Understanding the impact of school inspection: An analysis of how school leaders in Wales interpret and respond to inspection outcomes

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Submitted in partial fulfilment for the award of the degree of Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD)

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

2023

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed (candidate) **Date** 30.11.23

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s). Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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STATEMENT 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for deposit in the University's digital repository**.**

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Abstract

This research explores school leaders' interpretation of and response to inspection outcomes in order to better inform policy developments. In the United Kingdom (UK), research related to school inspection has tended to focus on England's inspectorate, Ofsted, and its influence on teachers and leaders there. This study is unique in that it considers for the first time the Welsh education and training inspectorate, Estyn, and its perception amongst school leaders in Wales.

Semi-structured interviews with four school leaders with experience of inspection were conducted. The sample reflected variation in inspection outcomes and diversity in school size, type and geographic location. Inspired by Foucault's conceptions of discourse and power (Foucault, 1972; 1977), a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) was undertaken and provided a framework for the exploration of perceptions of inspection and how they affect school leaders' actions.

Findings from the study suggest that the conduct of inspectors was more of a concern to participants than the judgements they awarded. While school leaders accepted inspection was a necessary process linked to the need to build and maintain public confidence, they were in broad agreement that the inspectors themselves did not communicate appropriately with school staff, were too authoritarian, and were at times disrespectful. This contributed to an 'us versus them' mentality and instilled in school leaders feelings of rejection, failure, anxiety and fear.

The most compelling finding, that reaffirms claims made in earlier studies (Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2009; Courtney, 2016; Page, 2017), relates to the way in which school leaders slavishly follow inspection criteria to such an extent that their behaviour and practice is driven almost entirely by the inspection process. New evidence obtained through this study suggests that both the inspector and the inspected engage in acts of fabrication that calls into question the efficacy of inspection as a robust accountability mechanism.

Acknowledgements

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Total word count: 66,420

Glossary

AoLE – Area of Learning and Experience

A-level – Advanced level qualification

BERA – British Educational Research Association

Capped 9 – Secondary school performance measure (Wales)

CfW – Curriculum for Wales

DT – Design and Technology

Estyn – Education and training inspectorate for Wales

FDA – Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

FSM – Free School Meals

GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education

HMCI – His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training

HMI – His Majesty's Inspector of Education and Training

ICT – Information and Communications Technology

ITE – Initial Teacher Education

National School Categorisation System – Colour-coded school rating system

NFER – National Foundation for Educational Research

NPQH – National Professional Qualification for Headship

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Ofsted – Office for Standards in Education (England)

Progress 8 – Secondary school performance measure (England)

PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment

RAG rating – Red-Amber-Green rating

Senedd Cymru – Welsh Parliament

UK – United Kingdom

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Chapter 1: Introduction and rationale

1.1 Inspection in Wales (Estyn)

Wales' education and training inspectorate, Estyn (from the Welsh language verb *estyn*, meaning 'to reach out, stretch or extend'), was established in 1992 to inspect and report on the quality of education provided across the country (Donaldson, 2018; Estyn, 2021a). Independent from Senedd Cymru (the Welsh Parliament) but funded by and answerable to the Welsh Government, Estyn is a non-ministerial organisation that publishes thematic reports to inform policy development and provides independent advice and guidance to ministers on matters related to school standards. It is led by His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training (HMCI) and has three strategic objectives, to: provide public accountability to service users on the quality and standards of education in Wales; inform the development of national policy by the Welsh Government; and build capacity for improvement of the education system (Estyn, 2020a).

However, it is the publication of individual school reports that tends to attract most attention within the education system itself (Bokhove *et al.* 2023). Under the most recent, complete inspection framework (2016-2022), upon which this research is based, schools in Wales were inspected at least once every seven years and received a phone call giving notice three weeks prior to an inspection being undertaken. During their visits to schools, inspectors explored five key inspection areas: standards; wellbeing and attitudes to learning; teaching and learning experiences; care, support and guidance; and leadership and management (Estyn, 2020b). Post-inspection, schools were given one of four summative judgements for each of the key areas, which reflected their current performance and areas for improvement. These judgements, with Estyn's description of what the judgements meant, are laid out in the following table:

Judgement	Description
Excellent	Very strong, sustained performance and practice
Good	Strong features, although minor aspects may require improvement
Adequate and needs improvement	Strengths outweigh weaknesses, but important aspects require improvement
Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement	Important weaknesses outweigh strengths

Table 1: Estyn inspection judgements, 2016-2022 (Estyn, 2020b, p.3)

Schools were given different levels of support and monitoring, depending on their inspection outcomes. Typically, schools returning predominantly 'Excellent' and 'Good' judgements would be given greater autonomy than those considered 'Adequate and needs improvement' or 'Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement', which were often subject to more sustained scrutiny. The results of inspection are made publicly available through Estyn's website, which is used by parents and other key stakeholders to gauge schools' performance relative to others (this is true of the current framework, as well as that employed from 2016-2022). As in many other countries around the world, the reports are also shared with higher-level education authorities who use them to evaluate schools and hold them accountable for the public resources they receive (OECD, 2015). In Wales, inspection outcomes were also considered during the process of school categorisation, as outlined in section *3.3.6*.

The outcomes of inspection are significant and can have a lasting impact on the day-to-day running of a school. For example, a school that was considered by Estyn to be 'Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement' could suffer serious consequences, such as job losses and/or a change of leadership (Jones & Tymms, 2014; Eyles & Machin, 2015). In the most extreme cases, ongoing concerns about school standards could lead to the imposition of 'special measures' – recognition that a school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education (Welsh Government, 2017b) – and on at least one occasion in Wales, the repeated poor performance of a school and its failure to improve in inspection has led to its closure (BBC Wales, 2013). Such interventions are rare, however, and it is important to note that

while inspection outcomes can prove problematic for some (e.g. those considered to be underachieving), they can also give cause for celebration.

It is common for schools deemed by the inspectorate to be performing well to attract attention within their communities and, in much the same way as negative outcomes invite publicity, those that receive positive feedback are often rewarded with favourable reporting in the press (Rosenthal, 2004). As such, a school in receipt of an 'Excellent' judgement would not only succeed in enhancing teachers' sense of efficacy and self-worth, but likely make the school more appealing to new recruits (Meyer *et al*. 2002; McNatt & Judge, 2008). There is an expectation on these high-performing schools that they will share what they have done with others, either informally through brokered school-to-school collaboration or formally, via 'effective practice' case studies (Estyn, 2021b). Whether outcomes are good or bad, consequences associated with 'Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement' and 'Excellent' judgements have contributed to the perception of school inspection in Wales as being 'high-stakes' (Sims, 2016).

1.2 Estyn as 'high-stakes'

The phrase 'high-stakes' is commonly associated with high-rolling card games in which participants win or lose large sums of money, and is now widely used in education to refer to the direct consequences of accountability mechanisms, such as inspection (Barzano, 2009). More specifically, high-stakes in this context is taken to reflect the way in which schools and educators are under increasing pressure to meet standardised achievement targets (Sims, 2016), such as those allocated to specific groups of learners or learners from different socio-economic backgrounds. As highlighted by Volante & Sonia (2010), in high-stakes accountability systems there tends to be a nationwide effort to create standardised performance criteria, with an emphasis on testing data as the strict measurement of teacher and pupil success or failure. They assume 'hard governance' structures designed to control quality (Grek *et al*. 2013, p.495) and give rise to 'accountability pressure' (Reezigt & Creemers, 2005, p.410) – from parents, governors and other key stakeholders – that drives improvement. In short, when the consequences flowing from accountability measures are unduly high, schools can become driven by their interpretation of the criteria used by external

agencies to judge performance (Donaldson, 2015). This, in turn, may lead to unintended consequences – i.e. outcomes that are not the ones foreseen and intended by a purposeful action; or to put it another way, the 'unwelcome side-effects of policy' (de Zwart, 2015, p.283).

The expectation that schools adhere to and comply with inspection frameworks and performance criteria aligns with my conceptualisation of the performativity discourse, a key area of interest to this study, as an inhibiting influence on educational institutions and their staff (see section *2.1.1*). The subjecting of practitioners to ongoing scrutiny of performance via inspection (Brix *et al*. 2014), has created a climate in which teachers feel they are being continuously watched and challenged to achieve. This 'surveillance' (see section *2.1.2*) is in some part owing to what Hardy & Lewis (2016, p.671) describe as the 'fetishisation of school performance data', and an apparent obsession within the educational sphere to quantify and measure what schools, and therefore pupils, are able to do. Roberts-Holmes (2015, p.1) calls this focus on measuring schools the 'datafication' of teaching which, he says, means that 'teachers' work is increasingly constrained by performativity demands to produce "appropriate" data'. Stevenson's (2017, p.537) definition of datafication as transforming the educational process 'into numbers that allow measurement, comparison and the functioning of high-stakes accountability systems linked to rewards and sanctions' has resonance with Foucault's work, explored in greater depth in *Chapter 2*.

Lingard & Rawolle (2010, p.39) liken the apparent reliance on testing and learner attainment to an 'economising' of policy, that is interested more in raw numerical outputs – for example, the percentage of top grades awarded in external examinations – than pupils' *actual* learning and progression through education. The net result is neatly articulated by Sackney & Mitchell (2008, p.112), whose research on policy reform in Canada found school leaders to be 'more concerned with accounting than learning, with control than with teaching, with compliance than with risk taking and with public relations than with student experiences'.

1.3 Estyn's code of conduct

Estyn inspectors, often referred to as 'HMIs' (His Majesty's Inspectors of Education and Training), are qualified teachers who receive training centrally via the inspectorate's head office in central Cardiff. This training provides new inspectors with a grounding in Estyn processes and procedures, including the writing of reports and how to engage with its common inspection framework (Estyn, 2021a). Estyn's (ibid) 'code of conduct for inspectors' is designed to negate the potential for inspectors to respond in different ways during the inspection process (see section *3.3.5*). A form of quality assurance, it requires inspectors to: be courteous and professional; carry out their work with integrity and due sensitivity; evaluate the work of the provider objectively; report honestly, fairly and impartially; communicate clearly and openly; act in the best interests of learners; and respect the confidentiality of all information received during the course of their work (Estyn, 2021a).

Inspectors are expected to inform Estyn of any perceived or actual conflicts of interest as soon as they are given notification that they are part of a particular school's inspection team, and 'ensure that evaluations are secure, reliable, valid and based on first-hand evidence' (Estyn, 2021a, p.5). This does not, however, mean that inspectors themselves are subject to any degree of surveillance over and above their adherence to Estyn's code of conduct. The fact that the inspectorate is not routinely held accountable for its own performance (aside for, say, the auditing of public finances) is the subject of some consternation within the education community (e.g. Courtney, 2012; Baxter & Clarke, 2013; Hutchings, 2015). Nonetheless, Estyn's approach to inspection is based on four key principles, to be: fair and impartial, supportive, reflective and transparent. In relation to being fair and impartial, Estyn (2021a, p.6) states that:

> This means that we work to be independent, objective and balanced. We are robust and consistent in our work. We weigh the evidence and its significance to provide an honest, credible and accurate view of the provider's strengths and areas for improvement.

The main forms of evidence gathered by inspectors to inform an inspection are: samples of pupils' work; discussions with pupils, staff, leaders and other key stakeholders; observation of teaching and other activities; learning walks, that involve inspectors visiting individual classes or workshops; pre-inspection parent/carer questionnaires; documentary or electronic

evidence (including e.g. self-evaluation documentation and school development plans); and information from the local authority/regional education consortium, as appropriate (Estyn, 2021a). Prior to this, school leaders are invited to provide a brief 'position statement' to set out their school's strategic priorities and current stage of development. In its guidance for inspectors, Estyn (ibid, p.12) reiterates its commitment to ongoing professional dialogue during inspection that 'enables inspectors to gain first-hand evidence from practitioners that can be triangulated with other sources of evidence'.

1.4 A new dawn for the inspectorate?

This study's interest in school leaders' interpretation of and response to inspection outcomes is justified by ongoing changes to Estyn, following an independent review of the inspectorate commissioned by the Welsh Government in July 2017. The review, which sought to 'build on Estyn's strengths and improve the work of the inspectorate further' (Estyn, 2017, par.2), was heavily influenced by a formal 'call for evidence' undertaken by researchers at Cardiff University. More than half of the call's 505 responses were from school-based practitioners, and a large proportion were from other educational professionals (Taylor *et al*. 2018). Collectively, almost all stakeholders expressed some concerns about Estyn, even if on balance they believed the inspectorate to be playing an important role in improving the quality of education in Wales (ibid). More specifically, analysis of the call for evidence found that 'many of the criticisms of school inspections related to the conduct of inspectors, claims that poor inspection reports were unsubstantiated, that inspections are stressful and that inspections are too data driven' (Taylor *et al*. 2018, p.iii). The most widely cited concern was that 'inspections are rather punitive and not supportive enough, suggesting that a different accountability system might better help schools improve than the current system does' (ibid, p.iii).

The review itself, led by Graham Donaldson (2018), the author of Wales' new national curriculum blueprint *Successful Futures* (Donaldson, 2015; see section *3.2.3*), found that benchmarking tools such as those currently used to gauge performance in Wales 'can inculcate a culture of fear, inhibiting creativity and genuine professional analysis and discussion' (Donaldson, 2018, p.23). It highlighted as widely-held concerns of key

stakeholders 'the perceived negative effects of the current "high-stakes" accountability culture in Wales and… schools being subject to multiple and potentially competing accountabilities' (ibid, p.14). Further limitations included what the report described as 'a cyclical approach to inspection', resulting in 'significant gaps between inspections', and the reliability of inspections more broadly, with some contributors questioning the consistency in how inspections are carried out (ibid, p.18). It noted that:

> Some respondents felt that inspectors varied in what they saw as good or bad practice. Examples were given of schools trying to customise their evidence and behaviour during the inspection to meet the assumed preferences of the lead inspector.
>
> (Donaldson, 2018, p.19)

This customisation of evidence and behaviour to suit individual inspector preference chimes with what Ehren *et al*. (2016, p.87) describe as 'window dressing' and the process by which school leaders and their staff 're-story themselves in and against the audit culture' (Stronach *et al*. 2002, p.130). Page (2017, p.4) argues that such practice derives from the high-stakes nature of inspection, and is now commonplace, noting that 'where once surveillance was temporal, focused on specific times and activities, teachers now work within an environment of normalised visibility'. Teacher response to inspection will be further explored in section *3.3.4*.

Estyn's response to the review, which recommended a more collegiate approach to inspection based on self-evaluation, was proactive and discussions with all key stakeholders resulted in a revised inspection framework. Headline changes to the framework, which launched in early 2022, saw the removal of summative judgements from school reports and greater emphasis on a school's strengths and areas for improvement (Estyn, 2021c). This was designed to help encourage more professional dialogue about the quality of a school's work (Estyn, 2022a) and responds to recommendations made by Donaldson (2018, p.23), who argued that the reducing of reports to a single judgement 'can over-simplify and fail to reflect the complexities of a school and of the learning process'.

Feedback from Estyn's consultation on the changes showed that respondents who were in favour of removing summative judgements believed them to be often viewed in isolation, without context, and that a more holistic view of a school's performance was needed (Estyn, 2020c). They suggested that 'summative gradings are too simplistic' and removing them

would encourage schools to instead read an inspection report in its entirety (ibid, p.7). Those who supported the retention of judgements argued that the gradings (e.g. 'Excellent', 'Good' etc) were a quick, accessible and helpful way for parents and the wider public to make decisions about schools and standards (Estyn, 2020c). As per previous frameworks, reports published within the new structure continue to include an overview of performance and recommendations, albeit evaluations and judgements are written into a narrative, and there has been no change to statutory follow-up activity (Estyn, 2021c).

