

## **LA INSPECCIÓN EDUCATIVA EN LOS PAÍSES ESCANDINAVOS: SUECIA, NORUEGA Y DINAMARCA E ISLANDIA. ESTUDIO COMPARADO CON ESPAÑA.**

## **THE EDUCATION INSPECTION IN SCANDINAVIAN COUNTRIES: SWEDEN, NORWAY AND DENMARK AND ICELAND. COMPARATIVE STUDY WITH SPAIN.**

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### **Resumen**

Este artículo presenta un estudio comparado de los sistemas de inspección educativa y garantía de calidad en Suecia, Noruega, Dinamarca e Islandia —excluyendo deliberadamente Finlandia— en diálogo con el modelo español. A partir de un diseño metodológico mixto que combina revisión documental especializada, análisis normativo comparado y aportaciones cualitativas de informantes clave, se examinan las arquitecturas de gobernanza educativa, los mecanismos de supervisión, el papel del liderazgo escolar y el equilibrio entre rendición de cuentas y confianza profesional. Los resultados muestran una notable diversidad de enfoques dentro del espacio nórdico: desde el modelo centralizado y sancionador de Suecia hasta sistemas descentralizados y colaborativos de garantía de calidad en Dinamarca e Islandia, pasando por el modelo híbrido noruego, orientado a la protección de derechos y al acompañamiento para la mejora. El análisis pone de relieve que los sistemas de alta confianza no eliminan la rendición de cuentas, sino que la reconfiguran mediante dispositivos de evaluación formativa, autoevaluación institucional y liderazgo distribuido. La comparación con España permite identificar aprendizajes relevantes para el fortalecimiento del liderazgo pedagógico, la mejora de la capacidad interna de los centros y la evolución del papel de la inspección educativa hacia modelos más estratégicos, dialógicos y orientados al bienestar del alumnado.

**Palabras clave:** inspección educativa; garantía de calidad; gobernanza educativa; liderazgo escolar; rendición de cuentas; confianza profesional; sistemas nórdicos; estudio comparado.

### **Abstract**

This article presents a comparative study of education inspection and quality assurance systems in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland,

deliberately excluding Finland, and contrasts them with the Spanish model. Using a mixed-methods research design that combines specialised documentary review, comparative legal analysis and qualitative data from key informants, the study examines educational governance architectures, supervision mechanisms, school leadership models and the balance between accountability and professional trust. The findings reveal significant variation across Nordic countries, ranging from Sweden's centralised and sanction-oriented inspection system to decentralised and collaborative quality assurance models in Denmark and Iceland, with Norway representing a hybrid approach focused on students' rights and developmental guidance. The analysis highlights that high-trust systems do not eliminate accountability, but rather reconfigure it through formative evaluation, institutional self-evaluation and distributed leadership. The comparison with Spain identifies key lessons for strengthening pedagogical leadership, enhancing schools' internal capacity for improvement and redefining the role of education inspection towards more strategic, dialogic and student-centred approaches.

**Keywords:** education inspection; quality assurance; educational governance; school leadership; accountability; professional trust; Nordic education systems; comparative study.

## I. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Introduction

In general, education systems in Northern Europe tend to delegate supervision to local authorities and schools themselves, although differences between countries can be significant. The Nordic education model is recognised worldwide for its emphasis on equity, decentralisation and trust in professionals. In this context, the role of **inspection** or **quality assurance** has been adapted to national structures, resulting in systems that vary significantly between countries. In contrast to more centralised models, the Nordic approach tends to balance external supervision with internal evaluation of the institutions themselves, promoting continuous improvement rather than mere bureaucratic compliance.

Leaving aside the case of Finland, which has been studied more frequently and in greater depth, the approach to school supervision mechanisms in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Iceland has been residual in the scientific literature in our country. This paper aims in part to provide a clear and close overview of the basic aspects of this issue, complemented by an interview that provides first-hand data on the content and scope of inspection work in the Nordic countries.

In the international literature, comparative studies on educational inspection highlight that Nordic systems are built around three pillars: (1) institutional trust, (2) teacher professionalisation and (3) shared responsibility (Sahlberg, 2021; OECD, 2020). These elements contrast with the Spanish model, in which the inspectorate has historically assumed a mixed role - administrative, technical and guarantor of rights - deeply linked to the state

and autonomous community structure. By placing both models in dialogue, this article explores to what extent the Nordic systems can offer keys for rethinking school leadership and the role of the inspectorate in Spain.

## **1.2. The legal framework of educational supervision in the Nordic countries**

The scope of our work covers, with the exception of Finland, the context of the so-called Nordic countries. This term encompasses several northern European states: those that make up the Scandinavian peninsula (Norway, Sweden, Finland), plus Denmark and Iceland. The common denominator is the cultural, historical and economic affinity between these territories, which is manifested in the field of education by a broad educational autonomy and decentralisation at local level, among other things.

