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## **School inspection: Evaluative judgements and how they can be investigated**

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### **Background**

A school inspection regime constitutes a costly and continuous large-scale intervention in a school system. However, international research findings on effects of school inspections are still inconclusive (Wolf & Janssens 2007; Ehren & Visscher 2006), especially as to whether the unintended and potentially dysfunctional side-effects outweigh the intended effects. In order to address this evaluative question more appropriately, the complex functioning of school inspection itself needs to be better understood.

Much research on school inspection has focussed on the perceptions of various actors - mainly teachers - of the school inspection process and its effects (see e.g. Chapman 2002; Brimblecombe, Ormston & Shaw 1995). Overall, it is possible to divide the body of research literature on school inspection roughly into two groups. One is primarily concerned with the extent to which school inspection may contribute to school improvement (e.g. Plowright 2007). The other strand highlights the potentially harmful consequences of school inspection. This section of literature often employs Foucauldian concepts (e.g. Perryman 2007).

By contrast, inspectorial judgements on the quality of schools have received considerably less attention from the research community despite being central to the inspection enterprise. Ofsted's interpretation of its own research supports the case that relatively high inter-rater reliability of judgements of observed teaching allows confidence in the accuracy of the inspection procedure (Matthews, Holmes, Vickers, & Corporaal, 1998). On the other hand, some academics problematise Ofsted's approach to educational judgement as prescriptive and ambiguous (Maw 1995; Gilroy & Wilcox 1997). To elicit the process of inspectorial judgement formation in depth, further empirical research is necessary.

### **Research Questions**

In this paper, I will report and reflect upon my pilot study which aims to investigate how school inspectors arrive at their judgements given that they are required to draw on and synthesise diverse forms of evidence stemming from observations, interviews, surveys, work samples, performance data, school policies and self-evaluation, as well as other forms of documentation. Furthermore, I will investigate how inspectors individually and cooperatively aggregate various 'minor' judgements into higher-order judgements.

### **Methods**

Pilot studies are common in large-scale survey research. However, the value of pilot studies for predominantly qualitative research is contested as it is equally possible to 'learn on the job' (Holloway, 1997, p. 121). Nonetheless, especially for novice researchers, there are many potential advantages: for example, increasing one's familiarity with the prospective research field before funding applications are due and final ethical approval has to be sought (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). Furthermore, they may help to foreshadow issues of access and clarify one's research design as is intended with the pilot study outlined below.

The purpose of my pilot study is to test several methodological options and to assess their fitness for purpose in terms of likelihood of access to required data as well as the quality of generated data in relation to the research questions and, thereby, the scope and limitations of such data for answering the questions posed.

The first option is based on shadowing school inspectors at work in real time. This includes first-hand observation as well as recordings of naturally occurring talk. Therefore, the main emphasis is on how inspectors discuss evidence and judgements with each other and with stakeholders of the inspected school. The second option also draws on contextualised data. However, data collection will take place

before or after an inspection, for example, in the form of problem-centred interviews with narrative elements in order to facilitate experience-near accounts. The last option operates with anonymised inspection evidence from schools that will be given to inspectors for evaluation. This is intended to enable the exploration of processes of judging evidence in greater depth than this is possible under real-life constraints.

### **Frame**

The main focus is of a practical nature, albeit with significant implications for theory and methodology, and rests on identifying how feasible the outlined options, or their combinations, are for realising a high-quality investigation before deciding on the research design for the main Ph.D. study. The quality will be considered in terms of do-ability, fit between research question and data, and the expected originality.

### **Research findings**

This paper will primarily make a methodological contribution to research on inspectorial judgements in educational settings. Furthermore, it addresses generic matters of preparing one's research design and it does so in an experientially rich manner. Thereby, it exemplifies the potential benefits and limitations of pilot studies with a qualitative focus.

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