Estyn's change in approach is reflective of what some have described as a policy of more 'proportionate accountability' (Waters *et al*. 2018, p.14), characterised by teachers and leaders in Wales being prepared for a future in which accountability processes will be *enacted with* the profession, rather than *done to* them (Hutt & Lewis, 2021). Given the relative infancy of Estyn's new inspection framework, it is my hope that the findings presented in this study (which relate specifically to the preceding framework, 2016-2022) will inform the inspectorate's evolution moving forward, particularly in the context of the new Welsh curriculum and culture of professionalism Wales appears to be working towards (see section *3.2.3*). Estyn announced in April 2023 that it would be making further revisions to how it inspects from September 2024 based on its discussions with a range of stakeholders (Estyn, 2023a).

1.5 The impact of school inspection: A world view

The public availability of school inspection reports has been likened to a process of 'naming and shaming', particularly for those schools that are considered to have been struggling (Bevan & Wilson, 2013, p.245). That does not mean the impact of inspection on schools is universally negative, however, and there is evidence to suggest that the publication of inspection outcomes can have a positive effect on school performance and provide an impetus for progress (McCrone *et al*. 2009; Allen & Burgess, 2012; Hopkins *et al*. 2016). Indeed, in their regression discontinuity analysis of school inspections in England, Allen & Burgess (2012, p.2) note that, in principle, the effects of failing an inspection 'could go either way: it could be a catalyst for improvement or a route to decline'.

In some cases, the pressure on schools to perform and demonstrate to inspectors that the education they offer children is of an acceptable standard (Gustafsson *et al*. 2015) leads to unintended consequences and drives teacher behaviours. Kemethofer *et al*. (2017, p.323), in their comparative study of inspection in Sweden and Austria, describe this practice as the 'quest for legitimacy', noting that:

> Inspection standards, procedures and reports create normative pressure which stimulate schools – in their quest for legitimacy – to react in a way to school inspections that will enhance their legitimacy.

Often, it is by conforming to institutionalised values and established norms, as set by the inspectorate, that legitimacy is gained (Meyer & Rowan, 2006). After all, it is the inspectorate that decides 'what a "good school" should look like and how it is to operate' (Kemethofer *et al*. 2017, p.322). This has been linked to what some scholars regard as a 'culture of performativity', in which 'the performances of individual subjects or organisations serve as measures of productivity or output' (Ball, 2013, p.57). These performances, argues Ball (ibid) 'stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement'. These ideas are explored in greater detail in the coming pages (see sections *2.1.1* and *2.1.3*), as I argue that the recognised process of inspection in Wales has what can be considered performative tendencies.

The process of inspection as a form of accountability can evoke feelings of tension and strain for those being inspected (e.g. Nichols *et al*. 2006; Jones & Egley, 2006; Verger & Parcerisa, 2017). Research has found that inspection can be 'damaging emotionally and professionally' (Hopkins *et al*. 2016, p.59) and, in some cases, 'profoundly toxic, damaging trust between staff, pupils, parents and policymakers' (Park, 2013, p.120). There are exceptions, and teachers have reported feelings of relief, elation and pride in the immediate aftermath of inspection (e.g. Ofsted, 2007; Barnes, 2012), particularly if it is deemed to have gone well. There is also broad acceptance that inspection has an important function in providing schools with valuable analysis of their strengths and weaknesses, acting as a stimulus for support and resources provided externally (Matthews & Sammons, 2004). According to Cunningham (2019, p.55), whose research considered the relationship between inspection and school improvement (explored further in section *3.3.5*) in Western Australia, how a school performs in inspection will determine whether it considers itself 'a winner or loser within the policy

framework'. Overall, the inspection regime has attracted mixed reviews (Rosenthal, 2004), albeit there is strong evidence which suggests that teachers' perceptions of the process tend to be more negative than positive (Vass & Simmonds, 2001; Park, 2013; Tunç *et al*. 2015; Luff, 2021).

Whilst all staff within a school are in some way susceptible to the outcomes of inspection and what happens as a result, it is arguably school leaders that have the most to gain or lose (see section *3.2.4*). As Wallace (2001, p.156) makes clear, 'heads alone are charged with legal responsibility for running the school within the oversight of the governing body', and thus ultimate responsibility for inspection performance rests with those appointed by governors to lead. The heightened pressure on school leaders to perform in inspection was brought into sharp focus recently, and towards the completion of this thesis, when it was widely reported in the media that a headteacher in England had committed suicide after receiving a negative inspection report. Ruth Perry's family were quoted as saying she had taken her own life in January 2023 as a 'direct result' of the pressure put on her by the process and outcome of her inspection, which downgraded her school from 'Outstanding' to 'Inadequate' (Weale, 2023, par.3). Ms Perry's tragic death and the events leading up to it have been the subject of intense scrutiny and attracted heavy criticism, most notably from education trade unions who believe inspection to be disproportionate and counterproductive (Ng & Kingsley, 2023). There has since been pressure on England's inspectorate, Ofsted, to reform its inspection processes (Adams, 2023; Santry, 2023).

1.6 The 'dreaded call' – why I chose to focus on inspection

My impression of inspection and accountability more generally has been shaped by my own professional career in education (across two related, but distinct career pathways) over the course of the past 14 years. It is important to note, therefore, that the following presentation of inspection is based heavily on these personal experiences, which I acknowledge might have resulted in a somewhat skewed early synopsis. My positionality in this research is explored in greater detail later (see section *4.6*).

Initially as a specialist education journalist and, more recently, an educational researcher and policy analyst, I have reported on inspection outcomes, interviewed key stakeholders and, in some cases, supported schools to prepare for and respond to inspection scrutiny. My work has therefore been heavily influenced by the scores of schools and many hundreds of teachers and leaders in Wales with whom I have come into contact. The vast majority have experienced inspection first-hand; some have led their schools through inspection, while others have been called upon to provide evidence. In the few cases where teachers had not yet experienced the visit of Estyn inspectors, they had braced themselves for what some have described to me as the 'dreaded call' that signals an inspection is imminent (see *Figure 1* below for an illustration of this, posted on social networking site *Twitter*).

Figure 1: An anonymised teacher's tweet referencing their school's impending inspection

My interest in inspection as a form of accountability stems from my many conversations with teachers and leaders, and their illuminating descriptions of the 'lived' inspection process. In some cases, schools have been lauded for their high-quality and 'sector-leading' practice, with glowing media coverage testament to teachers' passion and enthusiasm for the children in their care. Indeed, I have written in my earlier career about a small number of schools that have received the highest possible Estyn judgement, with the maximum grade attributed to all aspects of their work. However, more often than not, teachers and leaders have presented Estyn to me in a distinctly negative light, with criticisms about its impact on staff behaviour and morale, inspector conduct and quality of reporting.

I have seen the devastating effect inspection can have on teachers' mental health and the way in which an Estyn visit can become all-consuming for staff desperate to put on 'a good show'. For many, the potential consequences arising from a poor inspection outcome are a source of genuine anxiety and distress (e.g. Leeuw, 2002; Hopkins *et al*. 2016). In my experience, teachers have lost their jobs, leaders have suffered irreparable reputational damage and entire school communities have been shamed into thinking education in their area is a genuine problem. In other, less frequent cases, teachers and leaders have spoken of the energy and impetus garnered through positive inspection episodes. All of this serves to show that a practitioner's experience of the inspection process can vary greatly.

It is with this contrast – between celebration and dismay – in mind that I wanted to learn more about inspection, and the way in which it influences how school leaders, as those ultimately responsible for inspection outcomes, behave and respond. I was conscious that my existing interpretation of the effects of inspection on school staff was purely anecdotal, and based only on my own previous encounters with teachers and leaders in the field. As such, I was presenting inspection as others had experienced it, and without the benefit of more rounded educational research, I could not confidently argue that what I had seen and heard was a fair representation of what was happening on a wider scale. Equally important for me was the need to explain in clearer terms why schools reacted to inspection the way they did. In short, I felt more comfortable explaining the consequential effects of inspection on staff and their communities, than I did the rationale for schools' response to inspection and their respective Estyn judgements.

This uncertainty, coupled with my regular discussions with school leaders across the country, made inspection the ideal focus for my professional doctorate. It was my intention to use this opportunity to challenge my own thinking, question some of my long-held biases, and test the assumptions I had developed over time to explore much more rigorously and in greater depth the impact of inspection on school leaders. Having considered a number of different aspects of inspection, and the way in which they affect the education system more broadly, I settled on an overarching aim and three research questions. These are outlined in the following section.

1.7 Research aim and questions

While inspection reports provide a snapshot of a school's performance against a set of previously-determined criteria, consistent for all, they do so only at a moment in time. Inspectors are required to base their judgements on what they see and hear during the course of their visit, albeit that historical pupil data and pre-inspection questionnaires form an important part of inspectors' decision-making process. They are not required to provide a more comprehensive, complete narrative of a school's development over a longer period (e.g. the gap *between* inspections). This to me is a clear shortcoming. For once a judgement is made by an inspector, there is no reliable way of knowing how it is interpreted and then acted upon by school leaders. The inability of Estyn reports to document what happens *as a result* of publication (e.g. once a judgement has been awarded) therefore means that there is no obvious way of verifying that an inspector's view of a school's performance has been read as it was intended.

Under the inspection system of interest to this study (related to the 2016-2022 inspection cycle), Estyn has the capacity to make judgement in the moment, but for the majority of schools, is less concerned about what actions are taken subsequently, aside for those schools subject to statutory follow-up activity (Estyn, 2021d). And so, assuming there to be a lengthy break (of several years) separating a school's inspections, it is not currently clear in Estyn's reporting what school leaders actually *do* with outcomes once they have been published. As such, this research is interested in better understanding what happens as a result of one inspection, that contributes in some way to the outcome of the next. Or to put it another way, it seeks to explore the practical interventions introduced by school leaders in light of Estyn judgements – and on what basis they chose those interventions over others.

The study works on the assumption that school leaders interpret the outcomes of inspection in different ways, based on their own prior experience of inspection and interpretation of what inspection is designed to do, which in turn leads to different actions. This assumption is founded on the basis of prior research in the field (Ouston *et al*. 1997; Bennett, 2003; Hopkins *et al*. 2016) and the findings of an earlier pilot study undertaken to inform the work presented here (see section *4.4.5*). This pilot study was helpful in identifying distinct phases of the inspection process, and how they impacted on and influenced school leaders' emotional and

physical responses. It provided evidence that school leaders' perception of the inspectorate (i.e. pre-inspection) shaped both their interpretation of outcomes (i.e. resulting from the publication of their Estyn report) and their subsequent responses to them (i.e. the legacy of inspection). In order to develop a clearer insight into the thought process of school leaders, it was therefore appropriate that this study first considered what Estyn and the process of inspection actually *meant* to individual school leaders (i.e. how they understood inspection as a concept). From there, I explored how school leaders interpret specific inspection outcomes, and how those interpretations – i.e. their assessment of outcomes – influence what actions they take as a result.

The study's overarching aim was to better understand how school leaders in Wales interpret and respond to school inspection outcomes. To do this, my research explored three research questions, which were informed by the findings of my pilot study:

- **How do school leaders understand inspection as a concept (i.e. their interpretation of what inspection is for/does)?;**
- **How do school leaders interpret inspection outcomes (i.e. what they understand by key judgements)?; and**
- **How do school leaders respond to inspection outcomes (i.e. what they do as a result)?**

In essence, my research was motivated by a desire to better understand why school leaders respond to inspection outcomes in different ways, and the extent to which their own interpretation of Estyn's judgements informs their subsequent actions. It does not seek to discover one, definitive representation of the inspection process, or an optimum response to it. Rather, it is interested in exploring in greater detail the extent to which school leaders' interpretation of inspection outcomes contributes to what they do and what interventions they make.

Having reviewed the existing literature on matters relating to inspection and accountability in education (see *Chapter 3*), it is apparent that studies of this type are almost non-existent in the Welsh context. Much has been written internationally, but researchers working or interested in the United Kingdom (UK) have tended to focus on Ofsted and its impact on teachers and leaders in England. This study is unique in that it considers for the first time the

Welsh education and training inspectorate, Estyn, and its perception amongst school leaders in Wales. Representing an original contribution to new knowledge, I am optimistic that its specific interest in the response of school leaders to Estyn will better inform the inspectorate's transition to new working arrangements, as explained in section *1.4*. The story of Ruth Perry and recent developments in England (Weale, 2023; Ng & Kingsley, 2023; Adams, 2023; Santry, 2023) further demonstrates the need for this research into school leaders' interpretation of and response to inspection outcomes in order to better inform policy developments in Wales.

Chapter 2: Conceptual framework

2.1 Philosophical approach

In order to explain how school leaders in Wales interpret and respond to school inspection outcomes, I have adopted an interpretivist approach that relies on the subjective experiences of individuals to develop meaning (Arthur *et al*. 2012). This branch of epistemology sees 'people and their interpretations, perceptions, meanings and understandings, as primary data sources' (Mason, 2002, p.56). This is particularly relevant in the context of this study, given my motivation to better understand why school leaders respond to inspection outcomes in different ways, and the extent to which their own interpretation of these judgements informs their subsequent actions. My approach is rooted in the assumption that what we know to be true is merely a construct of the material world in which we live, and we cannot be certain about our claims of knowledge when studying the behaviour and actions of humans (Cresswell, 2009). As such, I conform to the view of Wetherell (1998, p.393), who argues that:

> Meaning can never be finally fixed; it is always in flux, unstable and precarious. The being of objects and people can never be encapsulated, once and for all, in a closed system of differences.

That school leaders do not interpret or respond to inspection in a uniform way, owing to their own assumptions and encounters, serves to justify this orientation (e.g. Courtney, 2013; Hopkins *et al*. 2016). However, it is important to acknowledge that these perspectives, leading to subsequent actions, can change over time and on the basis of new experiences (Ouston *et al*. 1997; Bennett, 2003).

My study adopts a post-structuralist stance. By challenging what has become accepted as 'truth', post-structuralism allows for the deconstruction of taken-for-granted assumptions (Parker *et al*. 1995) and reflects my belief that school leaders are products of an ever-changing and complex professional environment that shapes how they understand and respond to certain situations. Post-structuralism provides a means through which popular perceptions of inspection – such as being 'damaging' (Hopkins *et al*. 2016, p.59) and inculcating 'a culture of fear' (Donaldson, 2018,p.23) – can be more meaningfully explored, and gives cause for deeper analysis of the effects of inspection on school leaders' behaviours. The interest of post-

structuralism in understanding what we do and why we do it, as well as the interconnected relationships between ourselves as individuals and those around us, makes it an appropriate lens through which to explore school leaders' interpretation of and responses to inspection.

During the course of this research, I draw on Foucauldian theory to unpack key themes pertinent to inspection and accountability more generally. In the coming pages, Foucauldian constructs of 'discourse' and 'power' (Foucault, 1972; 1977) are introduced and then explored as a way of informing my analysis of school leaders' responses later in the study. My post-structuralist lens and particular interest in Foucauldian theory also shapes the way in which I review relevant educational literature (see *Chapter 3*).

2.1.1 Discourse

An influential and prominent exponent of post-structural theory, Foucault (1972, p.54) defines discourses, or discursive formations, as bodies of knowledge that 'systematically form the objects of which they speak'. In other words, discourses do not simply describe the social world; they constitute it by bringing certain phenomena into being and making sense of 'an otherwise meaningless reality' (Lewis-Beck *et al*. 2004, p.402). And so it is through discursive formations that lived reality is produced (Mills, 2004). Hall (1997, p.45) elaborates further, explaining that discourses shape how ideas are put into practice and can be 'used to regulate the conduct of others'. This notion of regulation is particularly pertinent in the context of this study, which is interested in the way school leaders interpret and respond to inspection outcomes (i.e. inspection as a form of regulation), and is something I explore further in coming sections (e.g. section *2.1.2*).