From a comparative perspective, educational inspection is conceived as a public policy instrument aimed at ensuring equity, system coherence and the protection of the right to education (Nevo & Scheerens, 2020). The Nordic countries share the premise that supervision should promote the internal capacity for school improvement, avoiding unnecessary bureaucratic burdens and strengthening professional accountability. This idea contrasts with more centralised systems - such as Spain's - where the inspectorate retains powers of supervision, evaluation, advice and regulatory control.

In this study we have decided to leave aside the case of Finland, because it is widely known and discussed, and because it has traditionally avoided formal external inspection. Furthermore, references to Iceland will

be limited to an outline of the general situation in the field of supervision, given the difficulty of finding rigorous technical information on the subject.

In this section, therefore, we will deal sequentially with educational supervision in Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Iceland, highlighting its key features and the aspects that differentiate them.

The relationship between inspection and school leadership is a critical issue in contemporary literature. Recent research indicates that the Nordic countries have consolidated a model of 'instructional' and 'distributed' leadership, in which the headteacher assumes significant responsibilities for quality, professional development and organisational culture (Moos, Paulsen & Johansson, 2020). In these contexts, the inspectorate is not perceived as an external audit body, but as one element in an architecture of support and continuous improvement. This approach contrasts with the Spanish case where the complex balance between pedagogical leadership and administrative compliance persists.

## **II. Research methodology**

This study is based on a mixed methodological design, articulated in three complementary phases - documentary review, comparative analysis and qualitative data collection from key informants - in order to ensure a robust, systematic and contrasted analysis of the educational inspection model, school leadership and governance mechanisms in Spain and in Scandinavian and Nordic countries. The methodological approach is based on principles of internal validity, procedural reliability and multi-source triangulation, following consolidated standards in comparative educational policy research.

### **1.Documentary review and specialised policy analysis**

The first phase consisted of a comprehensive desk review structured according to the PRISMA criteria adapted to education policy studies. It included:

- national and sub-national policy bodies on educational inspection and school leadership;
- technical reports from evaluation agencies (Skolinspektionen, Utdanningsdirektoratet, FINEEC, EVA);
- high quality academic literature published between 2018 and 2024 in specialised databases (Scopus, ERIC, Web of Science);
- comparative documents from international organisations (OECD, Eurydice, European Commission).

The documents were selected using an inclusion protocol based on thematic relevance, timeliness, institutional reliability and conceptual contribution. The review allowed for the construction of a robust analytical framework around four key dimensions:

- (a) educational governance,
- (b) oversight mechanisms,
- (c) school leadership models, and
- (d) accountability systems and institutional trust.

## 2. Comparative design: methodological approach and analytical criteria

We adopted an educational governance comparative analysis approach using a systemic-structural design that allowed us to compare heterogeneous institutional architectures. The analysis was oriented according to the criteria of Bray and Thomas (1995) and was operationalised by means of:

- Multilevel comparative matrices (macro, meso and micro) to identify cross-cutting patterns and structural divergences;
- Deductive-inductive analysis to develop interpretative categories (autonomy, accountability, professional trust, well-being, pedagogical supervision);
- Inter-documentary triangulation to ensure convergences and detect contradictions between regulations, technical reports and scientific literature.

The comparative approach allowed us to integrate governance, leadership and evaluation perspectives, facilitating a holistic understanding of each system.

### 3. Gathering of qualitative information through key informants

The third phase consisted of the systematic consultation of key stakeholders in Spain, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland through a survey-expert method articulated in two instruments:

- 1.A 20-item structured questionnaire administered through Google Forms, configured with closed-ended multiple choice, Likert response and multiple choice questions, to generate quantitative patterns and frequency distributions.
2. A 10-item semi-structured interview, administered in synchronous mode, aimed at eliciting rich descriptions of actual supervisory practices, organisational tensions, leadership capacity and professional perceptions of national education systems.

Participants included education inspectors, school principals, municipal counsellors, and experts in educational quality and evaluation. Selection was

based on criteria of maximum variation and professional relevance, ensuring representativeness of diverse roles and levels of responsibility.

#### 4. Analytical procedures

Data processing was carried out following a mixed protocol:

- Descriptive quantitative analysis (frequencies, percentages and trends) applied to the closed questions of the questionnaire.
- Qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014), using an open and axial coding process to extract significant categories.
- Methodological triangulation between the three main sources: documentary evidence, comparative evidence and key informant evidence.

This triangulation allowed validating emerging categories, reinforcing the internal consistency of the analysis and connecting professional perceptions with normative structures.

#### 5. Assurances of rigour and methodological quality criteria

The study adopted the methodological quality standards of comparative educational policy research:

- Credibility: triangulation of sources and direct contrast with practitioners from six education systems.
- Transferability: detailed description of national contexts and governance mechanisms.
- Dependability: systematic review and categorisation procedures that can be replicated.

