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What Ails School Inspection in Uganda? Reflections, Experiences and Emerging Issues

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ABSTRACT

School inspection is one of the mechanisms that governments use to ensure accountability to the public in terms of the value for money invested in the education systems, and to improve the education quality and in schools. The study investigated the effectiveness of school inspection in staff development in secondary schools in Wakiso District, Uganda. A mixed methods approach was used involving phenomenology and survey designs. Findings revealed that school inspection was weak in facilitating staff development in secondary schools because the process lacked the evaluative component in regard to teacher classroom practices, provision of adequate feedback and in post-inspection follow up. The study recommends that inspectors undergo further training to acquire requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes that are consistent with modern trends.

Key Words: School inspection, staff development, teachers, pre-inspection, post-inspection.

Introduction

In various education systems the school inspection process is carried out by independent agencies or semi-autonomous organs attached to the Ministry of Education (MOE). The current practice of school inspection in various education systems faces challenges that curtail its credibility and usefulness in achieving the objectives for which it was established. Recent research has identified some of the bottlenecks to external evaluation practice that thwart its credibility among teachers and head teachers. These include poor inspector techniques, failure for external evaluation to improve teacher classroom and head teacher practices in the classroom and school management. Hopkins, Harris, Watling and Beresford (1999) and Perryman (2010) point out that the improvement of schools through inspection has been a subject of research and evaluation to justify the investment of funds in the process. Even though inspection has been supposed to lead to school improvement there has been

limited research on the topic to support the claim or to establish whether or not inspections as currently conducted actually made positive impact upon school improvement (Earley, 1996; Wilcox & Gray, 1996; Hopkins et al. 1999; Whitby, 2010). In 2008, the Government of Uganda established the DES within the MOES to carry out school inspection and to document and share best practices within the education system among other functions. However, the inspection practice has been riddled with challenges that threaten to undermine DES's mission. There are concerns that school inspection has not been achieving its goal of supporting schools in improving the educational quality. Head teachers had not been involved in the preparations ahead of inspection, and that inspection lacked a feedback mechanism. In the same vein Sembirige (2009) found that the inspection process was not only threatening and stressful to teachers but also judgemental in nature. District inspectors also lacked constructive feedback mechanisms to improve teacher practice. This scenario presented a distorted picture regarding the effectiveness of school inspection itself and/or that of its outcomes especially in contributing to staff development as a school improvement strategy. Two research questions guided this particular study: To what extent are post-inspection staff development activities focused on the outcomes of school inspection in secondary schools in Wakiso District, and, how can school inspection practice be enriched to support staff development in secondary schools in Wakiso district?

2. Methodology

The study was conducted using the survey and phenomenology designs to obtain different but complementary data on the effective of school inspection in facilitating staff development. According to Creswell and Clark (2007, p. 33) "the combination of qualitative and quantitative data provides a more complete picture by noting trends and generalizations as well as in-depth knowledge of participants' perspectives." The researcher preferred the triangulation-validating- quantitative-data design whereby one form of data (qualitative) is used to validate the other form of data (quantitative). Hence the researcher triangulated quantitative and qualitative data from teachers, head teachers and inspectors; and from related documents in the schools and at DES.

Hence, the findings in this study provide a basis for assessing the effectiveness of school inspection and the extent to which inspection practice facilitates school improvement especially through staff development. Both probability and non-probability sampling procedures were used to select the sample for the study. In a phenomenological study criterion-based sampling, also known as purposive sampling is used to select participants (Creswell, 1998). The selected participants met two major criteria namely the being information-rich in relation to the experience of the phenomenon under study and the ability to articulate their lived experiences during in-depths interviews. Proportionate sampling was used to select teachers for the study.