Leaving aside for a moment *how* school leaders respond to these judgements (and the practical steps they might take as a consequence), Foucault's construct of discourse is useful in exploring *why* they might respond in a particular way. In Foucauldian theory, individuals are bound by the 'rules of formation' that determine the objects, modes of statement, concepts and thematic choices within a particular discourse (Foucault, 2002, p.42). The implication here is that we can never fully separate ourselves from discourse and discursive formations, as Fadyl & Nicholls (2013, p.25) explain:

> A person's account of themselves and their experiences cannot be seen as a point of origin for the construction of meaning, because the subject is constituted through discourse, and discourse provides the means of articulation and action.

Based on my own lived experience of working within the sector, I have argued previously in another text (Evans, 2022) that 'performativity' and 'professionalism' are two of the more prominent discourses related to the field of education currently at play in Wales. The former, a discourse that pervades teachers' work (Jeffrey, 2002), has been described by Ball (2003, p.216) as 'a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change', and can be related to the way in which teachers and leaders are compelled to evidence performance, using standardised benchmarking criteria and other key performance indicators. In the case of inspection, this means that those being inspected are expected to reach certain targets, set and agreed by the inspectorate as a ruling authority on education, and to demonstrate evidence that they have done so. Failure to reach and evidence these targets, or to achieve what the inspectorate considers an 'accepted' level of performance, usually has consequences and leads to some form of intervention.

Sanctions for what could be construed as *failing to perform* could include the addition of external support, removal of leadership responsibilities and required adherence to prescriptive action plans (Estyn, 2021a). For practitioners, the 'high-stakes' nature of inspection (see section *1.2*) feeds into a number of insecurities, perhaps most obviously the threat of losing employment (Volante & Sonia, 2010). As Harris & Jones (2022, p.1) warn, 'like underperforming companies, relationships or governments, the judgements on underperforming schools are often swift and ruthless', albeit that when standards are demonstrably poor, it is important that action is taken quickly to rectify the situation.

Our perception of inspection as an event bound by rules and regulations, that is laid in statute and conducted using pre-determined areas of interest and judgements, is itself derived from discursive construction. The very notion of holding someone or something to account is itself born from a 'system of representation' developed over time (Hall, 1997, p.17). Taking a Foucauldian perspective, it is the discursive construction of inspection as a form of regulation with very real consequences that leads to its perception amongst teachers and leaders as something to be feared, which in turn drives performative behaviours. In other words, the

process of inspection brings with it its own 'regime of truth' that means practitioners and inspectors conduct themselves in a certain way, and determines ultimately 'the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true' (Foucault, 1976, p.112).

In the discourse of performativity, it is the teacher and school staff that are answerable to the inspector given their inferior status as those *being* inspected, and they are bound by the 'rules of formation' that require them to demonstrate their capacity to meet set aims and objectives (Foucault, 2002, p.42). Somewhat perversely, this means that focus can be shifted away from developing practice for the benefit of learners, towards achieving targets set for the sake of doing so, thus validating one's conformation to the 'rules'. It is accountability structures, of which the inspection event forms part, that precipitate performative behaviours. As Foucault (1981, p.52) himself makes clear, 'in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a... number of procedures'. Procedures related to inspection – such as the dynamic between teacher and inspector, the areas of interest to inspectors, and their reporting arrangements – all contribute to our understanding of performativity, usefully characterised as a new 'discourse of power' (Ball, 2001, p.210), in this context.

The discourse of professionalism, meanwhile, is a much more contested terrain (Mockler, 2005). It can, on the one hand, relate to the way in which members of a profession perceive their knowledge, beliefs and skills as being somehow inherent to their professional practice. It is what makes them a professional, and the currency through which they can showcase, legitimately, their proficiency in a given field. This conceptualisation of professionalism can be likened to notions of professional agency, which according to Priestley & Drew (2019, p.6), 'denotes a "quality" of the engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves'. In other words, the environments in which teachers and leaders operate, and their engagement within those environments, is what gives teachers and leaders the capacity to act agentically, and thus demonstrate their professionalism. Defined by Anderson (2010, p.541) as a teacher's 'capacity to make choices, take principled action, and enact change', this agency represents a form of *bottom-up* professionalism that is empowering and productive, as teachers themselves seek to promote their work and what it means to be an effective practitioner.

The alternative is a more reductive *top-down*, institutional and managerial form of professionalism (Leung 2009; Dehghan, 2022). In essence, professionalism of this kind is more prescribed, and requires the professional to do what is *expected* of someone in their position. Troman's (1996, p.476) perception of professionalism as that being 'defined by management and expressed in its expectations of workers and the stipulation of tasks they will perform' would align with this thinking. Ozga (1995, p.35) offers a possible way through the malaise, arguing that professionalism is 'best understood in context, and particularly in policy context'. This brings into focus the causal relationship between external drivers (e.g. the process of inspection) and practitioner behaviour, and would appear to re-enforce the view of Stronach *et al*. (2002, p.130) that teachers as professionals need to 're-story themselves in and against the audit culture'. It could therefore be argued that if performativity is the imposition of pressure on teachers to 'perform', professionalism of this type instead constitutes the professional agency – and collective pressure *amongst* teachers to perform – inherent within the profession itself.

And so there is, to me, a contrast between the idea that professionalism is in some way liberating for teachers, who are empowered to take agentic action, and the notion that professionalism is in effect a form of self-regulation, born out of a culture of performativity and expectation. There is certainly some overlap between top-down manifestations of professionalism and performativity, given that they both appear to acknowledge and respond to the same pressure on teachers to demonstrate compliance with established norms. In her documentary analysis of English inspection frameworks, Baxter (2014, p.27) refers to 'normative discourses' that legitimise the work of Ofsted, both institutionally and externally. She adds that:

> The agency [Ofsted] acts not purely as a single institution but also as the producer and effector of discourses that influence the way in which standards in English education are understood and conceptualised.
>
> (Baxter, 2014, p.22)

This positioning of the inspectorate as both the *producer* and *effector* of discourse, that then shapes the way in which standards in education are understood and conceptualised (ibid), is helpful in framing my exploration of performativity and professionalism in the context of this research.

2.1.2 Power

Defined as 'the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation' (Foucault, 1976, p.92), Foucault's conceptualisation of 'power' relates, in simple terms, to the way in which one individual or organisation influences another. This does not mean, however, that power resides only in the hands of the few, and is instead relational and manifested in 'localized episodes' that have 'effects on the entire network in which it is caught up' (Foucault, 1977, p.27). Deacon (1998, p.113) takes this thinking further, arguing that 'multiple, local and unstable relations of power are seen as inherent in all human interactions', and thus power is considered ever-present and all-encompassing. In this case, the inherent nature of power means that a teacher is only a teacher if they have somebody to teach, and an inspector only an inspector if they have something to inspect. According to Foucault, power is 'exercised rather than possessed' and, in the context of this study, intrinsic to the dynamic between school leader and inspector (Foucault, in Sawicki, 1991, p.52). In his essay *The Subject and Power*, Foucault (1983, p.212) explains how the exercising of power gives rise to 'struggles', as those being objectified attempt to resist and challenge the power relations that define them:

> This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him (sic) by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects.

Described by Farfan & Holzscheiter (2011, p.14) as 'the ways in which social institutions, societal discourses and political authority constrain the behaviour of human beings', power is commonly associated with constructs of 'influence, authority, persuasion, dissuasion, inducement, coercion, compulsion, [and] force' (Dahl, 1986, p.40). Each of these constructs could be easily applied to the process of inspection, and it has been interesting to explore during the undertaking of this research the way in which power is manifested, exercised and used to bring about changes in behaviour and practice. So too does the study consider the potential for 'struggle', using what Foucault (1983, p.211) describes as 'the antagonism of strategies'. For example, Foucault suggests that if we want to find out what society means by sanity, the issues around insanity should also be investigated (ibid). It follows that in this case,

we might consider the power of the inspector over the inspected – and the struggle by the inspected against what Foucault (1983, p.211) refers to as 'domination'.

This manifestation of power, involving the relationship between inspector and the inspected, can be likened to what Foucault (1977, p.215) calls 'discipline'. A form of regulation, he describes discipline as the control of people through monitoring and surveillance, and an 'anatomy of power' that is omnipresent yet very rarely challenged (ibid). Surveillance, he says, is a means through which discipline and disciplinary power is exerted (Foucault, 1977), and in the context of education, could refer to the way pupils are required to go to school during certain times and on particular days. It relates to the taking of registers and writing of reports; it is what gives teachers authority and makes learners subordinate. A form of social control, Foucault's conceptualising of surveillance derives from what social reformer Jeremy Bentham (1791) coined the 'panopticon', a circular-shaped prison that emerged in the 18th century and allowed watchmen to observe occupants without them knowing they were ever being watched. This, said Bentham (1843, p.93), meant he who observed 'had it in his power to commence and conclude a survey of the whole establishment in the twinkling of an eye'. Meanwhile, for occupants of the panopticon, it was the *threat* of surveyance that drove behaviours, as the ability of watchmen to see without being seen (Bentham, 1791) ensured inmates operated as if they were being watched, even if they were not. As Bentham (1791, p.3, emphasis in original) himself noted, 'at every instant, seeing reason to believe as much, and not being able to satisfy himself to the contrary, he [in the panopticon] should *conceive* himself to be so'.

The panopticon is thus 'an imposition of a structure of domination' (Poster, 1990, p.214) and the site in which disciplinary power plays out. It creates a dichotomy between the 'watchers' and the 'watched' and is, according to Fiske (1999, p.218), 'the most efficient form of power, the most totalitarian and the hardest to resist'. There is so much of interest here when applying Foucauldian notions of discipline and surveillance to the process of inspection in education. First, it gives rise to the perception of inspection as a ubiquitous commodity; something that looms large in the life of a teacher, and that ensures they are subject to ongoing scrutiny and pressure to perform. Second, it presents teachers as objects of surveillance that are never completely hidden from the inspectorate's gaze. School leaders, in particular, are all the more visible given their key role in decision-making and their

hierarchical positioning as the school's first point of contact. Finally, the notion of panopticon-inspired surveillance can be related to the process of inspection in education because of its assumption that those being surveilled are very much *aware* they are being watched. This in itself leads to them doing certain things and behaving in certain ways; it is, returning to Foucauldian notions of performativity, a teacher's response to the 'rules of formation' that governs what they should do in particular social situations. Writing in *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*, Foucault (1977, p.170) makes reference to the 'instruments' through which power is exerted:

> The success of disciplinary power derives no doubt from the use of simple instruments; hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination.

The hierarchical observation and normalising judgement, to which Foucault refers, can be related to the process of inspection which, in this case, is akin to what Foucault might consider 'the examination' (ibid). The impact of this examination of school leaders (as well as other members of school staff) is played out in Bottery's (2007) highly-cited paper on the perceptions of English headteachers to the effects of external pressures. In it, he quotes from one school leader who said that 'most of the decisions I make [are] geared towards thinking "what would Ofsted look for? What would they deem acceptable?"' (Bottery, 2007, p.100). Indeed, Bottery resolves that of the 12 school leaders involved in his study, which used semi-structured interviews to gain an understanding of participants' perceptions of the impact of centralist legislation, Ofsted was 'at the back of people's minds most of the time, steering and channelling their thinking' (ibid). He concludes that most interviewees 'accepted that they framed much day-to-day action, as well the contemplation of any new initiatives, with reference to the likely Ofsted reaction' (Bottery, 2007, p.107).

Perryman *et al*. (2018) paint a similar picture in their more recent paper on the influence of Ofsted on schools. Drawing from case studies involving four 'moderately successful' secondary schools in England, they describe the inspectorate's 'hidden power' and its 'subtle influence on school practices and normalities such that inspection does not have to physically take place for a school to be governed by its perceived judgements' (Perryman *et al*. 2018, p.149). The authors undertook secondary analysis of data from an earlier project and found that the influence of the inspection agenda on strategic direction was strong in schools, with

policy decisions 'often being made to conform to Ofsted's expectations' (ibid, p.146). The power dynamics depicted by both Bottery (i.e. inspection being at the back of people's minds and thus an ongoing concern) and Perryman *et al.* (i.e. inspection as hidden and having a subtle influence on practice) could be considered surveillance in action and chime with MacBeath's (2006, p.42) characterisation of inspection as a way of 'policing' the work of schools.

However, given that in post-structuralist theory power is not one-sided, and therefore not confined to inspectors only, it is also possible for others within the education system (and involved in the process of inspection) to benefit from it. Indeed, Hollander & Einwohner (2004) argue that it is possible for individuals to be simultaneously powerful and powerless within different systems, which in the case of inspection, could relate to the way in which school leaders have authority over their school's direction, whilst at the same time being answerable to visiting inspectors. The idea that power pervades society and is dissipated through all relational structures, making it 'a possibility condition for any relation' (Balan, 2010, p.39), gives rise to the potential for educators to counteract and fight back against the constraining influences on their behaviour. After all, we are reminded by Foucault (1976, pp.95-96) that 'where there is power, there is resistance' and it is impossible to divorce one from the other. In fact, power both implies and produces resistance, with the power relation emerging through a process of antagonism or struggle (Nealon, 2007). And so the struggle, or resistance to power, is itself a force to be reckoned with and one that can influence directly the power dynamic between two parties.

To further explore Foucauldian notions of resistance and its possible implications for this study, I will return briefly to the presentation of school leaders as being subordinate to the inspectorate, as per inmates in the panopticon. This conceptualising of surveillance, with its strong disciplinary connotations, suggests a reluctance or inability on the part of those being watched to do anything about it. There is an element of helplessness in this positioning, as it assumes that school leaders lack the agency and/or appetite to confront inspectors and challenge the judgements they bestow upon them and their schools. But there *is* an alternative, and by objecting to the sort of subjectification apparent in the process of inspection, school leaders can instead choose to engage in what Foucault (1983, p.782) describes as 'anti-authoritarian struggles'. According to Lilja (2018, p.422), the anti-authority

struggle 'is about struggling with power's effects on people and the immediate enemy' which, in this case, could relate to the perceived struggle between school leaders and inspectors (e.g. Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Colman, 2021). Indeed, in practical terms, this form of resistance might result in improved inspection outcomes, as school staff seek to persuade inspectors that what they have seen is deserving of a better grade (Baxter & Clarke, 2013). The very fact that such a conversation (leading, potentially, to negotiation) might take place, is demonstrative of the scope for resistance to inspection judgements.

According to Kelly (2009), whose work explores Foucault's place in the history of political thought, power can only occur when there is an inclination that runs contrary to it, as inducing someone to do something implies that they would otherwise have done something else. In the case of inspection, this could mean school leaders having to follow a particular course of remedial action recommended by inspectors, that they might otherwise have chosen to avoid, or the practice of allowing an inspector to inspect at a time that is totally inconvenient to the school and its staff (schools being unable to choose when their inspection takes place). The following statement connects a number of Foucauldian themes and makes clear the intrinsic relationship between discourse and power, but also the fragility of power and its susceptibility to resistance:

> We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.
>
> (Foucault, 1976, p.101)

The idea that power can be thwarted relates to conceptualisations of agency which, in a Foucauldian world, is about 'individuals… abandoning their statutory identity and the figure under which they had been recognized' (Foucault, 1977, p.197). This 're-storying', as Stronach *et al.* (2002, p.130) put it, demonstrates the capacity of individuals to 'exercise control over the nature and quality of one's life' (Bandura, 2001, p.1), and thus reposition themselves in the hierarchical structures to which they have become accustomed. In the case of education, this means teachers making choices and taking stances in ways that affect their professional positions (Sang, 2020). However, it is important to note that agency, as theorised in educational literature, is something that people *do* rather than a quality or condition that

people *have*, and is therefore heavily influenced by the environment in which people live and work (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Biesta *et al*. 2015; Priestley *et al*. 2015). This, of course, resonates strongly with the process of inspection, which has the potential to stymie agentic action and, in some cases, limits the capacity of teachers to resist (de Wolf & Janssens, 2007; Ehren *et al*. 2016). The same is arguably true of school leaders themselves who, mindful of the expectations and 'regimes of truth' associated with inspection, might warn staff against the unnecessary provocation of visiting inspectors.