- Confirmability: explicitness of the analytical process and interpretation criteria used.

Priority was also given to updating the evidence, incorporating official and academic sources up to 2024-2025, as well as analytical coherence, integrating dimensions of leadership, supervision, equity and student well-being.

#### 6. Methodological contribution to the comparative study

The methodological design adopted gives the study a solid structure that combines academic rigour with applied value. The integration of documentary analysis, multilevel comparison and professional input allows for:

- identify transnational patterns of leadership and supervision;
- contextualise structural differences between high-trust systems (Finland, Iceland, Denmark) and models of greater state intervention (Sweden, Spain);
- interpret educational governance from a systemic, not merely normative, perspective;
- generate contextualised findings with relevance for policy design, inspector training and improving school leadership.

Overall, this methodology provides a reliable, valid and scientifically consistent framework that underpins the quality of the study and reinforces the relevance of the conclusions drawn for the contemporary debate in comparative education policy.

In the case of Denmark, the consultation of a municipal expert with experience in school leadership and educational supervision allowed access

to situated perspectives on the tensions between autonomy and accountability, as well as to concrete examples of effective collaborative supervision practices implemented at the local level. The responses provided empirical evidence on the gap between the formal normative framework and the operational reality of supervision in contexts of high professional trust.

The Danish case illustrates the added value of methodological triangulation: while official documentation emphasises the autonomy and trust of the system, evidence from practitioners reveals everyday tensions between formal autonomy and pressure for results, as well as variability in implementation according to municipal cultures. This complexity, invisible in purely normative analysis, underscores the need to incorporate situated perspectives in comparative studies.

### III. RESULTS OF THE STUDY:

#### III.1. COUNTRY-BY-COUNTRY ANALYSIS

##### **Sweden: the Centralised School Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen)**

In Sweden, in contrast to other neighbouring countries, there is an organised inspectorate called **Skolinspektionen** (Swedish School Inspectorate). In 2003, a decision was taken to reintroduce the School Inspectorate. Multiple academic articles explore how this change represents a “return of the state” and how it moved from a decentralised system based on trust to a regime of external scrutiny and control with a dramatic increase in resources and inspectors (Holmberg, L.; Waks, C. and Blomgren, M).

The shift towards a strong inspection model in Sweden must also be understood in the context of the market reforms introduced in the 1990s, including the expansion of the friskolor and the system of free school choice.

As Rönnerberg (2014) and Lundahl (2020) point out, the reintroduction of inspection responded to the political need to restore public trust and ensure quality in a more competitive and heterogeneous ecosystem. This development places the country at the more regulatory end of the Nordic spectrum.

Sweden operates the most traditional model of centralised state inspection of the countries analysed. Skolinspektionen is a government agency with a clear and broad mandate. It has responsibility for national inspection and evaluation of the entire education system, from pre-school to adult education. Its main objective is to ensure that local authorities and independent grant-aided schools (friskolor) comply with laws and regulations, guaranteeing the equal right of all students to a good education in a safe environment.

Its main tasks are as follows:

- **Monitoring and legal compliance:** regular supervision through regular inspections of all schools.
- **Thematic quality audits and school audits:** investigations initiated in specific schools.
- **Complaints and grievance handling:** investigations and decision-making on individual complaints lodged by citizens, pupils, parents or others.
- **Independent school authorisation:** assessment and granting of permission for the establishment of independent schools.

In short, and like any inspectorate, it has the mission to promote appropriate education in a safe environment and to ensure quality education

for all pupils. We can concretise this mission in a series of standard actions of the **Skolinspektionen**, such as the following:

- It verifies that the school provides a safe environment and actively works to prevent bullying, harassment and discrimination.
- The planning and evaluation of teaching is audited in relation to the national curriculum.
- The functioning of school health and vocational guidance services is reviewed.
- The school is required to have a self-evaluation system to develop quality.
- Regular inspections include classroom observation, document review and meetings with staff and pupils.

The consequences of an inspection can be significant. An investigation may culminate in an official warning and a demand for action from the responsible authority. In the case of independent schools, inaction can lead to the **withdrawal of the licence** to operate or the right to grants, underlining the regulatory power of the agency.

### **The School Based Child and Student Representative (BEO)**

One aspect that stands out from the analysis of the documentation concerning the Skolinspektionen is the existence of a "Child and Pupil's Representative" (BEO in Swedish: Barn- och elevombudet) in the Inspectorate, whose role is to protect pupils' rights and investigate complaints of bullying and abuse. The BEO can even claim damages on behalf of the pupils concerned. Its administrative status is that of a body attached to the Inspectorate and resourced by the Inspectorate, but it is

appointed directly by the Swedish Government, which gives it independent authority in the exercise of its functions. The BEO and the Skolinspektionen work together to ensure that schools comply with the section of the Education Act concerning offensive treatment and harassment.

