

Governing by Inspection (1): The work of the European Inspectorates

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No. 64, November 2013

Increased global and European competition in education opens up possibilities for a re-alignment of the role of inspectorates towards more policy learning and teaching across national boundaries. It also offers challenges to national inspectorates, given the increased importance of performance data and league tables such as PISA. This Briefing reports on findings about the role and influence of the Standing International Conference on Inspection (SICI) and its relationship with three national inspectorates - in Scotland, Sweden and England - and considers what these findings tell us about convergence and divergence in policy for school inspection in Europe.

- ▶ The central role of education in economic growth – and, indeed, recovery – has made education a policy priority for the European Commission and for the member states of the European Union, as evidenced in Europe 2020's key targets.
- ▶ In response to pressure for increased performance, school inspection systems in the three countries are undergoing very considerable change, in quite different directions and with differing degrees of connection to European developments.
- ▶ At the same time, and in response to growth and change in inspection systems in an expanding Europe, SICI is becoming increasingly active as a forum for transnational agenda setting and policy learning.
- ▶ SICI serves as a hub for inspectors, inspection systems and evaluation methodologies in education across Europe; it positions itself as the key source of collective expertise and a policy actor in European debates. The Scottish Inspectorate both responds to and drives SICI's search for a role in Europe, and there is a synergy between their role as 'teachers' of the national system and their work in the European arena.
- ▶ The Swedish Inspectorate is now engaging more actively with SICI, but is preoccupied with its own changing inspection system. The English Inspectorate is focused on learning from 'world class' education systems and promotes its mode of inspection in a global, rather than a European, arena.

Introduction

The central role of education in economic growth – and, indeed, recovery – has made education a policy priority for the European Commission (EC) and for the European member states as evidenced in Europe 2020's key targets (EC 2013). At the same time, the growth of performance data on education, and their use in league tables, has increased pressure on national systems and stimulated a search for 'what works' and encouraged the growth of policy transfer and policy learning among systems (Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow 2012).

In this context, the research project 'Governing by Inspection' asks such questions as: what is the role of national inspectorates? Do they interpret, mediate or translate into action transnational performance-based knowledge? Do they attempt to form alliances and associations that mirror and /or challenge the EC's policy agendas? To what extent do national traditions of inspection survive or spread within the emergent European policy space? In exploring these questions, we seek to understand the processes of Europeanisation in Education and track the emergence of a European Education Policy Space. We follow the movement of transnational policies, to better understand the work of transnational organisations (eg OECD and the EC: see *Briefing No. 58*); technologies (eg performance data) and actors, including inspectors, which may both facilitate and mediate that movement.

The Project Methodology

Understanding inspection in these challenging times requires us to explore the ways in which inspection may be transnationally connected, in this case, through the Standing International Conference on Inspection (SICI) of the European Association of Inspectors. We do this through analysis of policy texts and interviews with key system actors at all 'levels': transnational, national, local and school. Our data include interviews with key 'system actors' at the international level (10 interviews) and as well as with actors at the national level in all three systems (30 interviews). In this *Briefing* we report on the results of the first project phase, focused on transnational influences on inspection, with

particular attention to the agenda setting and policy learning capacities of SICI.

Inspectors in Europe: the role of SICI

SICI serves as a hub for inspectors, inspection systems and evaluation methodologies in education across Europe. Increasing internationalisation and mobility across Europe led to SICI becoming a legally based association of inspectorates in 1995 with the following aims: sharing experience; updating on developments in education systems; improving working methods; and building cooperation. Cross-border events and projects have increased rapidly since the institution of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) – that is, the use of guidance, best practice and benchmarking to promote policy convergence across the European Union. SICI's formal collaboration with the EC and the OECD has also grown. In recent years, SICI's activity in central and eastern European countries has increased either as a result of OECD country reviews or in reconstructing systems in preparation for EU accession.

Closer collaboration between all SICI members, bilateral and multilateral agreements between national associations, and extensive training programmes which take place in the SICI Academy – a European-wide professional development school – weave SICI together as a European network of policy actors in education.

There is evidence of SICI members taking the opportunities presented by the expansion of the European Union and the concerns about underperformance apparently revealed by PISA to exert their professional power through cross-border collaborative projects and to construct a new technology of inspection, basing it on their success at a European level:

'I think PISA has been a big driver for that. The whole policy agenda in Europe in the last 20 years was the school effectiveness movement stress on accountabilities [and its] implications for what inspectorates do and one of the ways, I think, that the inspectorates have seen that they can help reflect on how their role might develop

is to engage with other inspectorates across Europe ... I think the combination of the policy imperatives, the impact of PISA, the necessity for inspectorates to change and inspectors becoming both more important and more vulnerable in the policy community ... have seen SICI as a way of doing it. SICI hasn't advertised itself, this happens by word of mouth.' (Senior Inspector and SICI Officer)

The need for a European-wide group of experts in evaluating and improving school systems explains both SICI's internal drive to improve services and expertise and the external pressures on the association.

