

NOTAS SOBRE LA INSPECCIÓN DE EDUCACIÓN EN IRLANDA.

NOTES ON EDUCATION INSPECTION IN IRELAND.

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Resumen

Traemos a este artículo algunas pinceladas sobre la inspección en Irlanda. Los buenos resultados PISA en 2022 junto al alto porcentaje de estudiantes que prosiguen estudios superiores, nos parecieron elementos relevantes para conocer el funcionamiento de la inspección en Irlanda. Se ha abordado desde una revisión bibliográfica, así como con el contacto con miembros de la inspección irlandesa que amablemente han participado

facilitándonos información y un espacio donde compartir experiencias en un encuentro online. Se podría destacar como elementos relevantes la labor investigadora basada en evidencias que se realiza desde la inspección, así como la publicación, desde 2005 de informes, lo que ha permitido tener mayor impacto y contribuir a la transparencia. Para este trabajo se ha utilizado el método Delphi como herramienta de investigación.

Palabras clave: método Delphi, inspección educativa, transparencia, sistema educativo, informes públicos, colaboración internacional.

Abstract

We bring to this article some insights on inspection in Ireland. The good PISA results in 2022 together with the high percentage of students pursuing higher education, seemed to us relevant elements to know the functioning of inspection in Ireland. It has been approached from a bibliographic review, as well as with the contact with members of the Irish inspectorate who kindly participated by providing us with information and a space to share experiences in an online meeting. We could highlight as relevant elements the evidence-based research work carried out by the inspectorate, as well as the publication of reports since 2005, which has allowed us to have a greater impact and contribute to transparency. The Delphi method was used as a research tool for this work.

Keywords: Delphi method, educational inspection, transparency, education system, public reports, international collaboration.

Introduction

In view of Ireland's good results in the PISA 2022 tests, together with the importance of sharing experiences in the European context, in order to know in detail the ways of working of the inspectorate in other countries, the idea arose of approaching the Irish inspectorate and establishing a first contact that would allow us to learn first-hand about its operation and impact on schools and the system in general. On 28 May we had the opportunity to share a working session with Irish inspectors, who gave us an insight into their functions within the Irish education system. We thought it would be interesting to bring here a brief analysis that would allow us to reflect on other models of inspection in Europe, in this case, the Irish model. Although Europe is currently struggling with uncertainties, the progress made so far in the harmonisation of different policies has allowed for closer ties with other countries, such as, for example, what has been achieved with the European Higher Education Area. In addition, it is very interesting to approach other European education systems through their inspection, to analyse their strengths and current challenges. Through the exchange of information and experiences we can contribute to the improvement of our system.

Analysis of the scientific literature on educational inspection in Ireland

Brown (2018) recognises the educational inspection in Ireland as one of the oldest inspectorates in Europe with school inspectors in Ireland historically being held in high esteem, being recognised by the Irish term "cigire" with connotations of admiration and respect and therefore historically entry to the educational inspection in Ireland has been, and remains today, quite demanding. Entry to the educational inspection in Ireland requires a first or second class honours degree, some experience in teaching, school leadership, school support services, curriculum design

and/or educational research and evaluation practice (Government of Ireland, 2022). In addition, knowledge of Gaelic is also a requirement, according to the documentation reviewed and from the meeting with colleagues in the Irish inspectorate.

Hislop (2022) on the long-term professional development of inspectors, states that the inspectorate funds inspectors' postgraduate studies and research related to the work of the inspectorate (Hislop, 2022, p. 75). Moreover, inspectors' attendance and participation in international conferences is encouraged (Coolahan and Donovan, 2009). The Department for Education Inspection (DEI) (2022a, b), with the help of guidelines for school inspection and the quality framework, 'Looking at Our School' (Department for Education Inspection, 2022c, d), provides guidelines on the work of inspectors, whose functions are also set out in the Education Act 1998. School evaluation procedures in Ireland are subject to national audits, according to Perry (2013).

The historical context of Irish education can be classified into three eras (Coolahan et al., 2017). Post-independence (1920s), economic modernisation (1960s) and alignment with neoliberalism (1990s). The policies enacted in each period reflected the spirit of the times. The various stakeholders and educational partners in this small island state have focused constructively on establishing the current structure. In 2004, a new form of inspection was introduced in post-primary schools in Ireland, which was a radical departure from the previous superficial intervention model, responding to the approach of implementing policies in the new governance while at the same time addressing in parallel policies to tackle social disadvantage in education.