### **Transparency and Public Access**

The Inspectorate operates under the principle of transparency and public access, which means that anyone has the right to read the information received by the Inspectorate, unless it is covered by the obligation of professional secrecy or contains sensitive personal data.

### **Academic Analysis: Inspectors as Hybrid Professionals**

The academic literature emphasises that the organisational change brought about by the establishment of a formal Inspectorate model did not mean a sharp break with previous practices. In an article by Waks and Blomgren (2019), the authors drew on interviews with inspectors, teachers, principals and civil servants between 2003 and 2008 to conclude that:

- Inspectors acted as "hybrid professionals", balancing their role as state control with their identity as educational peers.
- They used strategies such as metaphors, narratives and retrospective wisdom to soften the controlling nature of inspections.
- They maintained relationships of trust and interdependence with the schools, which facilitated the acceptance of the inspections.
- The result was a less radical change than expected, with continuity in professional practices.

### **Requirements and Process of Access to the Skolinspektionen**

### **Basic requirements for entry to the inspection function:**

- University degree in pedagogy or a relevant subject (master's degree).
- Extensive and proven teaching experience.
- Experience in school leadership (e.g. having been a headteacher or deputy headteacher).
- Thorough knowledge of the Swedish education system and its curriculum.

### **Admission process:**

- Skolinspektionen regularly publishes vacancies on its job portal.
- The process is competitive and includes:
  - o Formal application with CV and motivation letter.
  - o Tests or exercises to assess the ability to analyse school documents, write reports and apply legislation.
  - o Multiple interviews, often with current inspectors and managers.
- Once selected, new inspectors usually receive an extensive internal training programme before working autonomously.

### **Denmark: Municipal Accountability and Participation (Styrelsen for Kvalitet og Tilsyn / EVA)**

The Danish system is characterised by a significant delegation of responsibility to the local level. Local administrations are directly

responsible for the economy and inspection of municipal schools in their jurisdiction, while the Ministry of Education maintains oversight with regard to educational content and secondary school examinations. Significant parental involvement is ensured through the school council of the municipalities.

The monitoring objectives are result-oriented, such as ensuring that a high percentage of pupils achieve good results in national tests in Danish and mathematics, and that the percentage of pupils with low results is reduced. There is also a strong focus on pupil welfare with the involvement of academic and vocational guidance officers with a strong presence in the educational environment.

Denmark is considered by many authors to embody an 'enabling state' model that delegates the core of supervision to municipalities, but maintains a robust system of accompaniment through the EVA (Andersen & Dahler-Larsen, 2021). The inspection function is not associated with sanctions, but with institutional capacity building, combining national data with structured dialogue processes, open to citizens and continuously reviewed.

On the other hand, "folkschule" schools have been increasingly inspected by the authorities to ensure democratic education and compliance with the law.

### **Responsible Bodies**

**The National Agency for Education and Quality** is responsible for the economic supervision of self-governed educational institutions under the responsibility of the ministry. The supervision ensures efficient management of educational institutions. In addition, the agency is responsible for the academic supervision and quality assurance of the institutions.

**The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA)** aims to contribute to ensuring and developing the quality of teaching, education and learning in Denmark. EVA advises and cooperates with the Ministry as well as other public authorities and educational institutions in matters of evaluation and quality assurance. Its role is more one of evaluation and development than of punitive inspection.

Evidence from practitioners in the Danish system confirms that supervision has evolved over the last decade from compliance verification to institutional capacity building. In practice, the relationship between municipalities and schools is characterised as relational rather than hierarchical, building on established traditions of dialogue, negotiation and joint problem solving and varying across municipalities. School principals tend to perceive municipal consultants as strategic partners rather than external controllers. The most effective practices identified include collaborative data dialogues, peer observations and 'leadership and learning labs' that create spaces for reflection for management teams. However, the impact of self-assessment is uneven: it is most effective when integrated into ongoing collaborative enquiry processes, but loses effectiveness when it becomes an annual documentation exercise.

### **Annual screening and dialogue with municipalities**

The National Agency for Quality and Supervision conducts an annual screening of all public primary and lower secondary schools. When schools show repeated signs of poor quality (non-compliance with legislation or results below national averages), the agency staff engages in a dialogue with the relevant municipality on specific actions to be taken.

The Primary and Lower Secondary Education Act requires municipalities to prepare a quality report every two years, which describes developments in the municipal school system. The National Agency for Quality and Supervision is responsible for monitoring municipalities in the preparation of their reports.

There is no centralised inspection authority with the same profile as the Swedish Skolinspektionen. Denmark is distinguished by a quality assurance model that avoids the traditional "full inspection" and relies on external and internal evaluation, with a strong delegation of responsibilities.