2.1.3 Linking discourse and power to inspection

In this brief conclusion to *Chapter 2*, I consider some of the more material effects of Foucauldian notions of discourse and power on schools, in the context of inspection, based on relevant educational literature. Firstly, aside from the psychological impact of inspection on school staff (i.e. as being subject to constant scrutiny, as per the panopticon), its performative connotations and teachers' compliance to discursive rules and regulations means, according to Alexander (2010), that the capacity for educational innovation, and subsequent advancements in practice, is stifled. He elaborates by describing inspection as a:

> Very powerful, though indirect, way of regulating the system by 'policing' [schools'] compliance with national directives and severely limiting high- or even medium-risk experimentation with content or process.
>
> (Alexander, 2010, p.33)

This view is supported in a more recent study by Fox (2021), a practising teacher whose exploration of the possible impacts of a performative culture on teachers' identities found that the 'commodification' of teachers to produce results had led to a diminished form of professionalism. As a consequence, she said workers were 'driven to fulfil their prescribed outcomes in order to be successful, rather than using professional judgement' (Fox, 2021, p.46). This adherence to prescribed outcomes at the expense of professional judgement does not, however, mean that there is *no* space for innovation and compliance cannot be challenged.

For example, in her study on the influence of scrutiny from Ofsted on school leadership and policy enactment, Colman (2021) described how the headteacher of a secondary school,

located within a coastal area of deprivation in England, chose to enter pupils early for their examinations against the advice of government policy. Colman held 17 interviews with 16 members of staff involved in leadership roles, and found that while Ofsted forced a privileging of a 'compliant and consistent enactment of policy' (ibid, p.268), with Foucauldian notions of power and discipline at play, there remained scope for resistance and what Perryman *et al*. (2011, p.190) describe as 'policy evasion'. Colman noted the school headteacher's moral obligation to do what she considered best for her learners as the driver for entering her pupils early for examinations, albeit that a favourable inspection outcome had created 'a space whereby a certain freedom was afforded' (Colman, 2021, p.279). However, in this case the headteacher's policy evasion (resistance) would come at a cost to the school itself, with only a child's first examination outcome counting towards external school performance measures. This would likely impact negatively on the school's overall examination outcomes which, said Colman (ibid, p.279), was something the headteacher was prepared to 'take the hit on'.

The idea that a headteacher would seek to manipulate or work against government policy in the interests of learners, but at the possible expense of their school more generally, is an interesting one, not least because of the ongoing focus on outcomes as a key driver of practice and quality (see section *3.3.6*). Indeed, regardless of a headteacher's apparent altruism (given the potential cost to them as the leader of their school, as highlighted in section *1.5*), there remains a performative agenda at play, with pupil performance in examination shaping strategic decision-making and associated behaviours. Courtney (2013, p.169) takes this thinking a step further and, reflecting on his research into 36 headteachers' experiences of inspection in England, urges school leaders to 're-engage with the moral purposes of educational leadership, rejecting any overly compliant narrowing of pupils' learning experiences promoted by the [Ofsted inspection] framework'. He maintains that context, and the subtleties associated with more localised decision-making, should be taken into consideration when evaluating schools' performance given the different challenges that each school faces.

Drawing on the work of Foucault, Ball & Olmedo (2013) delve deeper into the relationship between government, as creators of policy, and practitioner, upon whom policies are typically imposed. In the case of government, there is both discourse (e.g. performativity) and power at play, which heavily influences 'the ways in which they (teachers) are governed and are *able*

27

to be in their classrooms and their schools' (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p.88, emphasis in original). Hall & Gunter (2009, p.768), in their review of attempts to modernise the teaching profession in England, describe this phenomenon as the 'harnessing' of teachers to centrally-led reforms, with teachers themselves conceptualised as 'the mere instruments of state policy'. There are similarities here with the construct of the panopticon, and the apparent hold inspectors have over school staff, as explored earlier.

Foucault (1983, p.221), acknowledging its authority over schools, talks about government as having the capacity 'to structure the possible field of action of others' with influence over 'the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed' (see section *3.3.3*). But when the power of government is resisted, as demonstrated by Colman (2021), there is a danger that those resisting could be seen as reckless, particularly in the context of performativity outlined earlier. Rayner & Gunter (2020, p.268), whilst sympathetic to teachers' plight, remind us of the potentially heavy price that such action might solicit, warning that 'to resist policy may invoke harsh consequences, such as loss of status, job security and earnings'.

In their research into what they call 'position-taking by educational professionals', Rayner & Gunter (ibid, p.269) draw on empirical data from an ethnographic study of structural change in a school in England to develop new insights into the different stances that teachers can take to avoid assimilation into what they call 'a hive mind' of collective consciousness. In what is effectively an exercising of professional agency, they describe how teachers can, to use Foucauldian parlance, abandon their statutory identity (Foucault, 1977) to assume one of four position-taking stances: 'to get with the times, to get on with it, to get away with it or to get out of it' (Rayner & Gunter, 2020, p.268). They go on to designate the 'coercive optimism' associated with one's getting with the times, perceived 'fatalism' in getting on with it, 'cautious subversion' in getting away with it and 'the disposability of teachers' in getting out of it (ibid, p.269). However, all of these positionings, whilst displaying some degree of agency and with it, resistance, carry with them the lingering threat of performative normalcies and an inherent understanding that policymakers are a more dominant and powerful force (at least in existing hierarchical structures) than the teachers themselves.

Ball & Olmedo (2013, p.86) frame this process of resistance in a slightly different way, describing the disobedience of government direction in order to do what one thinks is right

as acting 'irresponsibly', so as to act responsibly (i.e. the moral imperative). They liken this to the 'struggles that surface when the teacher begins to question the necessity of and think about the revocability of his or her own situation' (ibid). Although not directly related to inspection, the work of Ball & Olmedo is useful as it highlights not only the potential for resisting power, but also teachers' possible justification for doing so. It is also helpful in reminding us that while inspectors are 'significant figures' for policymakers, as well as teachers, they are nevertheless able only to act 'within the limits of government policy' (Ozga & Lawn, 2014, p.14). In other words, the inspectorate itself is part of a wider hierarchical structure that gives national government higher authority (and thus greater power) to ensure minimum standards and effectiveness in spending public funds (ibid). The need to demonstrate effectiveness and adherence to standards in turn feeds into discussion regarding quality, as the driver for regulation and accountability, and what it means to 'perform' in line with expectation (see section *3.3.6*). This, together with conceptions of discourse and power, and their relationship to inspection, will be considered further in the following review of literature.

Chapter 3: Literature review

3.1 Overview

This chapter helps locate my research in contemporary debates related to inspection in education, and is separated into two parts. These are as follows:

- **Section A: The landscape of education in Wales**

- **Section B: Accountability and inspection**

Given my interest in school leaders' interpretation of and response to inspection outcomes, I begin with a brief exploration of the policy environment in which school leaders in Wales currently operate. This initial part of the review (**Section A**) incorporates the following subsections: policy context; PISA and 'neoliberalism'; *Curriculum for Wales*; and school leadership and school effectiveness.

In **Section B**, I consider the origins of inspection as a form of accountability, and explore in greater detail how teachers respond to inspection and how inspection is related to notions of school improvement. Subsections include: what is accountability?; accountability – whose role is it, anyway?; inspection as a form of accountability; teacher response to inspection; school improvement; and assessing quality.

Together, the composite sections of the literature review provide a deeper examination of some of the prominent themes associated with inspection in education, and consider the extent to which Foucauldian notions of discourse and power are prevalent in these discussions. These themes are explored in turn, through a post-structural lens, and help build a picture of the process of inspection and the impact it can have on school staff. The chapter concludes by identifying gaps in existing literature and how the thesis contributes new knowledge in this field of educational research.

The review incorporates peer-reviewed academic literature, and high-quality grey literature emanating from non-commercial publishers. In this case, grey literature refers specifically to that produced by various levels of government and respected education organisations operating outside of academia. The Welsh Government's and Estyn's websites were

particularly useful in this regard. A full literature search was conducted using a variety of search engines, including ERIC, EBSCO, SAGE Journals Online and Taylor and Francis Online. These searches were largely undertaken during autumn/winter 2020, although some materials were sourced earlier as part of a pilot research study. Other literature was added dependent on its relevance to the study, as it became available. Key search terms included: school inspection, Estyn inspection, Ofsted inspection, school accountability, school improvement, performativity and professionalism. For the most part, and to help narrow the scope of these searches, a date limit for articles published after 2000 was set. There were some exceptions, to include what I considered more seminal works and useful documents I had come across previously in my professional work.

The majority of cited authors are located in the UK and Europe, but writers in Australia, the United States of America and Canada are also included to ensure fuller breadth of opinion and experience from English-speaking countries. Only documents published in English were included.

3.2 Section A: The landscape of education in Wales

3.2.1 Policy context

To better understand the context in which this study is located, it is useful to begin by looking at the recent history of educational reform in Wales (e.g. Evans, 2015; Dixon, 2016; Power, 2016). A relatively small country that is a constituent part of the wider UK, Wales has around 3.1 million inhabitants and is officially bilingual, with Welsh being spoken by around 30% of the population (Welsh Government, 2022). Created in 1998, Senedd Cymru sat for the first time a year later and is the country's democratically elected body, with power to make legislation, vary taxes and scrutinise the ruling Welsh Government. An incremental devolution of powers from the UK Parliament to Senedd Cymru has given Wales almost total control over key policy areas including health, economic development, transport, the environment and indeed, education. The Welsh Government, which receives funding for public services from the UK Government via 'the block grant', is therefore responsible for the oversight and delivery of education across *all* sectors, despite a level of decentralisation to local authorities

and their supporting regional education consortia (a relatively new entity allocated school improvement functions in 2012). This strengthening of responsibility has allowed policymakers in Wales to pursue a discrete strategic policy on education, resulting in greater divergence between itself and the other 'home nations' (of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland).

The fracturing of education systems across the UK has given rise to the narrative, espoused by successive Welsh education ministers, that there is an alternative 'Welsh way' to policy design and implementation (Evans, 2015; Dixon, 2016; Evans, 2022). However, the unique education policies pursued by Wales since the 'Devolution settlement' in 1999, and designed to deliver better outcomes for learners, have not necessarily resulted in higher external examination results. Evidence suggests that the performance of Welsh pupils in GCSEs and A-levels (external, end-of-year examinations typically taken at ages 16 and 18) has lagged behind that of pupils in England and Northern Ireland for much of the past two decades (Rees & Taylor, 2015; Dixon, 2016) and Estyn has repeatedly warned of shortcomings in pupils' key skills (Estyn, 2015; Estyn, 2016). But it was arguably the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests taken by teenagers across the world in 2009, and published a year later in 2010, that had the most dramatic effect on Welsh education policy.

3.2.2 PISA and 'neoliberalism'

A perceived measure of the knowledge and core skills of 15-year-olds as they near the end of their compulsory education, PISA 2009 showed pupil performance in Wales to be significantly below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average in reading, mathematics and science (NFER, 2010). The attainment of Welsh teenagers in all three domains was lower than that recorded previously in 2006 (when Wales split from the UK and participated in PISA in its own right for the first time), prompting the then education minister Leighton Andrews to describe the scores as a 'wake-up call to a complacent system' (Dauncey, 2016, para.3).

Wales' response to PISA has been likened to that experienced by Germany in 2001, when the publication of results had a 'Tsunami-like impact' on educational policymaking and discourse

(Gruber, 2006, p.195). In Wales, a nationwide phenomenon of 'PISA shock' (Waldow, 2009, p.476) made the public more aware of large-scale assessments taken internationally and its coverage in Welsh newspapers and the wider media brought the issue of school standards to the fore. The portrayal of Wales' education system as having 'underperformed' and, indeed, 'gone backwards' since the nation's first foray into PISA contributed to the narrative that 'something had to be done' to arrest the perceived decline in pupil performance (Evans, 2022, p.376). In so doing, Wales joined the growing list of countries that sought to respond 'very seriously in political and policy terms to PISA-shocks' (Baroutsis & Lingard, 2018, par.25), and by using its comparative data to justify change, the country's political establishment had accepted PISA as a proxy for school system performance (Takayama, 2008; Sahlberg, 2011; Breakspear, 2014). Since then, Wales' education system has displayed a number of neoliberal characteristics commonly associated with data-driven accountability systems (Liasidou & Symeou, 2016; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2015).

Neoliberalism is a policy model that came to prominence in the 1970s as an alternative to liberalism, which gives individuals the right to liberty, democracy and freedom of speech and is based on the premise that political authority and law must be justified (Crouch, 2011; Courtland *et al*. 2022). If liberals are by definition more sceptical of political authority, then neoliberals provide it with promissory legitimacy (Beckert, 2020). Centred around an understanding that the governance of societies should rely on increased competition, neoliberalism is characterised by a strong regulatory state which gives up – or at least reduces – its redistributive functions (ibid). This has led to a shift in the locus of power away from citizens, and towards the economic elite. As Ives (2015, p.15) explains:

> Governance and neoliberalism can be seen as two sides of the same coin: they both contribute to placing power squarely in the hands of those with capital.

Power is thus prevalent and visible in the neoliberal sphere which, according to Beckert (2020, p.320), 'advocates punishing those who do not play according to its rules'. Beckert's conceptualisation evokes Foucauldian notions of discipline and surveillance, and aligns with the description of neoliberal states, by Connell & Dados (2014, p.127), as 'instruments of coercion'.

The emergence of neoliberalism as 'a global field of education policy' (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p.67) is founded on three main attributes of accountability, competition and privatisation,

which have in turn resulted in more 'high-stakes testing of students, more media scrutiny of how one school (or school district) compares to another and more opportunities for schools to opt out (or be forced out) of the public system' (Rancière, 2010, p.19). These neoliberal traits, increasingly prevalent in Wales in the aftermath of PISA 2009 and under the leadership of Andrews, who favoured a more data-driven form of accountability (Evans, 2022), contribute to the objectification and measurement of knowledge (Brancaleone & O'Brien, 2011) and presentation of educators as being 'tightly governed' (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p.249). Indeed, there is a great deal of similarity between the characteristics outlined here and those related to the discourse of performativity summarised earlier. In particular, suggestions that schools are subject to more intensive media scrutiny in a neoliberal environment (Rancière, 2010; Sturrock, 2021) would appear to marry with the pressure felt by teachers and school leaders to perform during inspection, for fear of negative publicity. That neoliberal policy is commonly associated with 'governance, discipline and regulation' (Giroux, 2013, p.459) serves to reinforce its close alignment to performativity.