3. Result and Discussion

Both male and female teachers who participated in the study had the capacity to initiate discussion and implementation of recommendations from school inspections and the requisite

strategic staff development activities. This was consistent with assertion by Memon (1999, p.14) who posited that "there is a generally held opinion among educators and researchers that school improvement is directly related to the nature of school leadership." The head teacher is a key person in guiding, influencing and leading the teachers and the entire school community toward school improvement

3.1 Post-Inspection Staff Development Activities Implemented and Teacher Participation

The study sought to find out the kind of staff development activities the head teachers implemented in relation to the outcomes of inspection in an effort to address the teachers' learning needs to improve their performance. The study found that head teachers carried out staff appraisals, mentoring sessions for staff in their respective departments, weekly staff meetings on quality assurance, retreats for top school administrators and participating in national curriculum development seminars. These findings suggest that head teachers utilized several strategies to develop their staff to address the inspectors' concerns after school inspection. However, as findings show in this study staff development activities are largely driven by results from internal supervision rather than by the outcomes of school inspection.

It is commendable that head teachers conducted internal supervision to inform staff development in their respective schools. Earlier research indicates that successful school improvement depends largely on the professionals within the schools especially through a collaborative partnership between the head teacher and the staff of the school combined with the use of an external body (DuFour & Berkey, 1995; Hopkins, Ainscow & West, 1994). Further still, Macbeath, Schratz, Meuret and Jakobsen (2000, p. 93) suggest that "a successful marriage between self-evaluation and external inspection can have a positive impact on school improvement."

3.2 Extent to which Staff Development Content, Skills, Departmental Discussions and Classroom Visits focus on Inspection Outcomes

The study sought the participants' views on the extent to which staff development activities in the schools focused on the outcomes of school inspection and the means of their responses by considering four aspects of staff development such as the content, skills, departmental activities and, head teacher classroom visits. Among the participants 19.6% of the teachers and 11.1% of the head teachers were uncertain whether the content of staff development activities focuses on outcomes of school inspection or not. These data imply that some head teachers based the content of the post-inspection staff development activities on the outcomes of school inspections while others did not. Similarly, 49.5% of the teachers and 51.9% of the head teachers agreed that the extent to which the skills to be learned in the staff development activities are focused on outcomes of school inspection was high. Furthermore, among the participants 25.3% of the teachers and 33.3% of head teachers said the extent was low while 25.3% of the teachers and 14.8% of the head teachers were uncertain. These data indicate that some head teachers plan staff development activities in such a way that skills to be learned are focused on inspection outcomes. Other head teachers based their decisions on other

considerations while planning the skills to be learned by the teachers during staff development. Data indicate that some teachers and head teachers participated in departmental discussions that are focused on outcomes of inspection while others probably participate in discussions focused on other issues. As indicated earlier, departmental discussions 74.0% were among the most popular staff development activities that head teachers organized to address the outcomes of inspection.

The average of the means of the participants' views on the four aspects of staff development namely, the content, skills, departmental discussions and head teacher classroom visits and the extent to which they were focused on inspection outcomes is 3.2. Apparently, the average mean indicates a fairly positive view of the extent staff development focused on inspection outcomes. However, it is important to note that from the teachers' point of view the content of staff development and the head teachers' classroom visits had the least focus on inspection outcomes. There is growing evidence among researchers and educators that school self-evaluation and external evaluation must complement each other for schools to improve (ERO, 2000; De Grauwe & Naidoo, 2004). This is also supported by Whitby (2010) who found that the majority of high performing education systems used a combination of school self-evaluation and external inspection but with contextual challenges of merging the two and getting the best from each of them. However, this study posits that if school self-evaluation and school inspection are to contribute optimally and complimentarily to school improvement in the context of the study each of the processes needs to be improved to begin with.

3.3 Extent to which Staff Development Activities Focused on Inspection Outcomes

The researchers sought to explore the views of the participants on the extent to which teacher evaluation conferences, teacher inter-school visits, peer-coaching, teacher school-based seminars and management training for heads of departments focus on outcomes of inspection. The mean for the teachers' and head teachers' responses on the extent to which individual teacher evaluation conferences focus on inspection outcomes are 2.90 and 3.00 respectively. The means suggest fairly negative views regarding the focus of teacher evaluation conferences on inspection outcomes. The findings also imply that several head teachers conducted teacher evaluation conferences in their schools but perhaps failed to focus data unrelated to inspection results. These findings further imply that school inspection did not probably generate critical data for discussion during teacher evaluation conferences. These and earlier findings in this study show that school inspection is significantly ineffective in providing data on teacher performance or practice that can be used during teacher evaluation conferences.