### **Requirements and Access Process**

#### **Basic requirements for employment at the Agency for Teaching:**

- Teaching degree or a relevant master's degree.
- Extensive experience in the education sector, preferably in leadership roles.
- Thorough knowledge of the Danish Public Education Act (Folkeskoleloven).

#### **Admission process:**

- Publication of vacancies and competitive process.
- Candidates with an analytical profile and the ability to make evidence-based decisions are sought after.
- The ability to communicate critical findings in a constructive manner is valued.

## **Norway: Emphasis on Learning Environment (Utdanningsdirektoratet / Fylkesmannen)**

In Norway, supervision focuses on legal compliance and ensuring a safe environment. The school has direct responsibility for preventing bullying and other harmful behaviour (it must supervise and implement measures if a pupil does not feel safe). Central and regional monitoring exists to ensure compliance with the law. In this line of verifying compliance with the Education Act, especially on issues of safety and bullying, the inspection and control functions lie mainly with the County Governors' Offices, which represent the central government at regional level.

The country introduced its own regular state inspections in the mid-2000s, often influenced by the Swedish model (Hall, J.B., 2017). Norway introduced a **new inspection approach in 2014** that seeks a balance between **guidance** and **inspection**. This system is framed within a model that promotes professional autonomy and decentralisation, having evolved into a hybrid model that integrates guidance for improvement with the control function.

### **Institutional Structure**

At central level, the **Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (Utdanningsdirektoratet)** is responsible for inspection. It has overall responsibility for overseeing kindergartens, education and the governance of the education sector, as well as the implementation of laws and education regulations in general. The directorate is also responsible for the supervision of public schools and has overall responsibility for the implementation of national policy.

State supervision is carried out by the **County Governor (Fylkesmannen)**. County Governors' Offices are primarily responsible for carrying out inspections of public schools within their county. They also use the inspection as a tool for monitoring the municipalities as a school authority.

Schools are considered autonomous units accountable to the municipalities. Headteachers have overall responsibility for developing school practice, following state and local priorities, and evaluating the educational results achieved.

A crucial difference with the Spanish model is that the Norwegian inspectorate is deeply linked to student welfare. The introduction of "Chapter 9A" of the Education Act made the emotional and physical safety of pupils an enforceable legal mandate, which has strengthened the role of county governors as duty bearers (Helgøy & Homme, 2019). This has expanded the scope of monitoring beyond academic performance into the realm of rights protection.

### **Support system for municipalities**

Recently, to support municipalities with "extraordinary challenges", the Board has recruited a group of 49 advisors responsible for supporting these municipalities and their schools to help students learn more, improve the learning environment and prevent dropout. This support system is, however, deliberately separated from the supervisory functions.

### **Focus on Learning Environment and Pedagogical Autonomy**

Much of the regulation and supervision focuses on the safe and positive learning environment. The school is legally obliged to act to ensure the well-being of its students.

In terms of regulatory compliance, the Norwegian system, like other Scandinavian systems, gives schools the responsibility for choosing their pedagogical approaches and teaching materials, even though they must comply with centrally set targets for academic competence. It often uses school self-evaluation as a key tool for evaluation. It is noted that classroom observations are not part of the inspection process.

Inspection reports are public and are designed to be used in local quality processes, reinforcing the principle of transparency and the use of evaluation for improvement.

### **Requirements and Access Process**

Being most similar to an Inspector as we understand it membership of the Directorate for Education and Training (Utdanningsdirektoratet - UDIR), the entry requirements are:

#### **Basic Requirements:**

- Master's degree in education or related field.
- Minimum 5 years of teaching experience.
- Experience in school management and development.
- Competence in evaluation, analysis and communication.

#### **Admission Process:**

- Public places are advertised.
- Great importance is given to advisory and guidance skills, not only monitoring skills.

- Inspectors are also seen as "supervisors" who help schools to improve.
- The selection process assesses this double facet: control and support.

### **Iceland: External Low Risk Assessment (Menntamálastofnun)**

There is no traditional centralised inspection body in Iceland. It is a "low-stake" external evaluation model, based on a cyclical and infrequent evaluation (usually a nine-year cycle for all schools), which is a cooperative project between the state and the municipalities, with the main aim of encouraging internal self-evaluation of schools. External school evaluation is the term used instead of inspection or supervision.

Since 2013, a cooperative external evaluation has been implemented between central government and municipalities, executed by the **Directorate of Education (Menntamálastofnun)**. There are no sanctions or rewards, only recommendations and follow-up, and reports are published which cannot be used to rank schools.

Evaluations are carried out by an inspector from the Icelandic Directorate of Education in conjunction with an external inspector. The inspectors are mostly recruited from among former teachers and principals with teaching experience at the school level inspected or persons with education in evaluation processes.

