



Do School Inspections Improve School Quality?

Luciana Joana¹, Maria João Carvalho²

University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro, and Centre for Research and Intervention in Education (CIIE) of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto, Portugal^{1,2}

Abstract

Approaching the concept of democratic management in Portuguese public schools, this research focuses on the role of the School Inspection System in failing to exercise a purely inspective and bureaucratic function, starting to have a more democratic and participatory role, having in mind that any changes occur among tensions, conflicts, ambiguities, as well as the complexity inherent to the inspection activity. It focuses, in particular, the activity of Monitoring of Educational Action (MEA), which is presented as an instrument to improve the quality of service provided by schools. The aim was to know the representations of Primary School teachers and of school inspectors regarding the fundamentals and methodologies of the inspection in the development of the MEA activity. The methodological option, in its qualitative nature, fell on a case study, using a survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews as instruments for data collection. The total of 21 participants in the research is divided between teachers and school inspectors. Results show the participants' level of agreement and/or disagreement regarding the role of the inspection, more specifically regarding the importance and efficiency of the MEA. The tension between control and emancipation emerges in the participants' representations, evidencing a different degree of apprehension in relation to the added value of the MEA.

Keywords: School inspection; Monitoring of educational action; Quality of education

1. Introduction

Several education systems around the world have been impelled to develop improved processes that allow the raising of quality standards of education and the improvement of students' results. However, the debate about the best way to achieve this goal remains a subject of discussion and many countries have introduced into their educational systems inspection agencies as a way to stimulate the improvement of the quality of the service offered (Gaertner, Wurster, Pant, 2014) ^[1], noting an emerging tendency for the admission of this element in the various educational systems (Ozga, 2011) ^[2].

In Portugal, the school inspection activity is carried out by the General Inspection of Education and Science (GIES), whose objectives are to improve quality and equity in the provision of educational services, improve the management and regulation of the educational system, and the strengthening of national and international cooperation, the promotion and enhancement of human resources and, consequently, improve the quality of their action (IGE, 2011) ^[3].

In this context, it seemed to us relevant to know and analyse: (1) the representations that teachers and inspectors have about one of the most recent inspection activities - the MEA; (2) the relationship established between actors; and (3) the MEA impact on the school organization.

2. Monitoring of Educational Action Activity

The MEA, created in 2012, is presented "as an inducer of better practices and as a stimulator of the effective functioning of schools [...] [conducting] to a better learning and better students results" (IGE, 2011, p.39) ^[3]. This seems to justify a special need that schools show to be continued support. The MEA main purpose is to promote a strategic action to resolve schools' problems, reflecting on pedagogical practices and collaborative work among teachers, with the aim of achieving pedagogical and didactic solutions that contribute to a better learning. Methodologically, this activity is developed in a collaborative work environment, promoting regular follow-up moments between teachers and inspectors, developing strategies focused on the internal mechanisms of pedagogical coordination and teaching supervision work, always based on reflection, discussion, negotiation, exchanging ideas and experiences, in a fair balance of responsibilities.

MEA comes with an innovative proposal once the object of the intervention is not defined at the beginning, in opposition to the other inspection activities determined by a guide that regulate the



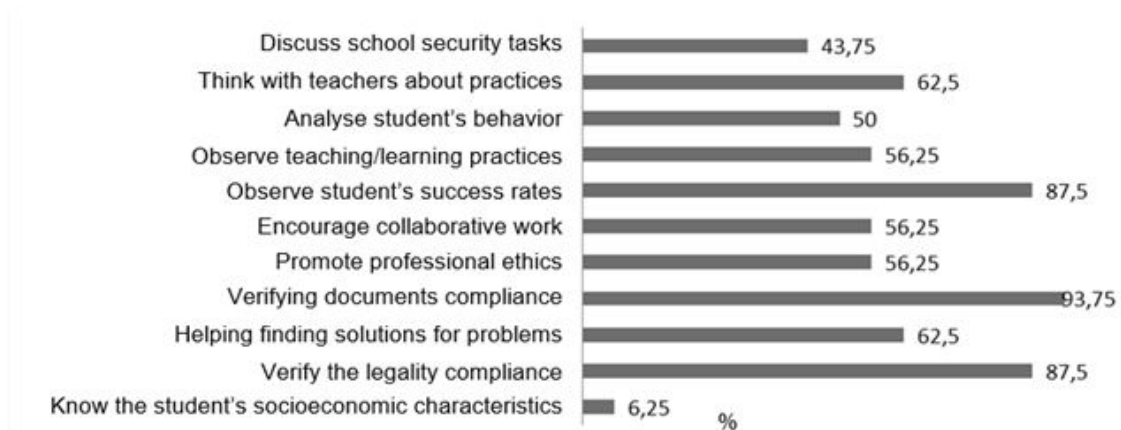
activity in a very closed way. It is a new positioning of the Portuguese school inspection where the methodology used allows the regulation through shared instruments that positively involve the schools and their actors.

