposed to monocentric forms of steering, where the national government is the central actor in defining and designing civil society and in deciding on how to tackle societal issues through instructions, norms, policy guidelines, monitoring and control (Teisman, 1992). In a polycentric regime, networks of schools and their stakeholders take a prominent role in defining, regulating and shaping school quality. Steering through networks is expected to create conditions for responsiveness which allow and motivate schools to learn from each other, to find ways to effectively develop and implement solutions to local problems and to have the capacity to respond to changing circumstances

Examples of polycentric systems can be found throughout Europe but here we will talk about three examples from England, the Netherlands and Northern Ireland. In these countries we find cases of governments steering *through* networks (England and The Netherlands), whereas in West Belfast local government and district inspectors are active partners *in* a network of pre-primary, primary and secondary schools to improve learning outcomes of children in a historically disadvantaged area.

These moves towards a more polycentric education system have consequences for Inspectorates of Education. As schools have a role in defining and shaping educational quality in new local arrangements involving networks of stakeholders, Inspectorates of Education will be required to adapt their inspection

methods. This will involve a redefinition of roles away from centralized approaches to quality control, to more agile and contextual methods of evaluation. Such methods of evaluation are needed as networking can come with a range of problems that Inspectorates of Education need to address. Common problems have been described by Mayne and Rieper (2003) and Janssens and Ehren (2015) who talk about a diffusion of roles and responsibilities with limited clarity for parents or teachers over where to complain or who to approach when things go wrong, competition between partners in the network, high transaction costs of collaboration, or convergence toward groupthink. Examples of these unintended consequences for school networks were described by Ehren and Perryman (submitted) who talk about how large Multi-Academy Trusts have introduced multiple layers of management to coordinate, top slicing schools' budgets to finance these layers, or where collaboration between schools located in different parts of the country takes up substantial time of head teachers to travel to meetings.

This paper introduces a conceptual framework, describing a continuum of inspection models which fit a monocentric system of strong centralized steering by the state (government) to a polycentric system of steering through/within networks (governance). We will use Christie and Alkin's (2013) work to inform our conceptual framework, and compare and contrast the inspection models in the three afore mentioned systems (England, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland) to this framework, presenting emerging good practices and discussing the constraints and dilemmas the Inspectorates in these three systems are facing as they move towards fully polycentric models. First we will describe the types of networks Inspectorates of Education in our study engage in before we conceptualize ideal-typical models of inspections in a polycentric context and present examples from the three systems.

2. Educational networks

Networks are defined here as formal arrangements of a multitude of public and private organizations, agencies, and departments that have been constituted to facilitate collective action (see Provan & Kenis, 2008). Informal networks where schools collaborate without structured agreements on collective action ('soft collaboration') are outside of the scope of this paper.

Collective action can include the implementation of specific education reforms or services, joint professional development, school improvement and exchange of good practices and/or peer reviews. These collective actions imply that (aspects of) the provision and/or improvement of teaching and learning becomes the joint responsibility of the network, instead of that of single schools. Of course in different countries the degree of autonomy granted to individual schools or networks varies a great deal, as do the formal structures underpinning collective actions. Schools 'have been given decision rights of different extent and in different fields at very different points in time' (Altrichter *et al.* 2014, p.3). Nonetheless a significant degree of commonality applies. Typically education networks would include schools and their governing bodies (within or across different schooling phases), and potentially also other service providers such as youth services or local community workers. These networks are often underpinned by legal structures which formalise the relationships between these institutions. In some cases, a separate governing body is added to the network to coordinate the partnership work and provide support services to individual schools, sometimes even taking over some of the responsibilities and leadership from/of individual schools.

These networks (and their governing bodies) can be the *object* of inspections when the Inspectorate of Education evaluates the quality of the collaboration between partners in the network or outcomes generated by the collaborative efforts of the network. Such an approach would fit the previously described approach of steering *through* networks, where central government sets frameworks, formulates a vision, facilitates knowledge exchange, or acts as a crowbar to enhance collaboration. In a polycentric system, where governments become actors in the network, the Inspectorate would however typically also be part

of the network and be involved in the networking process. In the following sections, we will use Christie and Alkin's framework of evaluation theories (2013) to explain the shift in inspection methodology required, when the network becomes the object of, as well as the platform for the implementation of evaluations.

3. Conceptualizing inspections in a polycentric system

Inspections are a widely used form of school evaluation, according to Christie and Alkin (2013). Their tradition of designing and employing evaluation procedures whereby teams with presumed expertise, guided by established process standards, visit a site to observe, account, make a report and judge institutions plays a significant role in evaluation. Janssens and Dijkstra (2013) previously used Alkin's (2013) framework of evaluation theories to position inspections of individual schools, describing how evaluation theories inform inspection *methodology*, inspection *judgements* and the *user* focus of the evaluation effort. In this section their thinking is extended by using Alkin's framework to reflect on the changes in inspection methodologies, judgements and user focus when Inspectorates of Education change their object of evaluation from individual school quality to the functioning of networks of schools and/or stakeholders.