This study posits that teacher evaluation conferences could be an opportune forum for the head teacher to interact with individual teachers on their performance and on how they could improve. As Ali (1998, p. 25) notes, the head teacher in the SFTD model is "as accountable for teachers' development as for student development." The teacher evaluation conference is a critical moment for helping teachers to identify areas of professional competence that need improvement; to negotiate the processes, resources and assessment criteria; and to draw realistic implementation and monitoring plans. The findings seem also to imply that there is

limited interaction among school staffs concerning outcomes of inspection. A further implication is that schools largely keep inspection outcomes to themselves and deal with them independently at the school level or that the inspection outcomes do not warrant any inter school interaction. The SFTD model according to Ali (1998) consists of an inter-school component managed by supervisory teachers who offer 'situationally contexted' supervision within a cluster of schools. Ali argues that assigning supervisory tasks such as supporting study groups, action research projects and peer coaching across schools to competent subject teachers makes a lot of educational and financial sense. The inter-school supervision component which compliments external supervision not only saves money, time and resources but also permits continuous interaction and collaboration among professionals within their particular context to address educational problems, and to generate relevant and appropriate solutions.

The findings further suggested that peer coaching is practiced in some schools negated the outcomes of school inspection. Among the valued components of the culture of learning organizations that educators advance are collegial conversations, collegial creativity, peer-coaching, and school based learning opportunities for professionals (DuFour & Berkey, 1995; Croft, Coggshall, Dollan & Powers, 2010; Barton & Stepanek, 2012). DuFour and Berkey (1995) argued that schools must begin thinking of professional growth not in terms of external workshops but in terms of their workplace. This implies that school leaders must promote an environment in which continuous learning through collegial collaboration and support takes the centre stage.

One participant observed: "The inspection carried out by DES was not so much on teacher development but on minimum standards. Therefore, any staff development activities we have had are related to school based needs and opportunities." While analysing the school staff development files, the researcher found evidence of communication and records of school-based seminars which had been facilitated by consultancy firms focusing on quality management for head teachers, heads of departments and directors of studies. The researcher also accessed staff development files that showed evidence of inter-school seminars for subject teachers on assessment and evaluation. These data indicate that head teachers organize school based seminars in support of teacher practice but probably basing on data from internal inspections. This scenario appears to suggest that the inspection process does not provide data that can be addressed at such sessions or that the data it provides is dealt with at other forums. Arguably, as findings show, the inspection process seemed to be very weak in addressing issues regarding the teaching and learning process to which schools attach a lot of importance.

The study does claim that for school inspection practice to be relevant and supportive of school professionals it must address itself to the problems of the teaching-and-learning process. School inspection must challenge teachers to explore and try out new ways through collegial conversation and creativity. School-based training has been highlighted as one of the characteristics of professional learning organizations and communities (Barton & Stepanek, 2012). The inspection process can engage school leaders and staff by facilitating inquiry, reflection and study so as to cause improvement in teacher practice which is known

to be the most effective way to improve student performance and schools in high performing education systems (Jensen, 2010).