3. Methodology, analysis and data interpretation

The methodological option, of a qualitative nature, fell on a case study, using the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview as instruments of data collection. The total of the 21 participants in the research is divided by primary school teachers (19) and school inspectors (4).

3.1. Inspection activity, the main concern

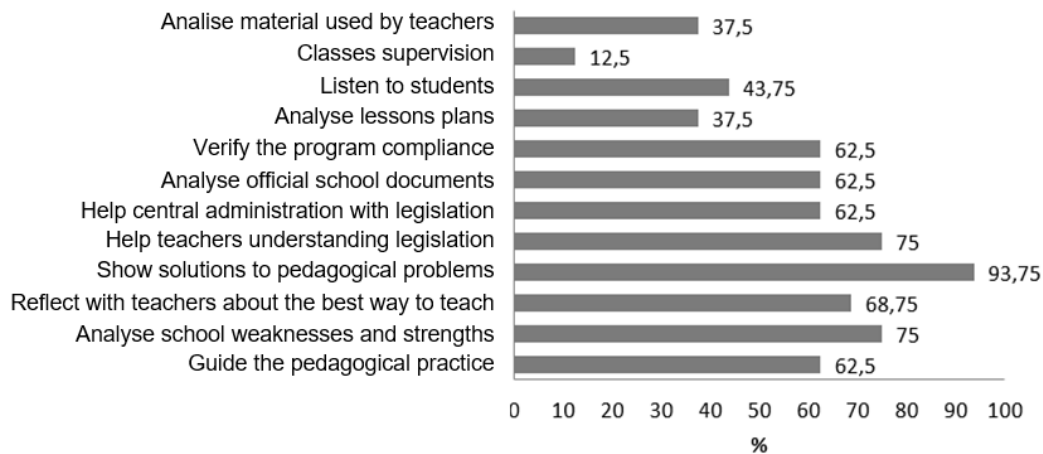
Trying to understand teacher's representation, and regarding MEA main objective, we asked them about what they consider to be the main concerns of the inspectors when they come to schools. Thus, 93.75% say that the main concern of the inspection activity is to verify the conformity of the institutional and official documents; 87.5% of teachers state that it is to analyze student success rates and confirm compliance with legal provisions.



Graph 1: Teachers' representations about the purpose of the inspection activities

We can also see that the majority of teachers consider that inspectors do not pay attention and/or do not care about the socio-cultural and economic characteristics of the students. For teachers, the action of the inspectors is based on observation, analysis and documentary correction, instead of pedagogical issues. Justifying the relevance of the bureaucratic nature attributed by teachers to the inspection activity, T3 (teacher 3) says: "Documentary verification and legal compliance will bring an education with higher quality since it is a more organized education and, the more organized the school is, better the results will be for students". However, T2 refers: "there is always something positive [in the inspector's actions] but much more important than the work of the inspection in terms of improving schools working better and the success of our students, are the educational policies, the quality, and intensity of government programs and the socio-economic situation of the families".

In this way, we ask teachers about what they think should be the main objectives and preoccupations of school inspectors.



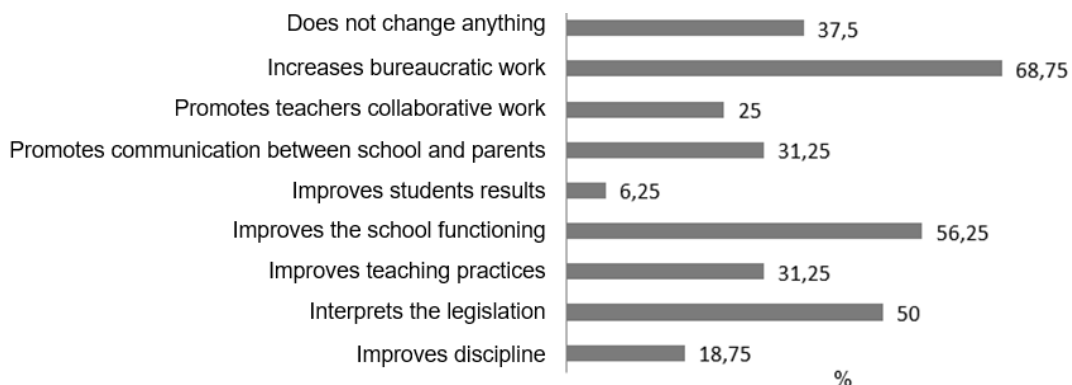
Graph 2: Teacher representations about the concerns that inspectors should have when visiting a school.

As we can see, teachers asking for more supporting activities that will help them find solutions for their day-to-day problems and improve their teaching practices. Yet they object to letting inspectors in on their classrooms, dismissing the need for a practical observation of teaching practices for effective supervision and supporting programs.

3.2. The impact of inspection action

Considering the inspection's interventions in schools, we find urgent to know the effects that come from them not only in teachers and in schools, but also (and especially) in the pedagogical process.