Methodology

Methodology concerns the techniques used to conduct evaluation studies and these can range from the traditional research methods of (quasi)experimental research to evaluate the effects of an intervention or programme, to broader and more comprehensive conceptualizations of evaluation of human activity, policies or organizations. Alkin (2013) provides a summary of the main (North American) theorists that have developed evaluation methodologies, such as Campbell, Suchman, Boruch, Cook, Cronbach, Rossi, Weiss, Chen, Henry, Mark and Tyler. His overview of the main ideas of these evaluation theorists suggests a continuum of approaches from, on the one hand, those which are concerned with

- investigating causal inference and making generalizations to other subjects and settings,
- evaluating single interventions, programmes, or organisational entities, and
- using objectivist and standardized techniques in the evaluation,

to those which aim to capture

- the mechanisms and conditions that explain the functioning and performance of an intervention, programme or organisation. Such approaches would
- include multiple levels of analysis (individual, interpersonal and collective) at which influence occurs, and
- using constructivist approaches to develop and test theories of 'how something works'.

The first approach typically fits within monocentric systems where Inspectorates of Education would use standardized frameworks, aiming to produce evaluation findings that are reproducible and that would lead to similar assessments of school quality across different inspectors (Janssens and Dijkstra, 2013). Such objectivist and standardized approaches are informed by education policy frameworks that describe school quality and define the remit of Inspectorates of Education. They rely to a large extent on available quantitative data, such as students' test scores or student drop out rates to evaluate the school's performance, sometimes using risk-based approaches which assume a cause and effect relation between risks of failing school quality (e.g. staff turnover, low teaching quality) and student performance. Of course inspection even in monocentric environments focussing largely on individual schools varies hugely from system to system and those with less emphasis on high stakes accountability and more on development and improvement fit more comfortably into the second approach above.

By definition a polycentric context implies that the power and control over who defines and monitors school quality is more fragmented. Interactions about school quality do not stop at the borders of an

individual school but are shaped in interdependencies of schools and their stakeholders who have different roles and expertise in defining and improving school quality. The second set of approaches becomes more relevant for Inspectorates of Education that have to adapt to local context and the type of networks they are inspecting and to create the conditions in which such networks effectively steer themselves. The common value of these approaches is their ability to understand and validate local and context-specific approaches to shaping educational quality by different partners in a network, looking at the bigger picture of how the many different parts in a network operate and the ways they interact and evolve over time in mutually reinforcing ways.

Valuing/judging

Valuing and judging distinguish inspection from other forms of evaluation or research as inspectors must place value on their findings and often have to make judgements about the quality of some object, situation or process. Valuing and judging are an important part of Inspectorates of Education's work which is often structured by a set of clear protocols and guidelines to judge the quality of individual schools. Many inspection systems categorize schools on a four-point scale (ranging from failing to good), using a hierarchical model of aggregating judgements on lower level indicators to a summary score on the overall quality of the school.

These 'monocentric' approaches are strongly in line with the objectivist methodologies described in the previous section, putting the onus on the judgement of the inspector who is evaluating a school, making 'pass/fail' decisions or using standardized evaluation criteria to compare similar entities, or benchmarking schools against a set of inspection indicators. Such a standardized 'objectivist' approach however does not fit well in a polycentric system where a variety of different networks emerge which include a range of (sometimes different and changing) actors working on a variety of different network-level outcomes in response to context-specific problems.

Christie and Alkin (2013) describe more 'subjectivist' approaches to valuing which are responsive to the object of evaluation and guided by the meanings people construct. Stakeholders and users of an evaluation (such as the network that is inspected) are actively involved in making judgements as the evaluator ensures that multiple realities are taken into account when making a value judgement. Relevant methodological approaches as described by Stufflebeam, Wholey, Chelimsky, Alkin, Patton, Fetterman, Cousins, Preskill, King (see Christie and Alkin, 2013) include the 'context, input, process and product evaluation model', Wholey's four-stage procedure for sequential purchase of information, 'utilization-focused evaluation', 'developmental evaluation', 'empowerment evaluation' (building on self-evaluations of users), 'participatory evaluation', and 'interactive evaluation practice'. The common concepts underlying these approaches are:

- a focus on the process of evaluation and a continuous cycle of evaluation with the purpose of transformation and learning (instead of seeing evaluation as an end product to be used for improvement by stakeholders)
- involvement of stakeholders throughout the evaluation process (instead of treating them as end users), and
- a shift in the role of evaluators from objective outsiders to one which fosters continuous interaction with the major stakeholders in an evaluation; evaluators should be actively involved in developing intended users' commitment to utilization of ideas for improvement.