3.4 Recommendations for Enriching School Inspection

The participants recommended that the number of inspections per year be increased to three a year, that is, to one per term. The common practice as revealed by a director at DES is to inspect each school at least once a year. The participants seemed to suggest that increasing the number of school inspections may raise consciousness about its benefits and provide more opportunities for addressing challenges in school performance and management. The participants seem also to suggest that the increase in the number of inspections will perhaps commit all involved parties to the implementation of improvement plans. This study posits that while it is agreeable that the increase in the number of inspections avails more opportunities for raising the effectiveness of the process, it is the deliberate and accurate identification of areas of improvement especially in teacher practice that might perhaps add the most value. Teacher effectiveness has been identified as the single factor that has greater impact on student performance than any other school educational program (Jensen, 2010; Haynes, 2011). School inspection can add more value to schools if it pays attention to issues of increasing teacher effectiveness. The teachers' recommendation that inspectors be well trained on how to give advice to teachers seems to suggest that some inspectors lack competence and skills in offering professional advice to teachers on how they can improve. This recommendation also implies that some inspectors need further training in evaluating the teaching and learning process in order for them to measure up to the challenges of guiding teachers. An earlier finding in this study shows that some primary school inspectors who seemed to be lacking in examining secondary school teacher practice were assigned to secondary schools.

The provision of adequate and effective instructional advice to teachers can go a long way in saving time and resources. In the same vein, accurate examination of teacher practice can also lead to strategic and timely planning and implementation of appropriate staff development strategies. Ali (1998) underscores the need for training and retraining of inspectors if they are to keep up with the challenges of supervising teaching professionals in the era where schools look at themselves as learning organizations. The participants recommended that inspectors be well equipped and motivated so as to carry out their work more effectively. It cannot be overstated that well facilitated and motivated inspectors can make a positive impact to the inspection process. An earlier study by Barrow (2011) showed that poor facilitation and motivation impinged negatively on the inspectors work. In an in-depth interview a director at DES also singled out the inadequacy of facilitation as one of the challenges that limited their work.

A well skilled, facilitated and motivated human resource is the most desirable for quality assurance in any education system that aims at continuously improving educational quality (Wanzare, 2002). This study posits that the rational planning and implementation of the school inspection process and the strategic use of funds in those areas that add the highest value to the improvement of schools is as crucial and indispensable in financially-constrained

contexts as it is in financially-endowed ones. The issue of inspectors taking on a fault-finding and intimidating stance has been highlighted by earlier researchers (Sembirige, 2009; Chanda, 2011). This stance has been found to cause stress among teachers and head teachers and has proved counter-productive to the schools. This finding is contrary to the finding by Ouston, Fidler & Earley, 1997 who found the that one of the key aspects of inspection that triggered improvement in schools was the conduct of the members of the inspection team. In this study, one head teacher expressed the need for inspection to be supportive and not a fault-finding expedition thus: "It (inspection) should not be seen as a fault-finding mission; rather it must be viewed as a process intended for learning and adding value to the teaching and learning processes." This position is further underscored by Penzer (2011) who posits that the demeanour of inspectors during inspection is one of the key tools that helps to give their judgements and conclusions the best chance of acceptance by the school professionals.

The recommendation that inspectors emphasize both pre-inspection and post-inspection visits to schools seems to suggest that the teachers are concerned that inspection tends to be carried out without due preparation to such an extent that the process ends up appearing to be a disruption than a support to the teaching and learning process. Pre-inspection preparation would reduce the tension in the school but would also allow the staff to know what to expect rather than the whole process being an impromptu one. The findings by Ouston, Fidler and Earley (1997) indicated that one of key areas of the inspection process that triggers school improvement is pre-inspection preparation. Pre-inspection provides an opportunity to schools to check if recommendations from a previous inspection are fully implemented and to evaluate their impact. The pre-inspection phase sets the stage for an interactive engagement between inspectors, school leaders and staff.

According to Steele (2000) the pre-inspection phase within the OFSTED inspection framework has five major purposes namely to establish a good and working relationship between the inspector (s) and the head teacher; to gain a better understanding of the school, is nature and how it goes about its work; to agree on aspects of the school that the inspection might focus on, some of which are identified by the school; to brief the staff and governors on how the inspection will proceed; and to agree on the necessary arrangements for the inspection. Undoubtedly, such a pre-inspection phase as advanced by Steele sets a strong foundation for a meaningful and successful inspection. The recommendation that school inspections should move hand in hand with financial support especially for private schools seems to suggest that much as inspection could be carried out effectively little change may take place in the schools without the financial means to implement the recommendations especially for resource-constrained schools. One of the major tasks of an external supervisor in the SFTD model as advanced by Ali (1998) is to systematically document and communicate schools' needs for external assistance, which as Penzer (2011) notes could take several forms including professional advice and funds among others. According to Penzer inspectors should present inspection results with cognizance that schools always have to juggle resources between competing school needs. Supporting schools then especially in sourcing for external professional or financial support may as well be part of the inspectors' repertoire.

