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Reframing School Inspection: Assistant Education Inspectors Between Control and Development

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ABSTRACT

School inspection sits between accountability and school improvement, yet little is known about how early-career inspectors in centralized systems negotiate these competing orientations. This qualitative study examined assistant education inspectors in Türkiye using metaphor-eliciting surveys and follow-up semi-structured interviews. Retrospective accounts contrasted earlier images of punishment, fear, and bureaucratic control with current understandings centered on guidance, diagnosis, feedback, and professional support. Reframing was shaped by field experience, interactions with school staff and senior inspectors, and awareness of the constraints of inspection. Developmental meanings did not replace evaluative ones, revealing continued tension between developmental aspirations and structurally embedded evaluative demands.

Introduction

The rise of New Public Management in the early 1990s, the introduction of major education legislation in the UK and the USA (i.e., the Education Reform Act and No Child Left Behind Act), and the launch of the first PISA assessment in 2000 signaled a growing emphasis on outcomes within education. These developments redefined the role of schools, shifting education policy and practice away from an input-based approach toward an output-oriented model. This new model was characterized by intensified school monitoring, binding quality benchmarks, and the widespread use of national testing (Hofer et al., 2020). As a result, demands for accountability regarding pupils' academic achievement have increased (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013), with school inspection becoming a key mechanism of external quality assurance. Accordingly, many countries, particularly in Europe, have established formalized inspection systems in recent decades (Hofer et al., 2020).

School inspection has traditionally been viewed as a control mechanism intended to ensure compliance with prescribed policy frameworks (Ehren et al., 2017; Hargreaves, 1995). Those subject to inspection often perceive it as a fault-finding exercise conducted by external officials, with inspectors seen more as compliance enforcers than contributors to instructional improvement (Adeoye, 2022; Brimblecombe et al., 1995). However, inspection may also support school improvement (Hofer et al., 2020). Growing accountability pressures and expectations for better student outcomes have therefore encouraged more collaborative and development-oriented models of inspection and supervision (Ehren, 2016; Vanhoof et al., 2025). Within these emerging models, inspectors are increasingly viewed as partners in school improvement who combine evaluation with developmental guidance (Gardezi et al., 2023; Sullivan & Glanz, 2013). This tension between control and development is therefore central to understanding the purpose of inspection and the roles inspectors are expected to perform.

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supervisory frameworks to align with inspectors' professional development needs and the overarching goal of instructional improvement. The observed shift in assistant inspectors' understandings from punitive to guidance-oriented highlights the potential importance of experiential learning in fostering a developmental supervisory mind-set. In light of this, we recommend that in-service training sessions go beyond regulatory content to incorporate practice-based modules, critical reflection exercises, and structured mentoring by senior inspectors (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2020). These components can support the early formation of professional identity and help establish developmental supervision as a shared professional norm. At the same time, the widespread dissatisfaction among participants regarding compensation, recognition, and ambiguous role expectations, despite their increased responsibilities, suggests a need to reconsider current structural arrangements. A review of professional rights, career progression pathways, and workload distribution may also help mitigate disillusionment and prevent a loss of motivation. Finally, aligning inspection protocols with the developmental role increasingly emphasized in inspection requires shifting emphasis away from procedural checklists toward practices that prioritize diagnostic insight, school development planning, and formative feedback. This might involve reducing the reliance on checklist-based evaluations, incorporating structured opportunities for professional dialogue and feedback during school visits, and requiring inspection reports to identify developmental priorities and follow-up actions alongside compliance findings. Such revisions would support the realization of supervision not just as compliance but as a tool for capacity building and sustainable school improvement.

For practitioners, particularly inspectors and school principals, the study reinforces the importance of reframing inspection as a collaborative process rather than a control mechanism. Assistant inspectors, many of whom have recently transitioned from school-based roles, are well-positioned to bridge macro-level expectations with micro-level realities. They should be empowered to initiate dialogue-based inspections, offer context-sensitive feedback, and build trusting relationships with school personnel (Arar, 2019). In addition, senior inspectors play a formative role in shaping the professional identity of their junior counterparts and should be formally recognized and supported as mentors. Peer learning communities, collaborative school visits, and reflective supervision sessions could also serve as practical strategies for embedding a developmental culture across the inspectorate.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the participants were limited to assistant inspectors who were recruited in 2022 within the Turkish education system. As such, the findings reflect the views of a specific cohort navigating their early professional socialization in a centralized context. Additionally, because participation is voluntary, self-selection and nonresponse bias cannot be ruled out. Participants' post-appointment accounts may have been influenced by social desirability bias, given the first author's employment at MoNE at the time of the study. The predominantly male sample, particularly the inclusion of only one woman in the interview phase, may further limit the transferability of the findings across gender groups. Moreover, participants had been in the role for approximately nine months at the time of data collection, which limits what can be inferred about longer-term changes in professional identity and role understanding. Future studies may therefore benefit from including inspectors at different career stages or from diverse policy contexts to examine variations across experience and institutional culture.

Second, although metaphor elicitation surveys and semi-structured interviews enabled exploration of participants' cognitive and emotional understandings of their roles, personal communication may have limited rapport-building and access to non-verbal cues. While personal communication are effective and cost-efficient for geographically dispersed participants (Holt, 2010), future research should consider face-to-face or video-based interviews to enable richer interactions.

Third, this study relies on participants' retrospective accounts of their understandings prior to and following their appointment as assistant inspectors. As participants were required to recall and compare experiences from different points in time, their narratives may be subject to recall bias. Longitudinal research following newly appointed inspectors over a longer period would help address both this recall limitation and the short duration of professional experience captured in this study.

Finally, while qualitative methods were appropriate for exploring shifts in meaning-making, they limit generalizability. Future research could develop and validate quantitative instruments to examine the