When we ask teachers about the impact of inspections visits, they are clear in their opinions: GIES activities do not make any difference in the improvement of student results, neither in school discipline. As much as 68.75% of teachers warned that the inspection action in schools would increase their bureaucratic obligations. T2 affirms that the changes brought with the inspections are very superficial, "on the ground they don't see practically nothing and almost nothing change". However, T3 admit some changes although they are very slow and, most of the time, forgotten over time. I2 (inspector 2) also states that the changes made in schools are rather slow, arguing that "schools change slowly. They will not change with only one's inspector's visit. Schools have a very heavy structure. They have their own culture, but I believe that something has changed in the course of this time".



Graph 3: Teachers' perception about the impact of the inspective action in schools

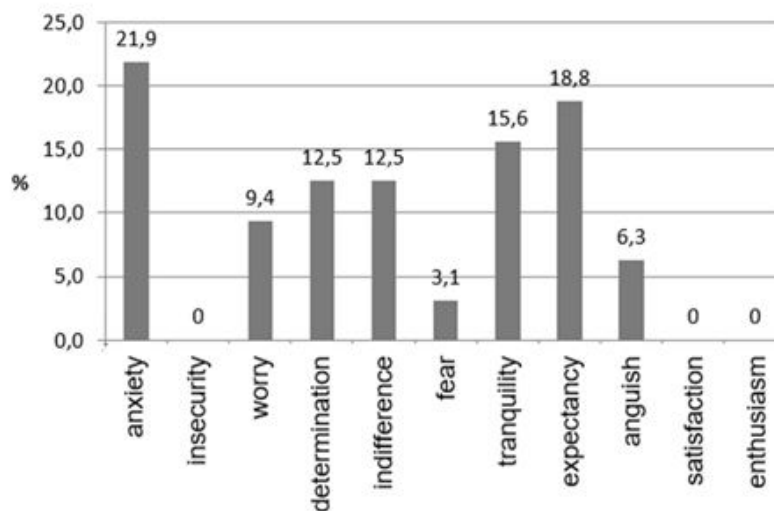
Although only 25% of teachers report that the inspection action enhances collaborative work among teachers, T2 says that observes an "increased concern from the inspections related with teachers collaborative work in order to have greater cooperation among all. (...) This is an evident concern, which is very positive".



There seems to be some kind of lack of comprehension and lack of exchange information, viewpoints, and conclusions between the teachers and inspectors or we are only faced with different expectations at the end of an inspection visit. On the one hand, inspectors recognize the slowness of the changing processes, despite they draw the attention for the fact that their work is always done in a very rigorous way, always fighting for achieving a standard of excellence, converging in the promotion of the student's educational success. On the other hand, there are teachers who do not realise in the same way that school inspection activities improve the pedagogical process.

3.3. The relationship between teachers and inspectors

Trying to understand the impact of the inspection action on the interaction and relationship between teachers and inspectors, we ask teachers about the feelings that they experience during an inspection visit. About this question, they say that contact with inspectors make them feel anxiety (21.9%) and expectation (18.8%). Contrarily, enthusiasm, insecurity, and satisfaction arise as uncommon feelings (Graph 4).



Graph 4: Feelings experienced by teachers during an inspection visit

Twenty years later from Lume's (1999)^[4] study, and more recently from Cabral's (2010)^[5] one, the results continue suggesting that despite the efforts of school inspections on reorienting their action to value the monitoring and support dimensions in detriment of control, auditing, and disciplinary procedure, the panorama is not understood. Teachers and inspectors still have a long way to go in order to co-operate in a collaborative and constructive way, as partners in the educational process.

4. Conclusion

The results show us that teachers' representations about inspection activity are closer to the control because they are strongly associated with the measuring method used to measure the policies implemented by the central administration. These representations result in an idea of punishment and criticism that ends up inhibiting behaviours and weakening relationships between the parts. In this context, teachers do not recognize the presence of a pedagogical concern on the part of the inspectors. They do not recognize a systematic attendance and support from inspectors that allows the reflection about the daily problems, allowing the uncovering of effective solutions based on an emancipatory way. However, we need to point out that this assumption does not find acceptance when we talk about opening classrooms to inspector's supervision, which can be a paradox between action and intention.

In turn, the inspectors refer themselves to an intervention based on a very rigorous way, with limits of action well defined in the work guidelines made by central administration in order to guarantee the cohesion and harmonization of the work done in schools. This uniformity in the way of acting will preclude the consideration of the characteristics of the context of each school.

This seems to legitimize the characterization of school inspection performance made by the teachers: so harsh and distant, generating feelings of apprehension, anguish, and concern. This

teacher's description is very different from the ones made by the inspectors interviewed once they assume commitment attitudes, oriented towards reflection and collaboration, and a close relationship with teachers.

Clarify the results achieved by educational inspection in terms of impact and in terms of the effects produced it's a hard challenge. What we can ensure is that the school inspection system is a crucial element in the implementation of educational policies and in the measurement of educational outcomes. Inspectors are central elements in the implementation of governmental political projects. They constitute a regulatory body that acts as knowledgeable of the educational policies reality, in a position of subordination to the respective Ministry (of Education) that impels them to act rigidly, distances them from communicative and empowering rationality.

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