The literature agrees that the Icelandic case represents the most formative and collaborative model in the Nordic environment. However, its reliance on self-evaluation limits the state's ability to intervene in schools with low performance or structural difficulties (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2022). In this

respect, Iceland provides a laboratory for how quality assurance systems operate in high-trust contexts.

Local authorities (the municipal council and the school board) are responsible for following up external evaluations to ensure that they lead to improvements in schools, and the ministry is responsible for supervising local authorities to ensure that they fulfil their obligations in that context. Schools are externally evaluated every five years.

### **Academic Analysis: the "Soft" Model of Governance**

In a scientific study, Ólafsdóttir et al. (2022) analyse how external evaluation of schools in Iceland influences the internal evaluation and professional practices of teachers and principals but its impact depends on the acceptance of feedback and clarity of expectations. Their findings confirm that:

- The Icelandic system functions as a 'soft' model of educational governance, centred on trust and collaboration.
- The active participation of teachers enhances the effectiveness of the process.
- The lack of sanctioning pressure avoids negative effects (stress, simulation), but also limits the momentum for structural change.

Complementing the findings of Ólafsdóttir et al. (2022), Sahlberg (2021) shows that the Finnish model of education is also based on principles of professional trust, school autonomy and cooperation between teachers and principals. His study shows that the combination of pedagogical autonomy with non-punitive external evaluation fosters innovation and continuous improvement in schools.

The active involvement of teachers in the design and implementation of educational policies significantly increases the quality of learning and professional satisfaction.

"Soft" systems of governance, by prioritising trust over punitive pressure, reduce work-related stress and strengthen intrinsic motivation, creating an environment conducive to sustainable structural change.

**III.2. COMPARATIVE STUDY**

**III.2.1. Sweden-Norway Comparison: School Inspection Policy (2002-2012)**

From a comparative approach, it is relevant to situate these systems in the analytical framework of "accountability architectures" (OECD, 2018). While Sweden embodies a vertical accountability - based on inspection, reporting and sanctions - Norway and Iceland are close to a horizontal model, where negotiation, guidance and co-accountability predominate. Denmark represents a decentralised hybrid articulated through independent evaluation bodies.

In an academic paper by Elstad et al. (2014) we find a comparison between the Swedish system and the Norwegian system, perhaps the two most oriented in this group of countries towards structured inspection. A summary of this study can be seen in the table below:

| Aspect                           | Sweden                                                                                            | Norway                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Political-administrative context | Strongly decentralised system since the 1990s, with large municipal autonomy and expansion of the | More centralised and cooperative system, with strong reliance on teachers and state administration. |

| Aspect                            | Sweden                                                                                                                                                                                        | Norway                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                   | education market (publicly funded public schools).                                                                                                                                            | Less market influence.                                                                                                                     |
| <b>History of inspection</b>      | Tradition of inspection since the 19th century. Abolished in 1991 with decentralisation, reintroduced in 2003 and strengthened in 2008 with the creation of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. | The inspectorate never disappeared, but was reformed in 2002 to strengthen state supervision and ensure national coherence in education.   |
| <b>Political motivations</b>      | Response to loss of trust in municipalities and increasing educational inequality. Reintroduced as a tool for state control and political legitimisation.                                     | Aimed at improving the quality and coherence of the system by maintaining a culture of trust and collaboration between educational actors. |
| <b>Nature of control</b>          | Centralised and punitive model: standardised inspections, public reporting and possibility of sanctions. Focus on compliance and results.                                                     | Formative and dialogic model: inspection acts as a support mechanism for institutional learning rather than as an oversight mechanism.     |
| <b>Relationship with teachers</b> | Hierarchical and bureaucratic relationship.                                                                                                                                                   | Collaborative relationship, based on                                                                                                       |

| Aspect                                  | Sweden                                                                                                                                        | Norway                                                                                                                              |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>and municipalities.</b>              | Local autonomy is limited by the new state control.                                                                                           | guidance and accompaniment. Professional improvement and collective reflection are encouraged.                                      |
| <b>Governance instruments</b>           | Governance by inspection: control, audit, standardisation, evaluation of results and accountability.                                          | Governance by dialogue: supervision through guidance, trust and negotiation. Improvement is prioritised over sanction.              |
| <b>Institutional change (2002-2012)</b> | Transition from a governance by objectives model to a hybrid centralised control model, combining formal autonomy and strong state oversight. | Reconfiguration towards network governance, combining state oversight and local collaboration. Emphasis on organisational learning. |
| <b>Dominant feature</b>                 | Re-centralisation and intensified state control.                                                                                              | Modernisation with balance between control and trust.                                                                               |

**Sources:**

- Rönnerberg, L. (2014). School inspection in Sweden: historical evolution, resurrection and gradual change. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 2014(1), 1-13.

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This approach reinforces the idea that Nordic models do not only seek to monitor results, but also to build professional capacity and long-term educational improvement.