In the 2017 comparative study "Towards a Better Future: A Review of the Irish School System" the authors paint a very commendable picture of the education system in Ireland and how education policy and provision in

Ireland has evolved, and how achievements are being made. Some of the issues addressed in this study are: teaching and learning; curriculum; assessment; transition from second level to higher education; educational leadership and governance; the school system: equality, inclusion and rights; the changing role of inspection; initial teacher training and guidance; professional development; the funding and resourcing of education at primary and post-primary levels, addressing the question "What can we learn from the OECD Education at a Glance report?" as a starting point for education policy improvements.

Regarding supervision, it is noted that "with teacher 'control' embedded in Irish classrooms, and the teacher positioned as 'king/queen of the classroom' (Coolahan et al., 2017), it will undoubtedly be difficult for teachers to become accustomed to being monitored, especially internally. Moreover, the warm and caring manner of Irish teachers is likely to be problematic in the individualistic climate of corporate education, where students' progress is reduced to data at the expense of their social and personal development and, ultimately, student-teacher relationships."

The results of the analysis of five hundred non-compliant regulations drawn from over fifteen hundred inspections of Early Years Services that took place in Ireland between January and December 2017 are set out in the report published as an article in 2020 entitled 'Making a Difference: The Impact of Statutory Inspection on the Quality of Early Years Services', the purpose of which was to consider the impact of the inspection process on the quality of services in the early years education stages. It is noted that the educational inspection successfully identifies non-compliance in the areas of children's health, welfare and development, as well as safety and the governance of the service and facilities. Following the detection of these non-compliances, it provides opportunities for early childhood providers to rectify deficiencies or non-compliances and works collaboratively to bring

about improvements in services. 83% of institutions make demonstrable improvements to their services once this process is completed and a further 10% of services report improvements to be reviewed at the next inspection. This high impact of the monitoring process on school improvement is welcomed by the education community in Ireland and by the Inspectorate. However, it is clear from the findings of this article that evaluation processes can continue to evolve in terms of transparency, collaboration and collaboration if the goal is shared and leads to improvement.

Descriptive Analysis of the educational inspection in Ireland

The latest report "Towards High-Quality Learning Experiences for All: Provision for children and young people with special educational needs in primary and post-primary schools" of September 2024, produced by the Inspectorate of the Irish Department of Education, states that the Inspectorate is a key component of quality assurance in the provision of education in Ireland. Its focus is on promoting improvement in the learning and well-being of children and young people and on promoting equity and inclusion objectives. The Inspectorate shares the results of inspections with the education system to support the overall strategy of education, inclusion and equity goals to which educators and policy makers in Ireland aspire. This report concludes in turn, in relation to the performance of the inspectorate function in Ireland that: "the Inspectorate's aim is to assist the Irish education system to provide high quality learning experiences for all children and young people, including students with special educational needs", and that the Inspectorate currently values highly the views and commitment to improving inclusive school provision and educational practices for all children and young people in mainstream primary and post-primary schools, highlighting one of the Inspectorate's key concerns in this country.

The Irish population currently stands at 5.1 million, with almost 40.5% of the population concentrated in the capital, and with 13.8% of the population of immigrant origin. In quantitative terms in the education system, this translates into 1.2 million students and nearly 77,000 teachers. Interestingly, 85% of students go on to higher education, which is certainly an indicator of success.

Organisationally, there are the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the Department of Education and the Department of Higher Education, Research and Science. The Chief Inspector is located within the Department of Education. The inspectorate contributes to the shaping of strategic policies.

The reference document for the organisation is the Education Act 1998, legislation governing the organisation and administration of education at various levels. It outlines the responsibilities of the inspectorate, establishing the duty to inspect and report on the quality of educational provision in schools, educational establishments and other educational settings in accordance with procedures approved by the minister, including procedures for the publication of inspectorate reports, which they felt was a differentiating element in their work and its impact.

The objectives can be summarised as follows:

1. To promote high quality education and enhance the learning experience by addressing the needs of learners.
2. Ensure equal opportunities in education and support learners in a way that enables learners to reach their full potential.
3. Provide strategic leadership and support to provide systems and infrastructure for the sector.
4. Organisational excellence and innovation.