3.2.3 Curriculum for Wales

As I have argued in an earlier paper (Evans, 2022), the publication of *Education in Wales: Our National Mission* (Welsh Government, 2017a), the first iteration of the Welsh Government's long-term education strategy (the document was updated in 2023), can be considered a turning point for teachers in Wales as it signalled an intention to transition from a culture of performativity to one of professionalism in education (see section *2.1.1*). Wales' journey from one discourse to the next is perhaps best exemplified by the new purpose-led *Curriculum for Wales* ((CfW) Welsh Government, 2020). Marking a 'radical departure from the top-down, teacher proof policy of the previous National Curriculum' (Sinnema *et al.* 2020, p.181), CfW is built around 'Four Purposes' that aim to develop children and young people as: 'ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives; enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work; ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world; and healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society' (Donaldson, 2015, p.29).

Encompassing the entire age range from three to 16, the curriculum champions literacy, numeracy and digital competence as cross-curricular responsibilities that will be the domain of all teachers, regardless of subject or age specialism. Under the new framework, traditional subject disciplines (e.g. Mathematics and English) are organised into 'Areas of Learning and Experience' – or 'AoLEs' – to make it easier for pupils to link their learning and encourage teachers to work creatively and collaboratively across existing subject boundaries (Donaldson, 2015; Welsh Government, 2020). These AoLEs are considered to be 'prerequisites to achieving the Four Purposes of the curriculum' (Gatley, 2020, p.213). The phasing in of CfW began in September 2022 and continues through to 2027, when all year groups up to the compulsory school leaving age of 16 will have adopted new working arrangements.

Demands on the teaching profession to implement the new curriculum are significant. Moving from a traditional curricular approach of organising knowledge into discrete subjects, to one that is driven by 'big ideas' and 'what matters statements' (Hughes & Lewis, 2020; Power *et al*. 2020), requires teachers in Wales to play a more active role in the shaping of what, why and how children learn. Writing in *Successful Futures*, which provided the blueprint for CfW, Donaldson (2015) said the implications for the formation and subsequent growth of teachers as reflective practitioners were considerable. This stems from CfW eschewing prescriptive content-led approaches to teaching, and instead affording schools and their staff considerable autonomy in developing programmes of learning to meet local needs (Sinnema *et al*. 2020). The respecting of local knowledge and experience plays into earlier conceptualisations of professionalism, with teachers' professional practice shaped by their own understanding of what would most benefit pupils.

According to Donaldson (2015, p.10), a high degree of prescription and detail in the previous national curriculum, allied to increasingly powerful accountability mechanisms, had created a culture in which 'the creative role of the school has become diminished and the professional contribution of the workforce underdeveloped'. At its core, *Successful Futures* sought to reverse that trend and the building of teacher agency and with it, professional autonomy (Drew & Priestley, 2016), was central to Donaldson's vision for Wales' education workforce. Drawing on Anderson's (2010, p.541) definition of agency as a teacher's 'capacity to make choices, take principled action, and enact change', this increased autonomy adds to the

perception that the teaching profession in Wales is increasingly seen as one that 'controls its own work' (Friedson, 1994, p.10), rather than that which has to respond constantly to what government policymakers dictate.

The positioning of teachers at the centre of Wales' education reform agenda, epitomised by their key role in co-construction of the new curriculum as part of the 'Pioneer School' approach (Evans, 2022), and an understanding within the Welsh Government that the 'new curriculum cannot be delivered without a well-supported, aspirational teaching profession' (Welsh Government, 2017a, p.25), has added to the narrative that the nation's education system is evolving into something markedly different from what went before (e.g. Donaldson, 2015; Evans, 2022). This is particularly important in the context of this study, as it suggests an openness on the part of the Welsh Government to consider new ways of working, and reaffirms the centrality of teachers and leaders to the change process (see section *1.4* for a more detailed account of ongoing reforms to inspection, specifically).

3.2.4 School leadership and school effectiveness

It is a key responsibility of school leaders to create 'the institutional conditions that promote the effectiveness of schools as organizations' (Bolívar *et al*. 2013, p.20). This notion of school effectiveness, and what constitutes an effective school, is notoriously difficult to define (Hernes, 2000) owing largely to the varied and changeable measurements of success through which to judge schools. In their theorising of school effectiveness, scholars have tended to list among the features most commonly associated with effective schools: high expectations, a safe and orderly environment, frequent evaluation of pupil progress, and an emphasis on basic skills (e.g. Edmonds, 1979; Scheerens & Creemers, 1989; Kirk & Jones, 2004). Reynolds *et al*. (2014), on the other hand, streamline school effectiveness into two general dimensions of quality and equity. For them, school quality is seen 'as the degree to which a school scores better than other schools, corrected for student intake characteristics', whereas 'the equity dimension refers to the compensatory power of schools, indicating that some schools are better at compensating for input characteristics' (ibid, p.205). They cite as input characteristics things such as gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status, which all have the

potential to impact on learner outcomes. It is these outcomes – typically those related to performance in external examinations (e.g. GCSEs and A-levels) – to which effectiveness is often tied (see section *3.3.6* for a deeper analysis of 'quality').

Burušić *et al*. (2016, p.7) offer as a definition of educational effectiveness the 'degree in which an educational system and its components and stakeholders achieve specific desired goals and effects'. But it is who or what that determines those desired goals and effects that is of real interest here, given the prevailing discourse of performativity in education and surveillance felt by teachers going about their daily business in schools, as established in section *2.1.2*. Within its 2016-2022 inspection framework, effectiveness in the eyes of Estyn was essentially determined by a school's performance against its five key inspection areas (Estyn, 2020b), of which 'standards' formed an important part (see section *1.1*). It is important to remember in the context of this study and its research questions that 'effectiveness is not a neutral term' and that 'defining the effectiveness of a particular school always requires choices among competing values' (Firestone, 1991, p.2). Despite the contested nature of effectiveness in academic literature, there appears one indicator that is common to all – namely, the centrality of the school leader to a school's achievements (Edmonds, 1979; Hopkins *et al*. 2014; Reynolds *et al*. 2014; Burušić *et al*. 2016; Al Ahbabi, 2019).

Earley (2017, p.162) considers the social and practical aspect of the school leader's role as the ability to 'influence others' actions in achieving desirable ends', which might be considered an oversimplification of the dynamic between teacher and leader. However, in the case of inspection, it is widely acknowledged that the response of a school as an 'organisation' is almost wholly dependent on the response of its leader. It follows, therefore, that what school leaders understand by inspection outcomes will likely impact on what action they take subsequently. Nevertheless, Netolicky (2020, p.392) describes school leaders as having to tread a fine balance between accountability and autonomy:

> That is, school leaders are at once constrained by accountability regimes, rankings, comparisons and an emphasis on external testing data, but they have some freedoms to make their own decisions within tight parameters.

This study explores these ideas further, and considers the extent to which accountability regimes – specifically those related to school inspection – constrain school leaders and, conversely, how much freedom they allow school leaders to make their own decisions. To

pave a way for this analysis, the next section in this chapter considers the origins of inspection as a form of accountability, and explores in greater detail how teachers respond to inspection and how it is related to notions of quality and improvement.

3.3 Section B: Accountability and inspection

3.3.1 What is accountability?

There does not exist one consistent, agreed definition of accountability. There are, however, a number of recurring themes within existing literature relating to accountability in the field of education, of which this study must be mindful. In their book on public service accountability, Jabbra & Dwivedi (1989, p.5) refer to 'the methods by which a public agency or a public official fulfils its duties and obligations, and the process by which that agency or the public official is required to account for such actions'. Reference to accountability as having to fulfil 'duties and obligations' suggests that teachers and, in this case, school leaders have a contractual responsibility to do what is expected of them by a higher authority. In other words, as professional educators they are accountable to learners, parents and society more generally for the quality of education and care they provide (see section *3.3.6*). According to Figlio & Loeb (2011), the most commonly considered definition of accountability in education involves the use of administrative data-based mechanisms to increase pupil achievement. Unlike that presented by Jabbra & Dwivedi (1989), this definition refers more specifically to improved learner outcomes (e.g. in national examinations) as a desired consequence of accountability, although both interpretations point to the use of some sort of benchmarking tool with which to measure performance.

Broadly speaking, when a person or an organisation is accountable for something, there is an expectation that they will be held responsible for their actions and decisions (Normore, 2004). This is nothing new and can be considered both a moral and ethical positioning to which we have become accustomed over time. Accountability is important, argues Penzer (2011, p.6), 'because without it any system risks losing legitimacy and public support'. Brundrett & Rhodes (2011, p.22) take this thinking a step further, and describe accountability as an arrangement 'in which one party has an obligation contractual or otherwise, to account for

their performance of certain actions to another'. The professional obligation to prove to a third party mandated actions, aligns with what Burns & Köster (2016, p.25) define as 'vertical accountability', and the 'top-down and hierarchical' way in which dominant parties enforce 'compliance with laws and regulation and/or holds schools accountable for the quality of education they provide'. In the case of inspection in Wales, during the 2016-2022 cycle this meant adherence to Estyn's five key inspection areas (Estyn, 2020b), as outlined in section *1.1*. The alternative to vertical accountability is, according to Burns & Köster (2016, p.25) 'horizontal accountability', which 'presupposes non-hierarchical relationships' and encourages a more moderate review of policy and practice.

Horizontal accountability is, on the face of it, less threatening than the vertical variation in that it advocates what has become known as 'peer-to-peer' evaluation (Brill *et al*. 2018) by clusters of schools, as opposed to more formal scrutiny by government-appointed inspectors. There is certainly some evidence to suggest that, from a teacher's perspective, having practice examined by your fellow professional is favourable to being interrogated by an external visitor, who is perhaps less inclined to understand the inner workings of a school on a day-to-day basis (Hargreaves, 2012; Sandals & Bryant, 2014). Indeed, according to Stoll (1992, p.95) 'the likelihood of schools 'buying in' to an evaluation process is much greater if they do not see it as an exercise in external accountability'. This, to me, is based on a perception that external (vertical) accountability is used for more punitive judgement, built on comparison between schools and/or groups of learners (e.g. Gonzalez & Firestone, 2013; Yi & Kim, 2019), thus evoking clear performative connotations. Horizontal accountability is, on the other hand, more collaborative and fits most obviously with the agentic 'bottom-up' form of professionalism, given its assumption that the profession will support itself to improve. Reflecting on his vast experience of working with schools, Elmore (2006, p.196) concluded that 'teachers and principals viewed external accountability systems like the weather… not something they could or should do much about'.

3.3.2 Accountability – whose role is it, anyway?

Simkins (1992, p.7) offers a more nuanced illustration of accountability in education based on four levels, which attaches to every stage 'key actors' involved in the accountability process;

namely those who actively participate in the administration and/or operation of accountability practices. Simkins' framework, which incorporates 'criteria for judging success' (ibid), includes: the professional model, involving professionals (e.g. teachers/support staff); the managerial model, involving managers (e.g. school leaders/regional consortia); the political model, involving representatives (e.g. school governors/elected members); and the market model, involving the consumers (e.g. pupils/parents). An adaptation of Simkins' framework, to compensate for contextual nuance, is offered in *Table 2* below:

Model of accountability	Actors	Success criteria
Professional	Teachers/support staff	Good practice, defined and evaluated by professionals themselves
Managerial	School leaders/regional consortia	Effectiveness and efficiency, defined and evaluated by organisational hierarchy
Political	School governors/elected members	Policy conformance, defined and evaluated by central government
Market	Pupils/parents	Competitive success, influenced by pupil and parental choice

Table 2: The four models of accountability in Wales (adapted from Simkins, 1992)

The political model is an important consideration in the context of accountability, particularly in the public sector. Given taxpayers' direct contribution to the sustainability and viability of education as a public service that is readily available and free to all (as opposed to private education, which is independent of state direction and attracts tuition fees), there is an expectation that public funds will be put to good use and spent effectively. Indeed, judgements about what this means in practice (i.e. what constitutes effective use of taxpayers' money) are shaped by prevailing discourses around standards (relating to performativity), as well as popular conceptualisations of quality (which are typically

determined by powerful institutions, such as government or the inspectorate; see section *3.3.6*). In the context of Estyn, this scrutiny of state funding is quite literally translated into a school's 'value for money', as part of what it calls 'resource management' (e.g. Estyn, 2013, p.10; Estyn, 2014, p.9). In their book *Leadership for Quality and Accountability in Education*, Brundrett & Rhodes (2011) address the interconnected issues of quality and accountability in education and its influence on school leaders. In so doing, they reinforce the link between public services and delivery, arguing that for the past few decades 'accountability has dominated the political and public thinking in education in the UK and internationally – based on questions about relative performance and value for money' (ibid, p.21).

Building on the work of Simkins, Earley & Weindling (2004, p.78) present four 'accountability relationships' of: moral (accountability to pupils); professional (accountability to colleagues); contractual (accountability to employers); and market (accountability to institutions) as central tenets of accountability debate and discussion in the context of education. However, these relationships do not account for educators' responsibility to the system at large, which prompted the addition by Hopkins (2007) of 'system accountability' to recognise the contribution of educators to the wider sphere in which they work. This gives rise to what Fullan (2018) coins 'systemness', defined as one's commitment to contributing to, and benefitting from, the system around them. These practices represent a more altruistic approach on the part of teachers and leaders, who are interested as much in what happens outside as inside their own schools. It was therefore interesting to explore during the course of this study the extent to which school leaders are committed to furthering the needs of the education system in Wales, and willing to go beyond the confines of their own institutions in the interests of broader educational change. Or to put it another way, what appetite – if any – school leaders had to share what they do well with others.

3.3.3 Inspection as a form of accountability

School inspection is employed in most European countries as 'an important instrument of educational evaluation and accountability' (Gustafsson *et al*. 2015, p.47). Defined by Kemethofer *et al*. (2017, p.319) as 'the process of assessing the quality and/or performance of institutions, services, programmes or projects by those (inspectors) who are not directly

involved in them', inspection involves the visit of inspectors to schools to quantify how well they are functioning against a set of nationally-agreed criteria and results in a formal report 'used to identify strengths and weaknesses' (OECD, 2015, p.479). Inspectors tend to be qualified teachers from a range of backgrounds in education and receive training on how to report effectively on standards and build capacity for improvement. To ensure consistency across inspections, inspectors are guided by common inspection frameworks:

> These frameworks define expectations of quality for schools and their stakeholders. Schools are expected to attend to the requirements included in inspection standards and procedures and adapt their goals and ways of working to come into line with the normative image of high-quality schools demanded by the inspectorate. These inspection frameworks are designed to inform and drive school policy, planning and practices.
>
> (Gustafsson *et al*. 2015, p.48)

During the process of inspection, inspectors use inspection frameworks to make judgements and provide recommendations for improvement as part of its developmental role in supporting school progress, as is the case in Wales (see section *1.1*). Follow-up visits are arranged dependent on a school's relative performance and require school leaders to demonstrate how they have responded to given improvement actions. In general terms, inspection can be viewed as a way of holding schools accountable for the public money they receive; it is a way of assessing the performance of schools and their compliance with government mandates. Inspectorates themselves, whilst propagating a narrative of their independence from government, are nonetheless constrained by the limits of government policy (Ozga & Lawn, 2014), to which they have a responsibility as an instrument of surveillance for the state (see section *2.1.2*).

Foucault (1991) uses the term 'governmentality' to describe the range of procedures and techniques used by government 'to shape human conduct by calculated means' (Li, 2007, p.275). Defined as 'the tactics of government that make possible the continual definition and redefinition of what is within the competence of the state and what is not' (Foucault, 1991, p.103), governmentality is useful when considering the relationship between the inspectorate and government, which retains oversight of what is and is not inspected (government effectively dictating what it wants the inspectorate, as purveyor of school standards, to examine). This definition is also helpful in that it sets out the capacity of government to use

inspection as a form of accountability, and to define – and redefine – what counts as important.