### III.2.2.2. Comparison of Education Inspection Systems

The following table summarises the main characteristics of the inspection or quality assurance systems in the four countries:

| Characteristic     | Sweden                                                  | Norway                                                 | Iceland                                       | Denmark                                                       |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Lead Entity</b> | Swedish School Inspectorate ( <b>Skolinspektionen</b> ) | County Governor's Office and Directorate for Education | Directorate for Education (Menntamálastofnun) | Danish Evaluation Institute ( <b>EVA</b> ) and Municipalities |
| <b>Main Focus</b>  | Inspection and                                          | Combination                                            | External "low risk" and                       | <b>Quality assurance</b>                                      |

| Characteristic                | Sweden                                                                | Norway                                                  | Iceland                                                        | Denmark                                                        |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
|                               | enforcement (more centralised)                                        | of <b>guidance</b> and <b>inspection</b>                | internal evaluation                                            | and decentralisation                                           |
| <b>Sanctions/Consequences</b> | Reprimands, <b>withdrawal of licence</b> for independent schools      | Public reports used in local quality processes          | No sanctions, only recommendations and follow-up               | Municipal quality reports, developmental evaluations by EVA    |
| <b>Legal basis</b>            | Laws and regulations enforced by Skolinspektionen (reintroduced 2003) | New approach introduced in 2014 (guidance + inspection) | Cooperative evaluation since 2013, emphasis on self-evaluation | External and internal evaluation by law (no "full" inspection) |
| <b>Publication of results</b> | Yes, with transparency and public                                     | Yes, inspection reports publicly                        | Yes, but not for ranking schools                               | Yes, municipal quality reports and                             |

| Characteristic           | Sweden                                                                                                                                                              | Norway                                                                                                                                       | Iceland                                                                                                                                                                                     | Denmark                                                                                                                                                                      |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                          | access                                                                                                                                                              | available                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                             | EVA assessments                                                                                                                                                              |
| Periodicity              | Regular periodic inspections                                                                                                                                        | Regular inspections                                                                                                                          | 9-year cycle (evaluation every 5 years)                                                                                                                                                     | Annual screening, biennial reports                                                                                                                                           |
| Most effective practices | Regulatory clarification, targeted thematic audits, risk-based inspections, strong sanctioning capacity combined with post-school guidance (follow-up inspections). | Proportionate legal supervision, rights-based inspection, structure and dialogue with local authorities, formative use of inspection reports | Cooperative external evaluation, strong integration between external and internal evaluation, professional accompaniment, culture of trust and organisational learning rather than control. | Data-based collaborative dialogues, peer observations, evaluations of school development by EVA, educational leadership laboratories and continuous improvement at municipal |

| Characteristic       | Sweden                                                                                                                                                                       | Norway                                                                                                                                           | Iceland                                                                                                                                              | Denmark                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                      |                                                                                                                                                                              | within municipal quality systems.                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                      | level.                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Main tensions</b> | State centralisation vs. school autonomy; pressure for measurable results; intensification of teaching work; risk of compliance culture vs. genuine pedagogical improvement. | Balance between legal control and development support; heterogeneity in municipalities' capacity; tension between legal approach and pedagogical | Limited capacity of the system to sustain in-depth evaluative processes; reliance on self-evaluation; scarcity of large-scale comparable indicators. | Local autonomy vs. demand for measurable results; professional judgement vs. accountability. Inequality in the quality of municipal systems; fragmentation of responsibilities; difficulty in translating evaluations into sustained |

| Characteristic                 | Sweden                                                                                                                                                                    | Norway                                                                                                                                      | Iceland                                                                                                                                                 | Denmark                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                |                                                                                                                                                                           | improvement.                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                         | pedagogical changes.                                                                                                           |
| <b>Role of self-assessment</b> | Mandatory and structured, but often instrumentalised to respond to external demands; greater impact when articulated with professional development and school leadership. | Central to local quality systems; used as a basis for thematic inspections; effectiveness varies according to municipal technical capacity. | Pillar of quality assurance system; embedded in teachers' reflective processes; high professional legitimacy and orientation to institutional learning. | Widespread but uneven impact; effective when embedded in ongoing collaborative enquiry and distributed pedagogical leadership. |

#### IV. Conclusion

Educational supervision systems in the Nordic countries (excluding Finland) reflect a diversity of approaches ranging from more centralised and punitive models to decentralised and collaborative quality assurance systems.

**Sweden** maintains the most robust and centralised model of state inspection, with a powerful agency (Skolinspektionen) capable of imposing severe sanctions, including withdrawal of licences for independent schools. The shift since 2003 represents a “return of the state” after the decentralisation of the 1990s, although academic literature suggests that inspectors have acted as “hybrid professionals”, maintaining elements of collaboration alongside state control.