There is a vision of an education system where every child and adolescent feels valued and is actively supported and nurtured to reach their full potential. Furthermore, it is a goal to ensure that children and adolescents have access to a positive learning experience, enabling them, through learning, to achieve their full potential and, in this way, contribute to the social, economic and cultural development of the country. The following elements are considered in policy development and implementation:

- Stakeholders involved from the beginning and during the process.
- Giving parents and pupils a voice.
- Based on evidence and research.
- Implementation guides with advice and support.
- Measuring quality and impact.

The allocation of inspectors is done in regional units and/or political units, something that may have parallels with the organisation in our autonomous communities.

As in Spain, there is a Strategic Plan for inspection, similar to the General Plans, which now ends with a horizon of 2021-2024. It is based on the premise of excellence in learning for all, with the goal of improving the quality of education for children and adolescents. Along these lines are three objectives: to establish standards and promote excellence, to promote innovation through collaboration and to work so that students become citizens who learn how to adapt to a changing environment.

Underpinned by the Education Act 1998, the inspectorate provides evidence-based information, policy and practice together with capacity building of the system. Thus, the goals of inspectorate would focus on improvement through quality frameworks, advice and support, and publications, on the one hand. Secondly, accountability through transparency, reporting and quality assurance. Finally, in capacity building by promoting internal evaluation, development and continuous

improvement, and responsibility and accountability. In addition, there is a 2022 code of conduct, based on four principles: learner at the centre, development and improvement, respectful engagement, and responsibility and accountability.

Regarding the selection of schools for inspection, the National Inspection Plan identifies the actions previously carried out in schools and relevant information. In addition, local knowledge is shared on a regional basis for decision-making.

To ensure the quality of the system, both internal and external evaluations are established. A relevant element is the self-evaluation of schools, which has two programmes: SSE, School Self-Evaluation and LAOS, Looking At Our School. The inspectorate carries out advisory visits, so that they are supported in the process and new areas for intervention are identified. In this way, skills are developed and the process of self-evaluation is assimilated through the support offered by the inspectorate's advice. Visits are facilitative rather than evaluative, and internal and external evaluations are complementary. There is a wide range of models of advisory visits, including incidental, curriculum evaluation, follow-up, stage-focused and wider-ranging visits. Activities include classroom observation, bullying interventions, surveys, work with parents and pupils, meetings with members of the education community and feedback.

A key element is access to inspection reports on different aspects of education, which provide quality and relevance to the inspection work. Prior to the publication of the reports, these are known by the schools, from whom feedback is received. The decision to publish reports was the result of deep reflection and has been taken since 2005. It was a decision of the Ministry, and involved the involvement of stakeholders for six months, involving a high level of consultation with members of the education community. Logically, no personal data or statistics are included. Thanks to

these publications, there is a greater awareness of the work of the inspectorate and it is seen as a benefit.

Methodology of the Delphi method in the context of the educational inspection

An adaptation of the Delphi method was used for this article, the aim of which was to carry out a comparative analysis of educational inspection in Ireland and Spain. This technique, based on a communication structure that aims to produce detailed critical analysis and debate, is very useful in educational settings for the formulation of guidelines, standards and prediction of trends. The fact that it is a consultative technique that uses the opinion of a group of experts to reach a consensus on a specific topic has made it easier for us to interpret and understand the documentation analysed, the consultation literature in relation to the topic emphasising personal commitment and the expert discussion technique to not only gather information but to generate new information that results in proposals for improvement to be considered by both systems.

The Delphi method is a structured technique for information gathering and consensus building among a group of experts. It is primarily used for decision-making in complex or uncertain situations, such as predicting future trends, strategic planning or policy evaluation. It was originally developed in the 1950s by the RAND Corporation for military forecasting and has expanded to multiple fields such as health, technology, education and business management.

The Delphi process is based on an iterative and anonymous approach, with several rounds allowing experts to adjust their answers based on group feedback. The process is detailed below:

1. Selection of experts:

Participants with relevant experience and knowledge in the area of study are chosen. Diversity within the group can enrich perspectives.

2. Questionnaire design:

The moderator, usually an impartial facilitator, designs an initial questionnaire to address the problem or central question. Questions can be open-ended or closed-ended, depending on the purpose.

