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Teacher Performance Assessment in a Context of Change and Innovation

The French Inspection of Teachers in the Eyes of European Inspectorates
Synthesis of School Visits and Workshop Feedbacks

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This paper is divided into two parts. I first synthesize the discussions aroused by the observation, by some SICI members, of individual evaluations of teachers conducted by French inspectors in seven primary or secondary schools in Paris¹. Then I recapitulate the sociological elements that I introduced for the professional debate that followed².

Synthesis of the workshops

Two questions were asked to the participants who were invited to give their feedbacks on the observations that they had led. The first one was: **“Does this individual evaluation of teachers improve learning, or at least learning through teaching?”** The great majority of the participants admitted that this kind of individual evaluation brought about an intense, detailed and *a fortiori* useful professional discussion between the teacher and the inspector. Many of them also observed that it led (as it was done today by these persons in this context) to a good and constructive relation between inspectors and teachers who could then capitalize on this mutual trust. Some were positively surprised to see that teachers expected many things from the inspectors, that the professional value and support of the latter were important for their own professional improvement and development. Lastly, some also stressed that this kind of evaluation, especially during the discussion which follows the lesson observation, was an opportunity to

¹ This synthesis is based on my own observations during one school visit and the two following workshops, and on the reports made by the moderators of these two workshops.

The teacher inspections that were observed took place at École de l’avenue Duquesne, École de la rue Saint-Lambert, Collège Claude Debussy, Collège La Fontaine, Lycée général Camille Sée, Lycée professionnel Corbon and Lycée professionnel Raspail.

² The information and views set out in this part of the document are mine only and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of SICI, its members and the participants to this workshop.

provide the teacher with resources and to help him/her put words on his/her professional and sometimes spontaneous practices.

However, several questions were asked. They can be synthesized in the words of one participant: "This piece is interesting, but how does it fit in the puzzle"? In other words, how to position this individual evaluation in a more global institutional landscape? Some participants asked how the teachers could transfer this particular and punctual discussion into their everyday professional practices and how could the continuity of their professional development be ensured beyond this very particular – and to some extent privileged – moment. They wondered how inspectors could generalize what they saw and heard during the inspection, especially in a context in which these inspections are not as regular as they should be. Others asked how the teachers and inspectors could capitalize on common experience and common knowledge on the basis of such an event. Lastly, two criticisms were levelled at this inspection process: its face-to-face logic (how to ensure the equity of this process and how to go beyond it?) and the separation between the evaluation of teachers and the evaluation of schools as a whole, whereas combining both might be useful for the teachers themselves (for instance to make their demands be better taken into account by the principals).

The second question was: "**What is the best point in this evaluation process and what can be improved?**" The first advantage mentioned by the participants is that this system of individual inspection allows the inspectors to know what really happens in class and to start from this everyday frame of work to build with the teachers common diagnoses and identify the main areas of professional development. The second advantage was expressed on a tone of surprise: good relationships with teachers are possible! Inspectors can be, as others, good "critical friends". Teachers can talk with them about their careers, etc. The last advantage is linked with the answers to the former questions: the discussion which follows the observation can be an excellent and concrete way to advise teachers, to help them make their practices evolve and improve.

Yet, various weak points were pointed out. The low frequency of inspections and the lack of time for inspectors to visit the same teacher several times if necessary contrasted with the long-run process required to make teachers understand and then recognize their problems and weaknesses. What about also the concrete and effective consequences of such a process after the inspection? Some participants pointed out that within the French education system the judgment of inspectors on teachers is strongly framed by a series of grades and marks which sometimes prevent them from considering – beyond the imperative of the immediate marking – the global evolution of teachers according to progressive and growing expectations. The disconnection within the inspection process between staff development and school improvement was also criticized: some inspectors were not convinced that these individual evaluations had any impact on the system as a whole. Is it really, as it is implemented, a key lever to make the system change? Others criticized the possible confusion between two roles which cannot always be reconciled in concrete situations of inspection: that of the critical friend and that of an inspector who has an impact on a teacher's career through his/her grading power. Finally, it was the deep and central question of the feasibility of this process which was asked.

Individual teacher inspection from a sociological perspective

Observing this on-going collective discussion led me to **two kinds of remarks** that I hoped to be both useful for the participants and evidence-based enough, even if they had to be formulated in a short period of time. The first ones concerned **the policy borrowing and the use of foreign evidence** as they could be

observed in this “private” professional moment. Globally, it seemed to me that people adopted various positions concerning the French experience. I present them successively but it does not mean that in my mind it is a linear process. The first one was a common general interest of the participants which explains, at least partially, their presence. The second one was the surprise aroused by the specific professional, institutional and technical choices made by the French inspectorate. If these choices may have been perceived as somewhat exotic (possible third position), this exoticism seems to have encouraged some people in the workshop to ask for further information about the French policy context, but mainly to better integrate this surprising foreign practice into their own representations and their own professional identities rather than to understand the French experience, from the inside. This is not a criticism; it seems on the contrary relatively obvious and, *a priori*, sociologically (and maybe psychologically) funded. But it invited me to go further in the direction of the improvement of the understanding of the French case to better, then, and if possible, come back to other foreign experiences and increase comparability.

That is why I proposed to **distinguish three kinds of vision** associated with this individual evaluation of teachers by French inspectors: the **technical process** of inspection itself, the **social situation** created by this inspection and the position of **this device in a more global policy context**. The technical process was largely analyzed by the participants, as shown in the synthesis above. Yet, the social situation was not much examined nor discussed. Using some works by a French sociologist who deeply analyzed evaluation practices in France in the 1990’s – Lise Demailly – I proposed to see this individual evaluation as a social situation in which the acceptability of the process, its legitimacy and its main political goals, and so its final effective form, are collectively defined by the protagonists through their interactions (at least teachers and inspectors). Taking this definition into serious account invites those who accept it to open the professional discussions that I had the honor to observe to other policy actors, in particularly teachers. Many stereotypes and fantasies, in France and elsewhere, travel about inspectors in the teaching world³. A recent research that I led comparing school evaluation processes in England, France, Scotland and Switzerland suggested that in England, the idea of the trauma aroused by Ofsted’s inspections tends to be in itself a part of the professional socialization of teachers: some young teachers said in interview that they joined the National Union of Teachers (NUT) mainly to be protected against inspection abuses; others declared that their inspection was the most awful day of their life even if their answers to other questions revealed that, objectively, they were finally hardly concerned by the inspection process; “I survived my inspection” T-shirts were produced by teachers’ unions, etc. Maybe it would be interesting to struggle against these stereotypes by opening the doors of the discussion, by showing more what is really done, by associating all the “stakeholders” to the definition of the inspection process, especially teachers. This led me to talk lastly, and rapidly, about the policy context. First I mentioned that several researches in France and some official reports have stressed that this inspection process is hardly effective, not always fair and weakly efficient. Then I argued that if many policy actors in France recognize that it is indeed the case, they all have deep professional interests not to make things change too much. Hence the burning political choice of the governing method adopted to reform this device while avoiding all the “veto players”. And on that point, several attempts of top-down reforms have already and regularly showed their lack of efficiency.

³ I am not saying that abuses do not exist of course and that teachers only imagine them, but beyond the reality of practices that I won’t analyze here, there is also a social life of collective representations and the myth of the partial and severe inspector plays an active role in it.