**Norway** has evolved towards a hybrid model that integrates guidance for improvement with the control function. Since 2014, the system seeks a balance between state supervision and support to schools, with a special emphasis on ensuring a safe learning environment. In contrast to the more punitive Swedish model, Norway maintains a “governance by dialogue” that prioritises improvement over sanction.

**Denmark** and **Iceland** lean more towards decentralised **Quality Assurance** models, where responsibility for evaluation rests largely with municipalities and specialised evaluation institutions such as the Danish EVA. Iceland, in particular, implements a “low-risk” model without sanctions, focusing on encouraging internal self-evaluation of schools through cooperative external evaluations every five years. Both systems promote school autonomy and improvement through systematic self-evaluation.

Evidence from Danish practitioners reveals that the success of the decentralised model depends critically on local municipal cultures. Where

there is established institutional trust, supervision adopts collaborative and generative forms; however, in contexts with lower trust, the logic of documentation and performance re-emerges. This internal variability suggests that "high trust" models are not uniform, but require specific systemic conditions to function effectively.

The Spanish system, on the other hand, could enrich the Danish system: the increased professionalisation of inspectors, the systematic classroom observations and the explicit focus on instructional quality. Reciprocally, the Danish emphasis on trust, dialogue and developmental supervision could offer Spain a valuable counterbalance to more legalistic traditions, particularly through collaborative enquiry practices and capacity-based leadership development.

The comparison between Sweden and Norway (Elstad et al., 2014) clearly illustrates the two poles of the Nordic spectrum: while Sweden has experienced a re-centralisation with intensified state control, Norway has achieved a modernisation that balances control and trust, maintaining a more collaborative relationship with teachers and municipalities.

From the Spanish perspective, the comparative study identifies three key lessons for strengthening school leadership and inspection. The importance of strengthening the internal capacity for school improvement, avoiding bureaucratic overload; the convenience of moving towards models of accountability based on evidence and professional dialogue, in which the inspectorate acts as an engine for strategic reflection; and the need to place student well-being at the centre of supervision, as exemplified by Norway and Sweden through specialised bodies and advanced legal frameworks.

These elements may contribute to a redesign of the role of the inspectorate in Spain, oriented towards stronger pedagogical leadership, greater accountable autonomy and a systemic vision of educational quality. If what is intended at some point in education policy planning is that the supervision model in Spain evolves towards greater delegation of responsibilities to teachers and less supervision from the classical point of view, this delegation must be accompanied by sustained investment in teacher capacity building and professional confidence building.

### **Limitations of the study**

While the initial methodological design envisaged systematic consultation with informants from the six education systems under study (Spain, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland), this paper has structured and comprehensive qualitative evidence only from the Danish case. The consultation was carried out with a municipal expert with extensive experience in school leadership, educational supervision and school accompaniment, whose professional background places him in a privileged position to offer situated perspectives on the tensions between autonomy and accountability, the effective practices of collaborative supervision implemented at the local level and the gaps between normative design and operational reality.

The responses provided allowed access to first-hand empirical evidence on crucial aspects that remain invisible in purely normative or academic analysis: the variability of institutional trust across municipal cultures, the day-to-day tensions between formal autonomy and pressure for measurable results, the uneven implementation of school self-evaluation, the structural obstacles faced by principals in exercising

instructional leadership and the complexity of addressing student well-being beyond simple quantitative indicators.

In the case of Sweden, Norway and Iceland, the analysis is mainly based on official documentary sources, specialised academic literature and documentation from evaluation agencies, complemented by information available in international databases (Eurydice, OECD). This methodological asymmetry constitutes a recognised limitation of the study that should be made explicit and transparent: while the Danish case allows for the triangulation of documentary, academic and experiential sources, the other Nordic countries are analysed by means of documentary-academic triangulation without direct validation from professional practice.

This limitation has specific implications for the interpretation of findings. In the Danish case, we can contrast what the rules state with what practitioners experience, identifying gaps, tensions and nuances that enrich the understanding of the system. For the other countries, the analysis remains at a more descriptive-normative level, although the quality of the academic sources used - many of them based on empirical studies with practitioners in those systems - partially mitigates this limitation.

Nevertheless, the Danish case serves a valuable methodological function as a qualitative deepening that illustrates the potential of the triangulated approach. The evidence from Danish practitioners reveals dimensions of the system that only emerge from situated perspectives: the dependence of the effectiveness of the model on specific local cultures, the difficulty of implementing genuine self-evaluation beyond bureaucratic ritual, the permanent tension between discourses of autonomy and

practices of accountability, or the complexity of sustaining instructional leadership in contexts of increasing administrative pressure.

Future studies should address this limitation by systematically incorporating professional perspectives from all contexts analysed, ideally including multiple actors per country (inspectors, principals, teachers, municipal leaders) to capture the diversity of experiences and perspectives within each system.

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