Such a shift in the position of schools, their stakeholders and the Inspectorates of Education who now become equal partners in a more interactive and ongoing evaluation of education quality also implies a different set of consequences to motivate improvement. Instead of using sanctions, rewards and interventions in single schools, Inspectorates of Education now need to develop a set of intelligent strategies that would enhance the performance of the entire network. This might be achieved by purposefully providing relevant actors with the information to act on inspection findings, putting

strategies in place to shift the power balance to improve relations in the network and increasing transparency to external stakeholders. Joint learning among all participating agencies and organisations in the network and the Inspectorate through a process of collaborative evaluation and knowledge development is the underpinning rationale for user involvement, and reciprocal relationships and joint activities become essential strategies in the evaluation and monitoring of schools.

Table 1 summarizes the two ends of the continuum of on the one hand inspection approaches in a monocentric system, using standardized frameworks to judge (single) school quality to inspections that fit in a polycentric system, using a more qualitative, interpretative and flexible approach of validating good practices of localized and collaborative provision and improvement of education.

Table 1. Inspection and evaluation approaches in a monocentric and polycentric education system

	Monocentric	Polycentric
Methodology Changes: from monocentric to polycentric: - Who defines standards and criteria and methods for evaluation? - What is the object of evaluation?	Top down, ‘objectivist’ and standardized approach to evaluation. Focus on establishing causality, predicting and explaining quality, and an evaluation of single schools.	Bottom-up, ‘subjectivist’ approach to evaluate (schools in) networks, aimed at validating, interpreting, understanding quality of context-specific approaches and solutions.
Valuing: - Who decides evaluation criteria? - What is the object of evaluation?	Prescriptive assessment criteria to judge quality of individual schools, pass-fail judgment decided by Inspectorate	Inspectorate facilitates evaluation, goal-free, flexible and specific to context and information needs of (network of) schools and stakeholders
User involvement: - What is the role of stakeholders in inspections and use of inspection findings? - Which phase of the inspection are they involved - Who decides on consequences of inspection assessment?	‘Distanced evaluation approaches’ Stakeholders (and schools) are end users of inspection assessments and object of evaluation. Only primary ‘decision-makers’ are target of consequences (e.g. head teachers)	‘Collaborative/participatory evaluation’ Stakeholders and schools involved in all inspection phases Intelligent intervention strategies targeted at all schools/stakeholders in a network to improve performance of entire network

References:

- Alkin, M. C. (Ed.). (2013). *Evaluation roots: A wider perspective of theorists' views and influences*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Altrichter, H., Heinrich, M., & Soukup-Altrichter, K. (2014). School decentralization as a process of differentiation, hierarchization and selection. *Journal of Education Policy*, 29(5), 675-699.
- Ainscow, M. (2015) *Towards Self-Improving School Systems: Lessons from a city challenge*. London: Routledge.
- Au, W., & Ferrare, J. J. (Eds.). (2015). *Mapping corporate education reform: Power and policy networks in the neoliberal state*. Routledge.
- Black, J. (2008). *Constructing and Contesting Legitimacy and Accountability in Polycentric Regulatory Regimes*. LSE Law, Society and Economy Working Papers 2/2008 London School of Economics and Political Science. Law Department. Retrieved from www.lse.ac.uk/collections/law/wps/wps.htm and the Social Sciences Research Network electronic library at: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1091783.0>
- Brown, M., McNamara, G. and O'Hara, J. (2015). *School Inspection in a Polycentric Context: The Case of Northern Ireland*. Dublin: (EQI) Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection.
- Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE) (2005) Systematic research review: the impact of networks on pupils, practitioners, organisations and the communities they serve. Nottingham: National College
- Cerna, L. (2014), "Trust: What it is and Why it Matters for Governance and Education", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 108, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jxswcg0t6wl-en>
- Christie, C. A., & Alkin, M. C. (2013). An evaluation theory tree. *Evaluation roots: A wider perspective of theorists' views and influences*, 11-57.
- Department of Education Northern Ireland (2010). *Delivering the Entitlement Framework by 2013: Guidance for Schools on the Next Phase of Implementation*. Bangor: Department of Education Northern Ireland.
- Education Reform (Northern Ireland. Order) (1989). S.I. 1989, No. 2406 (NI20). Belfast: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- Edelenbos, J., & Klijn, E. H. (2006). Managing stakeholder involvement in decision making: A comparative analysis of six interactive processes in the Netherlands. *Journal of public administration research and theory*, 16(3), 417-446.
- Ehren, M.C.M., Altrichter, G., McNamara, G. and O'Hara, J. (2013). Impact of Schools Inspections on Improvement of Schools – Describing Assumptions on Casual Mechanisms in six European Countries'. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 25 (1), 3-43.