Dean (2010, p.18) characterises the enactment of governmentality as 'any attempt to shape with some degree of deliberation aspects of our behaviour according to particular sets of norms for a variety of ends'. These 'sets of norms' are, in the case of Estyn, set out in the common inspection framework (see section *1.1*), which provides schools with pre-determined quality criteria and, as a consequence, drives teacher behaviours. Together, all of this evokes images of the panopticon, as a mechanism of state control, and the discourse of performativity, which employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive and change (Ball, 2003).

3.3.4 Teacher response to inspection

Inspection as a form of accountability is often interpreted negatively by educators as putting unnecessary pressure on schools and teachers (Ozga, 1995; Ehren *et al*. 2013), albeit there is broad consensus that education should be subject to checks and balances, as in any other public service (Gilbert, 2012). Negativity might stem, according to MacBeath (2006), from teachers' distance to the process of inspection itself; their positioning on the 'periphery' of an inspection contributes to the feeling that their 'collective expertise' in informing the process has been overlooked (MacBeath, 2006, p.75). This, in the view of Watts (2012, p.86), 'may have led to some teachers feeling side-lined, or even inferior to school leaders, albeit others were possibly relieved to receive less scrutiny'. In her study of the role of primary headteachers in the Ofsted inspection process, Watts surveyed 749 headteachers whose schools were inspected in November 2006. Based on her analysis of 253 questionnaire responses, she acknowledged the fundamental role of the headteacher in determining how a school responds to inspection, and how willing they are to build rapport with visiting inspectors. She concluded that 'a head's sense of agency will not in itself make a school effective, but will enable it to be seen in the best light possible' (Watts, 2012, p.4) and, likening inspection to a form of 'game', said it was incumbent on school leaders 'to learn the rules and prepare his or her team for the contest' (ibid, p.306).

The analogy of inspection as being like a game, complete with its own rules and contesting teams, serves to reinforce earlier conceptions of performativity in the context of education (see section *2.1.1*). In short, schools have to demonstrate execution of pre-determined success criteria (which is itself a manifestation of the inspectorate's power), in order to achieve. It follows that if schools and their teachers are required to perform in order to 'win' at the inspection game, as a football or rugby team might, it is incumbent on school leaders, who might be considered 'captains' or 'managers' in this analogy, to ensure that they get the best out of their players. This brings into sharp focus the possible power dynamics at play within a school, given the responsibility of school leaders to work with and answer to visiting inspectors; a responsibility not necessarily expected of teachers more generally. Nevertheless, the emotional and psychological impact of inspection on teachers appears relevant, regardless of seniority.

In their study of teachers' response to inspection in England, Brunsden *et al*. (2006) found unhealthy levels of anxiety in teachers at all times; that is before, during and after inspections. Focussing on staff at a single primary school, they used self-reporting personality measures at various points in the inspection process to better understand the psychological effects of an Ofsted inspection. In collating their findings, the researchers found that teachers had demonstrated symptoms of severe traumatic stress linked to their school's inspection, and that the process of inspection (e.g. the visit of inspectors to their school) rather than its outcome had generated most anxiety for teachers. A similar study interested in the effects of Flemish school inspection (Penninckx *et al*. 2015) found a strong increase in stress and anxiety amongst teachers, as well as a decreased level of professional enthusiasm before and during inspection. Drawing from a much larger sample, of 2,624 participants from 130 primary and secondary schools, it used an online survey to explore the impact of inspection on teachers' self-efficacy. The research concluded that respondents from schools with an unfavourable inspection judgement reported more severe emotional effects post-inspection, whereas more positive outcomes elicited 'a substantial positive impact on the self-efficacy of individual staff members' (Penninckx *et al*. 2015, p.738).

The idea that teachers respond to inspection in different ways at different times (e.g. before, during and after inspection) is corroborated by Ouston & Davies (1998), who list a series of stages teachers must go through during the course of their inspection visit. In fact, they

consider the way in which teachers behave before an inspection is announced, and then after an inspection date is known (e.g. before the inspection itself begins), as being integral to the way in which the process of inspection is understood. In their study of 55 secondary schools that had been subject to Ofsted inspection over a three-year period, the researchers found that inspection could have a positive effect on schools, particularly when teachers and leaders were proactive and displaying a high level of professional self-confidence. This self-confidence, they said, made teachers and leaders more immune to the potentially intimidatory nature of their visit by inspectors. Nevertheless, Ouston & Davies (1998, p.19) noted that in the aftermath of inspection, many schools reported 'slowing down' while they recovered from the 'ordeal' of having inspectors come into school – a phenomenon they described as the 'post-inspection blues'.

With this in mind, it is easy to see why Cunningham & Raymont (2010), who were commissioned to review relevant literature on the monitoring, assuring and maintaining of quality in English primary education, arrived at the conclusion that inspections are a means of controlling teachers as well as schools. They also found that while inspection is better-known for monitoring schools and generating data, it can effect change in other ways by influencing school curricula and teaching methods. The perception of inspection as a mechanism of control and monitoring plays into the earlier conceptualisation of surveillance as a form of regulation, through which discipline and disciplinary power is exerted. There is however a more fundamental consequence arising from these performative techniques, that directly effects teachers and leaders and the way they conduct themselves.

Accepting that the discourse of performativity has a material impact on the way school staff think and act (Foucault, 1977; Perryman, 2009), it is important to acknowledge that, in some cases, these mechanisms of control (e.g. inspection) can in fact be embraced by teachers as validation of their hard work and endeavour. The net result, according to Frostenson & Englund (2020, p.698), is that 'schools become populated by teachers whose ideals have developed in an education system permeated by neo-liberal norms'. From this, they argue, a new type of teacher identity emerges – the *performative teacher*, 'i.e. teachers who want to be (perceived as) high performers' (Frostenson & Englund, 2017, p.900). For Frostenson & Englund (ibid, p.901) a performative teacher 'is valued not because of her beliefs, principles, or moral compass, but because of her performances and the outputs she can produce'. As

Ball (2003, p.224) attests, in a culture of performativity 'we are expected to be passionate about excellence'. These performative teachers are then, in effect, a product of the environment and culture in which they operate.

To better understand the influence of inspection on practice, the relationship between the way in which schools are judged (and the judgements they are given) and their subsequent response to those judgements, needs to be unpacked. It is widely accepted that accountability mechanisms have unintended consequences that are often negative (Jerrim & Sims, 2022). De Wolf & Janssens (2007) separate these negative, or undesirable, side-effects into two categories – the so-called 'intended strategic behaviour' of schools and their 'unintended strategic behaviour'. The latter can lead to what has become known as 'teaching to the test' (Phelps, 2016; Copp, 2018), a process in which teachers focus heavily on outcomes and performance in high-stakes assessment, over children's broader learning; or in other words, pupils are taught how to succeed in examination, at the expense of deeper, more meaningful education. This, according to Koretz (2008, p.131), often means that learner scores are 'severely inflated' and 'gains… on these tests are often far larger than true gains in students' learning'. De Wolf & Janssens (2007, p.382) describe these side-effects as being akin to 'tunnel vision' or 'indicator fixation'.

An example of unintended strategic behaviour is what Smith (1993) calls 'myopia', the focus on short-term solutions at the expense of longer-term improvement. Intended strategic behaviour, on the other hand, relates to the 'gaming' of the inspection process by practitioners (Allen & Burgess, 2012, p.14), so as to curry favour with inspectors. This form of 'window dressing' (Ehren *et al*. 2016, p.87) could be as simple as changing wall displays, refreshing school documentation or altering timetabling arrangements. According to Duffy (1999, p.131), a school not threatened by imminent inspection 'might not be so prolific in its production of policy statements and schemes of work'. But there are more sinister implications and window dressing could, as de Wolf & Janssens (2007, p.382) suggest, extend beyond innocent 'misinterpretation' to more deliberate 'fraud' and 'deception'.

In his much-cited and influential work on social interaction, Goffman (1959) draws on theatrical production as a way of understanding human behaviour. Describing social life as a 'performance' shaped by its environment and those watching (ibid, p.17), he uses the perspective of 'frontstage' and 'backstage' to make clear the distinction between actions that

can be seen and those that cannot. For Goffman, those at frontstage are visible and thus display an 'official stance', whilst in the backstage, 'the impression fostered by the presentation is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course' (ibid, p.112). It is the notion of an 'official stance' that is of most interest to this study, as school leaders seek to present to their external audience a highly-scripted version of themselves and their schools that is not necessarily a truthful reflection of their everyday work. Useful in this context is Goffman's description of the behaviours driven by being front of stage, as:

> that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance.
>
> (Goffman, 1959, p.22)

In a clear manifestation of performativity, Goffman paints a picture of society's adherence to convention, with performers performing roles to which they have become accustomed over time. When related to inspection, what Goffman describes as 'expressive equipment' could be considered a catch-all for 'gaming' and 'window dressing', as teachers *intentionally* manipulate practice so as to define situations in a way that is acceptable to visiting inspectors. Alternatively, safe in the knowledge that backstage is 'typically out of bounds to members of the audience' (Goffman, p.124), and thus protected from the public gaze, those hidden behind the front curtain can relax, let their guard down and 'step out of character' (ibid, p.70). The idea that stakeholders involved in the inspection process might step in and out of character will be explored further in the coming pages.

3.3.5 School improvement

The notion of school improvement and accountability through means of inspection are intrinsically linked, given one (the former) should, at least in theory, arise as a result of the other. After all, we have come to rely on accountability measures to tell us how schools are doing and to show us which schools *could*, or *should* be doing better (McMahon, 2017). By what and by whom improvement is judged is, therefore, extremely important and essentially the means by which success or failure can be meaningfully gauged. Pupil performance in external examinations is, as I explore in greater detail in the next section (section *3.3.6*), a

recognised indicator of school performance and with it, relative improvement (Creemers & Reezigt, 2005). Year-on-year comparisons between groups of learners (by e.g. age, ethnicity or socio-economic status) are used to determine a school's progress over time, and whether or not a school is performing as expected (e.g. in relation to schools of a similar size and demographic). The latter, drawn in Wales from 'families of schools data', provides school governing bodies, the Welsh Government, Estyn and other interested parties with comparative data they can use to rate individual schools' performance (Welsh Government, 2018a).

That such heavy value is placed on learner outcomes (most notably in the form of GCSE and A-level examinations), is to me a clear signal of the prevailing discourse of performativity in Wales. Indeed, there is a perception within such a culture that in order to succeed or in this case, demonstrate improvement, a school has to *perform* to an agreed standard. These standards are, in the context of the Welsh schools system, determined by the Welsh Government, as the foremost authority over state-funded education, and Estyn, whose job it is to maintain a level of service on behalf of the taxpayer (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2011; Ozga & Lawn, 2014). In other words, the bar is set by those with greater power over schools, which are as a consequence subject to ongoing surveillance (by e.g. the Welsh Government and Estyn) so as to ensure that they comply with recognised rules and regulations.

The earlier conceptualisation of the *performative teacher* as 'one who is able to prove herself as a continuously "delivering individual"' and 'one who is able to provide results' (Frostenson & Englund, 2017, pp.887-888) plays into the narrative that in order to improve, a school has to be able to evidence how it has impacted positively on learner outcomes as measured through narrowly defined criteria, such as i.e. examination results. The extent to which the process of inspection has a direct impact on school improvement is, however, less conclusive (Ehren & Visscher, 2006; Whitby, 2010) and, as explored in section *3.2.4*, there are contrasting views as to what constitutes effectiveness in this context. While different in origin, their interest in orientation to outcomes, input and processes nonetheless means notions of school improvement and effectiveness have much in common (Creemers & Reezigt, 2005).

Evidence suggests improvement is more associated with 'indirect developmental processes rather than through more direct coercive methods, such as schools accepting inspection feedback' (Gustafsson *et al*. 2015, p.297). These 'indirect developmental processes' align with

Smink's (1991, p.3) interpretation of school improvement as requiring 'a broad description of all the variables that play a role in a school improvement project'. And so it is reasonable to conclude that there are more factors contributing to a school's propensity to improve over and above those identified by a visiting inspector as needing attention. Chapman's (2001) investigation of teacher perceptions, responses and intentions to change their classroom practice as a result of being inspected would support the view that school context and culture are equally important considerations. His study on the impact of Ofsted inspections on classroom change involved five secondary schools from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. It found that around half of teachers felt that inspectors did not get a realistic picture of their teaching during their inspection visit, while only 55% viewed the feedback they received on their teaching as useful. A much smaller proportion – 22% – said they would change their practice as a result of the inspection (Chapman, 2001).

Harris (2002, p.18) describes school improvement as 'a way of schools achieving organizational development and growth', whereas Hopkins (2001, p.13) gives greater credence to the resulting course of action itself, via what he calls a 'distinct approach to educational change' that aims to enhance pupil outcomes as well as strengthen a school's capacity for managing change. For Barth (1990), the *conditions* necessary for school improvement are more important, focussing on the effort required to create an environment in which adults and children are able to promote and sustain their learning. Others, like Datnow (2001), argue that collaboration and collegiality are essential components of school improvement, which suggests that comparisons between providers – and the unhealthy competition they can engender – are not conducive to meaningful educational change. Indeed, a suggestion that schools are better judged according to their *own* improvement criteria and quality indicators has some credence when factors impacting on a school's development are so specific and can vary from setting to setting (Thrupp, 1999; Mills & Gale, 2010; Muller, 2015). Even after 40 years there is a lot to be said for the definition, by Madaus *et al*. (1980, p.22), of an effective school as being that which demonstrates 'congruence between its objectives and achievements' and 'is effective to the extent that it accomplishes what it sets out to do'.

However, a school's success in accomplishing what it set out to do is not, by itself, a clear signal that improvement has taken place. Indeed, what constitutes improvement for one

school, might be considered normal or stagnation for another. The extent to which a school has improved or progressed its practice is therefore entirely subjective, and based solely on one's understanding of what 'good' looks like. The same is true of poor performance, and schools deemed to be underachieving. But on what are these assessments of school achievement based? In their paper on accountability and its relationship with improvement, which focuses on education in England from the late 1990s, Muijs & Chapman (2009, p.41) take as a starting point the 'well-known phenomenon that organizations will concentrate their efforts on those things they are judged on'. In the case of the inspectorate, and the process of inspection, it is the common inspection framework that provides the quality criteria against which all schools are judged (see section *1.1*). It is, returning to Foucault, a mechanism through which discipline and disciplinary power is exerted (Foucault, 1977), given the expectation on schools to demonstrate proficiency in the inspectorate's key areas of interest. The ripple effect, as described by Earley (1998, p.172), is that 'schools change their practices to conform to what they think the inspectors inspect'. This could be considered a manifestation of surveillance in action.

The idea that schools and their staff simply adapt their practice to align with what the inspectorate is required to inspect is not, however, without problem and brings with it clear challenges. During the process of inspection, schools and their staff are subject to what is largely qualitative judgement. That does not mean that quantitative data sets, in the form of e.g. examination outcomes or attendance records, have no value or influence over these decisions, but they do not by themselves determine inspection outcomes. Instead, frameworks are used and judgements made based on an individual inspector's own understanding of what they mean; in short, inspection is not an exact science, but a process of categorisation based on interpretation (e.g. Courtney, 2012; Donaldson, 2018). Richards (2020, p.513), recognising the subjectivity associated with inspection, likens the role of the inspector to that of the theatre critic:

> Theatre critics appraise a performance or run of performances, as school inspectors appraise schools, based on a series of observations. Critics judge the quality of the acting; likewise, inspectors judge the quality of teaching. Critics judge how far the performance reflects the content and intentions of the play text; similarly, under the current Ofsted framework, inspectors comment on the rationale and implementation of the 'text' of the curriculum. Critics assess the reactions of the audience; likewise, inspectors assess students' responses.