3. First round:

Experts answer the questionnaire individually and anonymously. Their responses are analysed and consolidated to identify patterns, points of consensus or divergence.

4. Feedback and second round:

The aggregated results are returned to the experts, along with a summary of the main opinions. This allows participants to review and, if they wish, modify their responses based on the group's perspectives.

5. Successive rounds:

This process is repeated until an acceptable level of consensus or stability of responses is reached. Generally, between 2 and 4 rounds are conducted.

6. Final analysis:

Consolidated data from the final rounds are analysed to draw conclusions. This may include descriptive statistics, trend graphs and a summary of areas of agreement and disagreement.

In the case in point, the application of the Delphi method to the study of inspection in Ireland developed as follows:

Initial Phase

As a first step, a literature review was carried out on the subject to be analysed in this article in order to obtain a scientific overview of the educational inspection in Ireland, reviewing the existing scientific literature on the subject, as well as the most relevant reports in relation to the subject of the article.

Once the objective of our study had been identified, we contacted a group of experts in the field, belonging to the educational inspection and related to both countries, and a working group was set up to coordinate this educational research work. This coordination group is made up of the authors of this article, on behalf of the educational inspection in Spain, and Gary Ó Donnchadha, Deputy Chief Inspector, Jason Kelly, Assistant Chief Inspector, Karina Holton, Divisional Inspector and Fiona Rushe, on behalf of the educational inspection in Ireland. The experts assume responsibility for making judgements and opinions on the research topic based on the existing evidence in each education system in relation to the question posed.

Second Phase

In the second phase of the study, the issues that will serve as the basis for the questionnaires to be worked on with the team of experts are raised. In this case, the most relevant aspects for the study of educational inspection in Ireland were analysed in terms of professional, motivational, social and contextual dimensions in comparison with Spain:

- . Functions and Powers of the educational inspection
- . System of Access and Promotion within the Corps
- . Monitoring Model

. Inspection Visits

. Perception of the educational inspection on the impact of its actions on the improvement of the education system.

. Proposals for improvement in relation to the performance of the inspection function.

The answers to the questionnaire were made available to the expert participants prior to the sharing, so that a presentation of the main aspects to be discussed was created by the educational inspection in Ireland, and the interventions were distributed as they were made by the representatives of the educational inspection who were the authors of this study.

Third Phase

In this third phase, once the responses to the initial questionnaires had been generated, the online meeting model was chosen to share the responses to the questionnaires and to carry out not only a comparison of the responses by country but also a subsequent discussion by the experts, raising proposals for improvement that generate debate in relation to issues such as the workload of educational inspection, the level of autonomy or decentralisation in the performance of the inspection function, teamwork and the impact of the actions of educational inspection on the improvement of educational results and quality.

One of the most striking issues that emerged from this sharing is the fact that the educational inspection in Ireland produces reports on the supervision of schools in the country and that a few years ago it was decided in educational policies to release these reports and make them public for all citizens, affecting to a certain extent the perception that the educational community and the pedagogical management of the schools have of the inspectors and improving transparency.

Final Phase

In this final phase, the conclusions of the experts' intervention and the answers to the questionnaires are collected, analysed and presented in the form of a research article.

Conclusions

From all the information obtained, some reflections can be made on those elements that we consider to be noteworthy. The research aspect of the inspection, based on evidence, is a differentiating element that can contribute to quality. The fact that within the organisation of the inspectorate there are professionals dedicated to this task in the Irish inspectorate, whether full-time or combined with the normal tasks of the inspectorate, is considered to contribute to clearly establishing the strategic objectives of the different actions, as well as contributing to the definition of educational policies in general. We also find that a common element in our system is to address social disadvantages, in line with the premise of equity in our system, something which is present in all the countries around us, as well as to focus on the pupil and his or her integral development. Collaborative work with schools seems to be an element that contributes to quality, especially in the self-evaluation process. This work of accompanying and advising schools is relevant and necessary and has a high impact. Precisely in terms of this process, the publication of reports on both individual schools and the system as a whole has been a turning point, which the Irish inspectorate considers to be very positive. Likewise, sharing spaces for sharing our work with colleagues from other countries can help us to exchange good practices and to reflect on the challenges we face in the inspectorate.

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