3.5 Enriching the Pre-Inspection Phase

The recommendation that inspectors should organize regular seminars for teachers and head teachers on the importance of inspection implies that the participants felt a need for them to be sensitized about the benefits of school inspections and the inspectors' expectations in the process. The teachers' and head teachers' knowledge of the goals, benefits and expectations of inspection might enhance their commitment to the process and its outcomes. The researcher in this study posits that the continuous education of school leaders and professionals about the goals, benefits and expectations of inspection is an indispensable activity in setting the stage for successful school inspection.

The proposal that head teachers and heads of departments be involved in the supervision of lessons and other activities in view of staff development seems to suggest that some head teachers and heads of departments are not involved in the supervision of lessons. The involvement of head teachers and heads of departments would put the inspection results into perspective in order to plan for the most appropriate staff development activities as advanced by McQuarrie and Wood (1991). This corroborates with Sheppard (1996) who found a positively strong relationship between effective instructional leadership and teacher commitment, professional involvement and innovativeness. Sheppard identified several instructional behaviours of the school principal that are associated with the positive effects. The behaviours included framing and communicating school goals, supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum, monitoring student progress, protecting instructional time, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives to teachers, supporting professional development sessions and providing incentives for learning. Additionally, Sheppard found that promoting teachers' professional development was the most influential instructional leadership behaviour of the head teacher at both the primary and secondary school levels. Regarding the involvement of heads of departments in supervision Brown, Rutherford and Boyle (2000) found that monitoring and evaluation of teachers were often neglected by heads of departments because they often allocated insufficient time to them. Brown et al. argue that heads of departments and their members form units which are essential agents of change in schools because they share subject loyalty, expertise and interests. Given these earlier findings it would be critically neglectful of head teachers and heads of departments not to engage in instructional supervision of teacher practice. In addition, data collected from such supervision would be fed into discussion with teachers in planning for staff development for individual teachers and the whole staff. Arguably, the participants' recommendations for enriching the pre-inspection phase are critical to the process and promise to raise the effectiveness of the inspection process if implemented.

4. Conclusion

The researcher made two major conclusions basing on the findings of the study. First, school inspection is a useful service that governments have established. Importantly governments have invested significantly in external evaluation to ensure accountability, quality education, and continuous improvement of education service delivery in schools. In Uganda, the Directorate of Education Standards has accomplished a lot in documenting the tools that

inspectors need and in facilitating their work even though a lot more still needs to be done. However, school inspection practice is failing in many aspects to measure up to the challenges in secondary education especially in evaluating teacher performance and in improving teacher performance through staff development.

Second, the study also concluded that the challenges of school inspection practice were spread out throughout the entire process from the pre-inspection phase, the actual inspection phase to the post- inspection phase. The value and effectiveness of school inspection is significantly reduced when no preparation is made with the school leaders before inspection. The value of inspection is further reduced when inspectors depict incompetence during the inspection process; and when no follow up is made after inspection to ascertain the extent to which school leaders and teachers implemented the changes proposed. The failure on the part of inspectors to offer adequate feedback and advice to head teachers and teachers, and their inability to conduct follow up visits to assess any improvement made after inspection undermines the gains that the process could have achieved in secondary schools. Subsequently, teachers and head teachers anchored most of the staff development activities in their schools on data from internal supervision conducted by head teachers and heads of departments rather than on outcomes of school inspections. Inspectors highlighted an overwhelming workload, incompetence on the part of some, and insufficient funding as hindrances that impinged on the effectiveness of their work.

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