Richards (ibid) argues that the success criteria on which theatre critics base their appraisals are largely intuitive and impressionistic, and not solely reliant on more quantifiable learner outcomes. Indeed, in the Welsh context, inspectors are encouraged by the inspectorate to 'make the link between pupils' outcomes, the quality of the provision and the effectiveness of leadership' when making their written evaluations on a school's performance (Estyn, 2021d, p.3). Which begs the question: how can 'quality of provision' be fairly and reliably assessed? And, perhaps most pertinently, who decides?

Elmore, an instrumental figure in improving educational practice and transformative leadership in the field of education (Elmore, 1990; 2004; 2008), once described school improvement as a 'developmental process', with high performance and quality not a state but a point along a continuum (Elmore, 2006, p.10). He maintained that 'moving a school through these stages requires an understanding, first, that there is a developmental process going on, and second, what distinguishes schools at one stage of development from another' (ibid). This is a useful observation as it implies that the inspection system should be able to understand where a school is in its developmental process related to improvement, by considering the specifics of how a particular school operates. Indeed it is also important to remember that the development, or regression, of a school can be sudden or protracted, dependent on certain circumstances (Beycioglu & Kondakci, 2021).

3.3.6 Assessing quality

Woodhouse (1998, p.258) defines quality as 'fitness for purpose', which is the broad definition of quality used in this thesis. But how that purpose is determined, and whether or not that purpose has been achieved, is very much open to individual interpretation. Despite their training, school inspectors will draw largely from what they know of their own practice, or what they have witnessed in a similar setting (Ozga, 2016). The framework around inspection might be the same, but how it is read and understood will be likely influenced by what inspectors themselves have previously seen and heard (Baxter, 2014). Courtney (2012) reinforces this point in his study of headteachers' experiences of inspection in England. In it, he notes that all six headteachers interviewed as part of his research commented on the 'variability in the quality and judgment of inspectors', and quotes directly from one

interviewee, who happened to be an Ofsted lead inspector, who cautioned that 'inspectors are human, they do all have their own hobby-horses, they do have a mixed background' (Courtney, 2012, p.8).

Indeed, in some cases, it may not be immediately clear to staff within a school exactly what an inspector is looking for, given that their interpretations of what the Estyn framework requires of them might differ. Put plainly, that there is no one, uniform way of inspecting – and every inspector is different – which has implications for teachers and leaders, who may be required to subtly adjust what they present during the process of inspection, on the basis of what they believe the individual before them wants to see. This careful manipulation of school processes and practices to suit the more specific wants and needs of individual inspectors plays into earlier conceptualisations of 'window dressing' (Ehren *et al*. 2016, p.87) and 'deception' (de Wolf & Janssens, 2007, p.382). With this in mind, Tobin (2005, p.425) resolves that notions of quality are based on an individual's cultural context and that 'attempts to come up with universal, decontextualised, external standards of quality are conceptually flawed, politically dangerous and counterproductive'. Drawing on his ethnographic work on early childhood education in Japan and France, he challenges what he considers to be 'taken-for-granted assumptions' that quality standards are 'universal, generalizable, and non-contextual' (ibid, p.424) and encourages those who set the bar to consider other, alternative voices (e.g. parents) when setting benchmarks for success.

At a school level, one of the most commonly-used benchmarks of quality relates to a school's performance in key external examinations. Learner outcomes in GCSEs (typically sat by pupils aged 16) and A-levels (for pupils aged 18) carry a good deal of weight and in Wales, like England and Northern Ireland (which jointly administer GCSEs and A-levels), a school's comparative record in these examinations is considered a major indicator of relative achievement. However, it is argued that holding schools to account in this way forces the acceptance of 'narrow interpretations of educational success' (Fisher, 2011, p.52), and such qualifications have been roundly criticised in recent times as providing only a snapshot of learner ability (e.g. International Educational Assessment Network, 2020; Independent Assessment Commission, 2022). To negate these criticisms, and to compensate for pupil intake characteristics (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000; Reynolds *et al*. 2014), a number of education

systems have sought the introduction of more rounded measurements by which to judge schools.

In England, *Progress 8* has been brought in with the intention of tracking the extent to which schools support disadvantaged pupils with the same prior attainment as their more affluent peers to perform at the same level at GCSE, and not fall behind as they have done traditionally (Burgess & Thomson, 2013; Leckie & Goldstein, 2019). It is a type of 'value-added' measure that aims to capture the progress that pupils in a school make from the end of primary to when they sit their GCSE examinations (UK Government, 2016). For secondary schools, every increase in grade a pupil achieves (i.e. over and above those predicted) attracts additional credit in performance tables, used by the government in England to monitor schools' performance (UK Government, 2020). However, despite recognising that pupils have varying levels of ability and different starting points, *Progress 8* has failed to allay more fundamental concerns related to the appropriateness of high-stakes testing, given that the tests are unable to measure many important aspects of teaching (e.g. pupil engagement), can lead to a narrowing of the curriculum (by giving weight to more traditional subjects) and induce excessive pupil and teacher stress (Leckie & Goldstein, 2019).

Similar attempts to account for learner difference have been made in Wales, where *Capped 9* has replaced a strong focus on five A*-C grades at GCSE as one of the core measurements of a school's success (Williams, 2018). In essence, the new measure widens the breadth of qualifications schools can use to record pupil performance, with a means of ensuring 'that every learner counts and that we value the progress of all learners across the cohort' (Welsh Government, 2019a, p.18). A school's *Capped 9* score also contributed to its positioning in the recently withdrawn *National School Categorisation System*, a four-level categorisation process comparable to England's school 'league table' (UK Government, 2020) that was introduced by the Welsh Government in 2014 to evaluate and assess the performance of state-funded schools in Wales (Welsh Government, 2019b). A three-step procedure drawing on school performance data (e.g. learner outcomes, *Capped 9* score etc), self-evaluation and group discussion, school categorisation, as it was more commonly known, resulted in the awarding of one of four support categories – green, yellow, amber or red – on which judgements of a school's relative health could be based.

A key mechanism of the neoliberal approach to reform prominent in the aftermath of PISA 2009 (as explored in section *3.2.2*), school categorisation was, prior to its cessation in 2022, a central focus of schools and in much the same way as inspection, a driver of practitioner behaviours (Evans, 2022). Support categories were made available for public consumption once a year and schools could be subject to praise or criticism, dependent on their associated colour-coding. For example, schools receiving a 'red' categorisation were deemed to be in need of most intensive external support (a form of discipline), which brought with it its own heightened level of scrutiny (Welsh Government, 2019b). Like inspection, categorisation could be considered high-stakes (see section *1.2*) given the pressure on schools to perform, and contributed to the perception of staff as being under near constant surveillance. In other words, categorisation not only created performative schools focussed on their published rating, but also performative teachers that were professionally bound to its outcomes (Frostenson & Englund, 2020; Fox, 2021). Categorisation had been phased out in Wales at the time of writing, but was a core component of the nation's accountability framework during the 2016-2022 inspection cycle, which is the context for the data generation in this study.

Notwithstanding the new emphasis on individual learner progress over time (e.g. *Progress 8*/*Capped 9*), the discourse that GCSEs and A-levels *matter* to learners, and are a precursor for well-paid jobs, is well-established and has remained constant since the former's introduction in the late 1980s (Hayward *et al*. 2014; Independent Assessment Commission, 2022). Osgood & Giugni (2015, p.3) take this thinking a step further, and suggest that data-driven accountability measurements (of which *Progress 8* and *Capped 9* are examples) should be understood as being 'deeply political and driven by economic imperatives'. This brings with it its own additional pressure on schools, as identified by Vinson & Ross (2001, p.19):

> As the public views test scores as either too low or contributing to some 'achievement gap', they pressure school and other public officials to do something. These officials, in turn, intensify their (and certain allies', including the business community and teachers' unions) control over curriculum, instruction, and assessment vis-à-vis greater and expanded degrees of surveillance… All of this leaves schools, classrooms, teachers, and students in the middle, caught within a spiraling surveillance-spectacle cycle.

And so the emphasis on examination outcomes, both individually (by pupil) and collectively (across entire cohorts of learners), ensures that teachers and leaders are under constant scrutiny and pressure to perform, such is their 'immediate measurable performative value'

(Ball, 2012, p.30). This contributes to the emergence of what McDermott *et al*. (2007, p.248) call 'a performance-orientated culture', in which 'there is a pressure on individuals, organisations and sectors to engage in work that is visible and measurable'. The net result, according to Greene (2005, p.77), is that teachers now 'identify their students by grades and test scores… [thus] depriving the young of a sense of agency or the chance to think for themselves'. Fox (2021, p.46), in her exploration of how performativity impacts on teachers' identities, offers the following first-person insight:

> In my own experience, having been a teacher for the last 8 years, I have observed teachers complaining about how unfair it is that they are judged so wholly by the grades their students achieve whilst, in the next breath, boasting about the grades achieved by another class they had taught.

Together, both the qualitative judgement of inspectors, based on the inspection framework, and the high value attached to examination performance (a manifestation of performativity), contribute to the 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1976, p.112) that frames school improvement and how quality is assessed. Hopkins (1990, p.182) neatly encapsulates this post-structural perspective by likening educational goals (e.g. inspection and examination outcomes) to 'what a school is 'supposed' to accomplish for its students and for society'. In the Welsh context, school leaders and their staff must be able to present positively during inspection (and thus attract positive judgements) and, in the case of secondary schools, support pupils to perform well in examinations (using *Capped 9* as the measure) in order to demonstrate quality schooling, or as Woodhouse (1998, p.258) puts it, 'fitness for purpose'. A school's performance in the *National School Categorisation System* had been another indicator of quality, prior to its removal.

3.4 Filling a gap…

I conclude this chapter by explaining briefly how my study fits within the existing knowledge-base. Having explored a range of literature pertaining to inspection and its impact on teachers and leaders, it is apparent that with little research specific to Wales available, we do not yet have a clear enough picture of the influence of Estyn judgements on school behaviours and practice. This is a gap that my thesis aims to fill. The unpacking of Foucauldian notions of discourse and power has been useful in identifying key themes pertinent to inspection and

accountability in education, namely: vertical and horizontal accountability; the different actors involved; the notion of 'systemness' and one's commitment to driving change on a much bigger scale; the emotional and psychological impact of inspection on school staff; school improvement; inspection as a mechanism of control; and the unintended consequences of inspection. But far less is known about how these themes are manifested, or indeed prevalent, in a Welsh context.

It is therefore my hope and aspiration that by developing understanding of how school leaders interpret inspection outcomes, and how this in turn informs what they do next, we can speak with greater confidence in Wales about the challenges and opportunities inspection presents. My focus on new qualitative research is particularly timely given ongoing discussion regarding the future of Estyn (see section *1.4*), to which my thesis actively contributes. I am optimistic that by providing more clarity around issues relating to inspection in Wales and its impact on school leaders, future adjustments might be made in order to better support those with ultimate responsibility for school improvement. I note with some trepidation however the view of Clarke & Ozga (2011, p.21), who state that 'conducting research into contemporary governance processes and practices is always a high-risk activity, since these objects of inquiry are neither solid nor stable'. Such warnings have to some extent already been vindicated by the considerable change to inspection and accountability processes in Wales since this research was first started.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Overview

In this chapter, I provide an overview of, and justification for, the methods used in the undertaking of my research. This includes reference to my research paradigm and how it informed the decisions I took, and a detailed outline of my research design and the tools I employed to support data generation and analysis. My reflections on an earlier pilot study and its impact on this research are also given. The chapter concludes with a focus on the ethical considerations that underpin this work, and critical reflection about my own position as researcher.

4.2 Research paradigm

All research is based on a philosophical understanding of the way in which knowledge is acquired and the beliefs, values and assumptions that researchers employ when conducting their research (Kuhn, 1977). This is important, as it recognises that a researcher's own view of the nature of reality (ontology) impacts significantly on their relationship with and assimilation of knowledge (epistemology). Together, these help shape the researcher's 'worldview' (Creswell, 2009, p.12), which in turn influences the way in which new knowledge is acquired (methodology). According to Terre Blanche & Durrheim (1999), the three dimensions of ontology, epistemology and methodology are integral to the entire research process.

This study is born out of a constructivist ontology, in line with my belief that there are multiple realities constructed by individuals. This is reflected in my research aim, to better understand how school leaders in Wales interpret and respond to school inspection outcomes. It also conforms to my earlier assumptions relating to the propensity of school leaders to respond in different ways to the outcomes of inspection (see section *3.3.4*). As outlined in *Chapter 2*, the study is rooted in an interpretivist paradigm that relies on the subjective experiences of individuals to develop meaning (Arthur *et al*. 2012). This epistemology is particularly relevant,

given my interest in exploring how school leaders' understanding and interpretation of inspection judgements inform what they do next. The interpretivist approach is closely aligned with qualitative methods of data generation, which allow for detailed, descriptive analyses based on humans' interaction with the world around them (Mertler, 2016).

My research questions are themselves interpretive in nature, given my interest in making connections between what school leaders understand by inspection outcomes, and their subsequent actions/behaviours. Indeed, my adoption of an interpretivist paradigm, and acceptance that 'objective reality can never be captured' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.5) and that knowledge and meaning are acts of interpretation (Gephart, 1999), has helped carve my worldview of school leaders as individuals shaped by their subjective experiences. These experiences were explored during the course of this study through the lens of post-structuralism, which reflects my belief that school leaders are products of an ever-changing and complex professional environment that shapes how they understand and respond to certain situations (see *Chapter 2*). I use Foucauldian theory, and in particular constructs of discourse and power (Foucault, 1972; 1977), to unpack key themes pertinent to the process of inspection and as a way of informing my analysis of school leaders' responses.

4.3 Research design

4.3.1 Introduction

The research was interpretive by design and centred around four school leaders, who were each subject to semi-structured interview (Bryman, 2008). I use the nomenclature 'school leaders' instead of headteachers intentionally, as not all participants were headteachers (three were, one was an assistant headteacher; see section *5.2*). A retrospective review of inspection outcomes in each school leader's school was undertaken ahead of data generation to provide context and better understand what research participants had experienced through the process of inspection.

The way in which I approached my research, including reference to my guiding literature review, which helped to conceptualise prevailing notions of discourse and power, is outlined in *Figure 2* below:

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│                          Literature review                          │
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        │                │                │                │
        ▼                ▼                ▼                ▼
┌──────────────┐ ┌──────────────┐ ┌──────────────┐ ┌──────────────┐
│ Retrospective│ │ Retrospective│ │ Retrospective│ │ Retrospective│
│   review of  │ │   review of  │ │   review of  │ │   review of  │
│  inspection  │ │  inspection  │ │  inspection  │ │  inspection  │
│   outcomes   │ │   outcomes   │ │   outcomes   │ │   outcomes   │
│              │ │              │ │              │ │              │
│  (School A)  │ │  (School B)  │ │  (School C)  │ │  (School D)  │
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│    Semi-     │ │    Semi-     │ │    Semi-     │ │    Semi-     │
│  structured  │ │  structured  │ │  structured  │ │  structured  │
│ interview of │ │ interview of │ │ interview of │ │ interview of │
│school leader │ │school leader │ │school leader │ │school leader │
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      ┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
      │      Foucauldian Discourse Analysis          │
      │     (including identification of themes)      │
      └─────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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      │                 Discussion                    │
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Figure 2: Research design (overview)

Qualitative data generated during my semi-structured interviews was analysed using a process of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis ((FDA), see section *4.4*), during which a series of themes were identified. These themes were in turn used to address each of the study's research questions, as outlined in section *1.7*. More specifically, they helped to provide new insight into: school leaders' perception of inspection as a concept; how school leaders interpret inspection outcomes; and how school leaders respond to inspection outcomes (see *Chapter 6*). The steps outlined in *Figure 2* will be explored in greater depth in the coming subsections.