Challenges to Inspectorates

The expansion of Europe and of data use offers threats or challenges to inspectorates. These threats are complex and interrelated. For example, in some contexts the growth of school autonomy and diversity of provision creates freedom from national controls but also enhances the need for performance measures and systems of regulation that guarantee minimum standards. In addition, many national inspectorates have a tradition of evaluating teaching and schools as institutions rather than focusing more narrowly on the policy priority of evaluating pupil learning, while the impact of technology (especially data) on inspection may challenge professional expertise based on observation.

Developments in the knowledge economy create demands to assess learning outside the classroom and the school curriculum, while policy-makers' preoccupation with the link between educational performance and economic competitiveness puts pressure on inspectorates to produce 'independent and reliable analysis' to support this policy direction. Finally the trend towards self-evaluation in some national inspectorates requires changes in inspection practices to place more responsibility on the school and hence limit the inspectorates' role (SICI 2004).

SICI's response to these threats has been (i) to provide international access to the expertise of

national inspectorates; (ii) to raise the quality of the education debate in Europe; (iii) to enhance the status of national inspectorates; and (iv) to strengthen the position and expertise of national inspectorates by international cooperation (SICI 2004). These objectives reflect an attempt to combine national development of the inspectorates with a strengthened international presence and influence through the positioning of SICI as the key source of collective expertise and a policy actor in European debates. SICI saw the opportunity to provide trustworthy knowledge to policy makers and become stronger policy players, without threatening the principle of national sovereignty in education policy making:

'... the EU doesn't have competence in school education – they can't push the boundaries very much in terms of where ... they should have a role. I think that they see that working with SICI from the Commission's point of view again blurs the boundaries of what they do. But from SICI's point of view the reality is that the EU has policy influence on member countries and it is one of the ways that SICI can be part of this policy interaction.' (SICI Officer)

In responding to shifting contexts of inspection and the rise of data in school evaluations, SICI inspectors are more closely defining their distinctive expertise. They claim 'unique access to the reality of the classroom' as a means of defending their expertise while facing the challenge of standardisation:

'We, the European inspectors, are the only people going into the classroom, going to see how qualitative lessons are given. All the others don't do it, they just have data.' (SICI Officer)

SICI is actively engaged in the European Education Policy Space (EEPS), at a time of considerable challenge to the expertise of inspectorates that may also offer opportunities for more active engagement with policy. We now turn to consideration of the national inspectorates in our study and their levels of engagement in the EEPS.

Scotland, Sweden and England: Inspectorates in Europe?

In Scotland, the changing political context—especially the election of the pro-European Scottish National Party (SNP) government has increased references to small, successful European states, and the European ‘project’ more generally. In the inspectorate, the Scandinavian nations, in particular, have become comparators in terms of education performance, and partners in collaborative engagement, building a community of practice of inspection:

‘I think they (Swedes) are, in some ways, closer to our way of thinking than Ofsted would be, say. The Skandics actually, we’re quite interested in. Norway has spent some time with us.... there’s a sense in which we feel we’re almost evolving towards similar territory from different starting points.’ (Senior Inspector, Scotland)

Sweden had limited engagement with SICI in its early years. However with the launch of a new national agency, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, in 2008 a formal relationship with SICI was established. There is evidence from our research that SICI is increasingly seen as a space where inspection ideas and practices are exchanged, nurtured and expanded, perhaps, as one leading officer in the Swedish inspectorate said, possibly leading to a ‘homogenisation of school inspection’.

Turning to England, our data suggest that Ofsted is perhaps better understood as a global ‘teacher’ of a particular inspection form rather than a European actor. The Ofsted approach is disseminated through its response to a constant series of requests for visits from across the world. Ofsted’s presentations to visitors focus on such issues as the independence of Ofsted from the Department for Education and the quality and refinement of the Ofsted data. There is little

evidence, in our analysis of documents or in our interviews, of engagement with SICI.

Conclusion

Our research on SICI shows European inspectorates learning from one another, and investing time and effort in ensuring good communications within their community, trends that are exhibited in policy movements globally (Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow 2012). Scotland is a very active player in SICI; Sweden more and more so, while the increasingly regulatory and data driven system in England attracts interest globally. By exchanging ideas, attending workshops, sharing technologies and approaches, Inspectorates in Europe are at the same time monitoring and constructing the European Education Policy Space.

References

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About this study

Governing by Inspection: school inspection and education governance in Scotland, England and Sweden was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC RES 062 23 2241A) and the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet). The authors acknowledge the support of their respective Research Councils. Further details about the project are available at <http://www.governingbyinspection.com/>

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