Ehren, M. C. M., & Hatch, T. (2013). Responses of schools to accountability systems using multiple measures: the case of New York City elementary schools. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 25(4), 341-373.

Ehren, M.C.M. and Perryman, J. (submitted). School inspections in a polycentric context; Ofsted and a self-improving school system. *Journal of Education Policy*.

Ehren, M.C.M. and Visscher, A. (2006). Towards a theory on the impact of school inspections. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 54, 51-72.

Eisner, E. (1998). *The enlightened eye: On the design and evaluation of educational programs (3rd Ed.)*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

French, J. R. P., Raven, B. (1960). The bases of social power. (p.607-623). In: D. Cartwright, A. F. Zander (Eds). *Group dynamics (2nd ed.)*: Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson.

Gray, A. (2014). Supporting school improvement: the role of inspectorates across Europe. *Brussels: SICI*. <http://www.sici-inspectorates.eu/getattachment/5caebee9-84c1-41f0-958c-b3d29dbaa9ef> (retrieved July 2014)

Gray, A., Jenkins, B. & Leeuw, F. (2003). Collaborative Government and Evaluation: The Implications of a New Policy Instrument (p. 1-29). In: A. Gray, B. Jenkins, F. Leeuw, J. Mayne (Eds). *Collaboration in Public Services: The Challenge for Evaluation*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Holtkamp, L. (2005), Neue formen kommunaler burgerbeteiligung, netwerkeuphorie und beteiligungsrealitat in: J. Oebbecke (2005), Nich normative steuerung in dezentralen systemen, Stuttgart: Frans Steiner verlag

Hooge, E., Burns, T. and Wilkoszewski, H. (2012), *Looking Beyond the Numbers: Stakeholders and Multiple School Accountability*, OECD Education Working Papers, No. 85, OECD Publishing

House, E. (1991). Evaluation and social justice: Where are we? In: M.W. McLaughlin & D.C. Phillips (Eds.), *Evaluation and Education: At quarter century (90th yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part II)* (p.233-247). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Janssens, F.J.G. and Dijkstra, A.B. (2013). Positionering van de evaluatiemethodologie van hetonderwijstoezicht: Uitgangspunten voor de inrichting van hettoezicht op de kwaliteiten endeugdelijkheid van hetonderwijs [Positioning of the evaluation methodology of school inspections]. Amsterdam/Enschede: Universiteit van Amsterdam/Universiteit Twente

Janssens, F.J.G. and Maassen, N. (2015). *School inspections in a polycentric context: The Dutch Inspectorate of Education*. <http://schoolinspections.eu/polycentric/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2015/05/Case-study-Dutch-Inspectorate-of-Education.pdf> (retrieved November 2015).

Jenkins, B., Leeuw, F. & Van Thiel, S. (2003). Quangos, Evaluation and Accountability in Collaborative Government. (p.53-83). In: A. Gray, B. Jenkins, F. Leeuw, J. Mayne (Eds). *Collaboration in Public Services: The Challenge for Evaluation*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Joseph, J. (2010). The limits of governmentality: Social theory and the international. *European Journal of International Relations*, 1-24.

Kania, J, and Kramer, M. (2011). Collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 36-41.

OECD. (2007). *Improving school leadership. Country background report for Northern Ireland* [Online]. Available from: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/29/59/38752145.pdf> [Accessed 15 September 2014].

Ostrom, Vincent, Charles M. Tiebout, and Robert Warren. 1961. "The Organization of Government in Metropolitan Areas: A Theoretical Inquiry." *American Political Science Review* 55(4) (December): 831–842.

Provan, K. G., & Kenis, P. (2008). Modes of network governance: Structure, management, and effectiveness. *Journal of public administration research and theory*, 18(2), 229-252.

Suchman, E. (1967). *Evaluative research: Principles and practice in public service and social action programs*. New York: Russell Sage.

Teisman, G. (1992). *Complexe besluitvorming [Complex decision-making]*. Den Haag: VUGA.

Theisens, H., Hooge, E., & Waslander, S. (2016). Steering Dynamics in Complex Education Systems. An Agenda for Empirical Research. *European Journal of Education*.

Whitby, K. (2010). School inspection: recent experiences in high performing education systems; literature review. Reading: CfBT Education Trust. Available from: <http://cdn.cfbt.com/~media/cfbtcorporate/files/research/2010/r-school-inspection-recent-experiences-in-hpes-english-2010.pdf> [Accessed 23 November 2014].

Wilkoszewski, H. and E. Sundby (2014), "Steering from the Centre: New Modes of Governance in Multi-level Education Systems", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 109, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jxswcfs4s5g-en>

Worth, J. (2015). *Academies: It's time to learn the lessons* (NFER Thinks: What the Evidence Tells Us). Slough: NFER.