4.3.2 Sampling approach

The four school leaders were selected using purposive sampling (Schutt, 2006), based on a number of contributing factors relating to both the school leader and their associated school. With regards to the former, it is important to note that all participating school leaders were known to me, and I already had a working, professional relationship with each of them. This brought with it strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, I acknowledge that by choosing participants myself I was more prone to researcher bias (Sharma, 2017). This was mitigated by my careful structuring of interview questions, detailed conceptual framework and clearly defined approach to data analysis. I also recognise that having met and worked with the participants before, there was potential for them to respond in a way that pleased me, and perhaps even exaggerate their experiences so as to help meet my research aim. I hope to have avoided this as much as possible by appropriately sequencing my interview questions and using supplementary questions to elaborate on or challenge some of the more notable claims made (see section *4.6* for more complete reflexive considerations).

On the other hand, however, our prior acquaintance could be considered beneficial in that it prompted a more natural interaction and elicited an initial level of trust that might not have existed otherwise (Brown & Danaher, 2019). Building rapport with one's subject is considered an important aspect of the semi-structured interview process (Spradley, 2016; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019), and I was fortunate in that I had already established a personal connection with my interviewees ahead of our meetings. That I knew the participants in advance of their involvement was also helpful because it helped to assuage the fear of teachers and leaders that they may be criticised for speaking openly about inspection, as outlined in earlier sections (see chapters *2* and *3*).

Thinking back to Foucault's (1997) conceptualisation of power, discipline and surveillance, it would have been understandable for school leaders to refrain from sharing their innermost thoughts on inspection, if they were not completely sure of the reliability of the interviewer, for fear of some kind of retribution. My prior relationship with participants did, I feel, have a calming effect on them and they appeared safe in the knowledge that their responses to my questions would not be attributed to any particular individual leading to identification. Indeed, the school leaders who agreed to participate in the study did so voluntarily and with

agreement that their anonymity would be ensured. It is important to note in this context the power dynamic at play between myself as interviewer, and the school leaders as active participants in my research. Whilst I worked hard to retain objectivity in my orchestrating of interviews, I acknowledge that, as 'the one asking the questions', I was ultimately responsible for leading the discussion, thus assuming a position of relative power. Detailed participation sheets were distributed to all school leaders ahead of our scheduled interviews to remind them of the purpose of the research and to reassure them that my interest in inspection was principally designed to help inform future practice.

Given the nature of my role in education, and my many years' experience of working with school leaders on a variety of projects, it was not difficult to source from my existing network a diverse group of possible participants from a range of schools across Wales. Participants were purposively sampled and chosen on the basis that they and their school met the following criteria:

- The school was last inspected within the last complete inspection cycle (2016-2022);

- The participating school leader was in post at the time of the last inspection;

- The participating school leader holds a senior position within the school's staffing structure, and thus forms part of the school's senior management team. They must hold one of the following posts:

  o Headteacher;

  o Deputy headteacher;

  o Assistant headteacher;

  o A role similar to those identified above;

- There has been no significant structural change to the school (e.g. merger/federation) since the last inspection.

For consistency, school leaders were only eligible for participation in the study if they had been in post at their school during the 2016-2022 inspection cycle. This cycle was deemed the

most appropriate as it was the last complete inspection cycle at the time the research was conducted, and thus the most recent cycle *all* participating schools had been subject to.

In addition, and in order to gain as broad a range of perspectives as possible, participants from primary and secondary schools of different sizes and geographic locations were chosen. Variation in schools' performance in their last inspection (drawing from secondary data publicly available via the Estyn website) was also considered and I believed it important to include at least one school that had fared particularly well, and another particularly poorly to give the study breadth. As a result, the research includes the following:

- Two primary and two secondary schools, all English-medium in type (Welsh-medium schools were available and met the criteria, but I am not a Welsh speaker);

- Schools of different sizes (e.g. fewer/more than 500 pupils; fewer/more than 1,000 pupils);

- Schools in different geographical locations (e.g. north, south, east, west and in areas of high deprivation/low deprivation);

- Schools with contrasting performance in their last inspection (e.g. range of 'Excellent' and/or 'Good'; 'Adequate and needs improvement' and/or 'Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement').

Having shortlisted a number of possible participants (I narrowed my focus to eight school leaders), based on our prior relationship and their adherence to the criteria outlined in this section, the ultimate decision on who to involve was informed by my own professional judgement on who had the potential to provide the most interesting and insightful responses to questions during interview. In short, I chose the people who I believed would best help me to respond to my research aim and questions. This meant selecting the school leaders who I knew to have strong opinions, and I felt had a story to tell. This did not mean, however, that my selection was in any way predicated on involving only school leaders with negative views of inspection, and I did not know enough about the participants or their experiences to determine in advance what they thought of the inspection process; put plainly, I was open-minded about what they might say and accepting of the fullest possible range of school leader

standpoints. The impact of this and other decisions I took during the course of this research is explored further in my section on reflexivity (see section *4.6*).

Individuals were contacted directly, using school contact telephone numbers and professional email addresses. None of those contacted refused to take part or chose to step back from the research, which is in my view indicative of the trust they had in me as a respected educational researcher. While I recognise this is a relatively small sample that is not representative of the wider school population, the study nevertheless offers valuable insight into the behaviours and response of schools in different situations, and with different histories of inspection. Furthermore, I was conscious that given discourse analysis is known to be a very labour-intensive method of data analysis, decisions about sample size are often strongly influenced by pragmatic considerations (Willig, 2008). This study was no different.

4.3.3 Research tools

Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data as they allowed participants to 'discuss their interpretations of the world around them and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view' (Cohen *et al*. 2000, p.267), which was in keeping with the principles outlined in my conceptual framework (see *Chapter 2*). In using this approach to data generation, I was confident that I would be able to capture effectively school leaders' views of inspection 'from the inside' in order to better understand how they interpret and respond to Estyn judgements (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Unlike structured interviews, which present a fixed set of questions and little scope for manoeuvre (Punch, 2005), the semi-structured interview provided more opportunity to probe and explore in greater detail what came up in conversation with school leaders. It allowed for more depth of investigation of key areas of interest, and gave space for follow-up questions when participants discussed matters of particular relevance to the research questions (Bailey, 2014). I was, however, mindful that 'interviews should not be conceived as informal chats' but as 'data-collection instruments which can be used to penetrate a number of research questions' (McGrath *et al*. 2019, p.1002). As a qualified journalist with a decade's experience in the field, I considered myself highly adept at orchestrating effectively interviews of this

nature. I was nevertheless mindful of the difference in interview style for journalistic and research purposes, with the latter typically directed by an interview guide (see *Table 3*), informed by literature and driven by research aims (Busetto *et al*. 2020). Conversely, in my experience, journalistic interviews tend to be more conversational and not as carefully prepared, albeit there is commonality in that professional interviews of any type usually involve an interviewer who is in charge of structuring and directing questioning (Sewell, 2009).

In this case, to provide structure and a level of uniformity across all interviews, a series of open-ended questions were drawn up in advance and, in some cases, related specifically to the information gathered for interview preparation (see section *4.3.4*). For example, school leaders were invited to offer their interpretation of their school's inspection outcomes (i.e. 'Excellent'; 'Good'; 'Adequate and needs improvement'; and 'Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement') in order to better understand their reading of these standardised terms. Although interview questions were predominantly pre-planned to ensure a general consistency in approach, there was some nuance on the basis of schools' performance in Estyn inspection and school leaders were given the opportunity to elaborate or provide more information as the interviews progressed. See *Table 3* below for a complete interview guide, including my six pre-planned interview questions (and sub-questions), and their associated research questions/Foucauldian theory:

Questions & sub-questions (in italics)	Associated research question	Associated Foucauldian theory
1. What does school inspection mean to you? • *In your view, what is inspection for?* • *What is its role/function?* • *Is inspection a good or bad thing?*	How do school leaders understand inspection as a concept?	Discourse (performativity), power, surveillance, discipline

• *What is your understanding of what e.g. 'Excellent'/ 'Good/ 'Adequate and needs improvement'/ 'Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement' means?* • *How would you describe your experience of inspection?*		
2. What is your interpretation of your school's inspection outcomes? • *Are they a fair reflection of how your school was operating?* • *How important are inspection outcomes to you and your school?* • *Did the inspection reveal anything you did not already know?*	How do school leaders interpret inspection outcomes?	Discourse (performativity, professionalism)
3. What impact did the inspection outcomes have on your school? • *In what ways have you responded to these*	How do school leaders respond to inspection outcomes?	Discourse (performativity, professionalism), surveillance, discipline

outcomes, e.g. what intervention/ practices have you employed as a result? • *How did these outcomes impact on your day-to-day practice? And how did they impact on your longer-term practice? Please give examples.* • *Did you do anything differently as a result of your inspection? Please explain.*		
4. Did the inspection outcomes give you a mandate for change? • *Did you use the inspection outcomes to move the school forward? If so, in what ways?* • *Would this (changes) have happened without the inspection outcomes?* • *Did the inspection outcomes give you confidence to secure*	How do school leaders respond to inspection outcomes?	Discourse (performativity, professionalism), discipline

improvement? If so, how?		
5. How are inspection outcomes used by other stakeholders within the education system? • *Did you feel pressure to perform as a result of your inspection? If so, why?* • *Were you subjected to greater scrutiny, e.g. from your local authority/ regional education consortium, following your inspection? If so, in what ways?* • *Do you think publication of inspection outcomes is helpful? If so, why?*	How do school leaders understand inspection as a concept?/ How do school leaders interpret inspection outcomes?/ How school leaders respond to inspection outcomes?	Discourse (performativity), power, surveillance, discipline
6. Were you content that everything explored by inspectors was represented fairly in your inspection outcomes/ inspection report?	How do school leaders interpret inspection outcomes?/How do school leaders respond to inspection outcomes?	Power, resistance

• *Did you accept all of the inspectorate's judgements? Please explain.*		
• *Was there anything that you fundamentally disagreed with during the course of your inspection? If so, why?*		
• *Were you satisfied with the conduct of your inspection team?*		
• *Did you feel the need to challenge anything arising from your inspection report/ the inspection process?*		

Table 3: Interview guide, with pre-planned questions and associated research question/theory

Thinking back to Bentham's panopticon as a 'structure of domination' (Poster, 1990, p.214), I was cognisant of school leaders' nervousness about what might happen to them and their schools in the event their – potentially controversial – thoughts about inspection were made public. Foucauldian notions of discipline and surveillance were of course prevalent in my thinking and I was not in any way satisfied that participants would be confident enough to air their views in front of colleagues, whom they were unlikely to have known or trusted. For me, this further strengthened the case for semi-structured interviews, as by engaging in a one-to-one conversation with me as lead researcher, participants could be assured their contributions would not be shared beyond the confines of this thesis (and would be anonymised, in any event). The potential for interviewer bias was mitigated by my careful

structuring of interviews, the testing of questions during my pilot study, and my engagement in reflexive practice (see section *4.6*).

Interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and were recorded using the built-in recording mechanism on *Microsoft Teams*, the platform chosen to undertake the interview process, in order to capture data effectively and support transcription.

4.3.4 Interview preparation

In preparation for my semi-structured interviews of school leaders, I undertook a brief retrospective review of inspection outcomes in each of the participant's schools. This was used to contextualise my conversations with school leaders, and gave me a better understanding of how each associated school had performed in its most recent inspection. It also meant that I could tailor my open-ended questions in a more appropriate manner, acknowledging that each school leader had experienced a different inspection process, as well as receiving contrasting inspection outcomes. The judgements awarded by Estyn against each of the inspectorate's five key areas of interest (i.e. standards; wellbeing and attitudes to learning; teaching and learning experiences; care, support and guidance; and leadership and management) were recorded for my own information and kept private, with only an abbreviated précis of these outcomes offered here, in narrative form (see section *5.2*), so as to ensure no possible identification of participants.

I was conscious that documenting *actual* inspection outcomes against Estyn's specific areas of interest, allied to brief school context and more specific commentary related to the school leaders' inspection experience, could lead to identification by association. The background information provided is, therefore, deliberately nondescript and presented ahead of data generated during interview with the sole aim of better locating for readers my individual discussions with school leaders. In short, I felt it important that readers of this thesis understood in the clearest terms possible the positioning of school leaders and the specific environments in which they worked. I was mindful that how a school had performed in its last inspection, and other contextual factors (as explored in *section 3.3*), may have contributed to school leaders' perception of inspection, and indeed, their subsequent actions.

It is important to note that, whilst not published here, only headline outcomes were used to inform this study, and the extended commentary provided by the inspectorate in relation to each school's inspection report was not considered unless specifically referenced during semi-structured interview.

4.3.5 Pilot study

I completed a small pilot study in summer 2020 to test my research design and build an early picture of school leaders' interpretation of and response to inspection outcomes. The study was informed by the same aim and research questions (an additional question was used in the final study, in light of the pilot; see below) and involved the same approach to data generation. The research was centred around two school leaders, one of a school that returned 'Good' judgements in each of the five key inspection areas in its last inspection, and the other who led a school that was, according to Estyn, noticeably weaker. This second school was awarded a mix of judgements for its five key inspection areas: one area was rated 'Good', three areas were judged 'Adequate and needs improvement', and another was deemed 'Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement' – the lowest possible outcome. Overall, both school leaders were negative about their inspection experiences, and raised a number of issues explored in greater detail in this research. Neither school leader was invited to take part in the final study as I wanted to explore with a different group of participants my research aim and questions; I was mindful also that the school leaders involved in the pilot had already given generously their time and I did not want to ask anything further of them.

As well as offering valuable opportunity to trial my semi-structured interview process and approach to data analysis, the pilot study provided evidence that school leaders' perception of the inspectorate (i.e. pre-inspection) shaped both their interpretation of outcomes (i.e. resulting from the publication of their Estyn report) and their subsequent responses to them (i.e. the legacy of inspection). This was an important finding, as it prompted me to consider in more depth what Estyn and the process of inspection actually *means* to individual school leaders (i.e. how they understand inspection as a concept). This was something implicit in my questioning, but did not feature as a clearly-defined area of interest and arose only during my

conversations with school leaders. Therefore, and as a direct consequence of my pilot study, an additional interest in school leaders' understanding of inspection as a *concept*, and what it means to them as education professionals, was built into the main study and formed the basis of my early questioning of school leaders during interview. This meant extending my pilot study's two research questions, which initially included:

- **How do school leaders interpret inspection outcomes (i.e. what they understand by key judgements)?; and**

- **How do school leaders respond to inspection outcomes (i.e. what they do as a result)?**

To accommodate a third:

- **How do school leaders understand inspection as a concept (i.e. their interpretation of what inspection is for/does)?**

The addition of a third research question for this study was an important development as it provided a useful foundation for the exploration of how school leaders interpret and respond to inspection outcomes. Fundamentally, it was helpful in understanding school leaders' perception of inspection as a concept *prior* to analysing their reading of the actual inspection outcomes themselves.

4.4 Approach to data analysis

Inspired by Foucault's conceptions of discourse and power (Foucault, 1972; 1977), I undertook a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) to analyse my data and provide greater depth of understanding of participants' views (Khan & MacEachen, 2021). Building on my post-structuralist stance, it gave me a framework for the exploration of popular perceptions of inspection (see *Chapter 3*) and how school leaders interpret and respond to inspection outcomes.

FDA was appealing because it acknowledges that there are various subject positions emanating from discourse, and that these positions influence what subjects experience and

how they interact (as explored in *Chapter 2*). In this case, the notion of a school being *inspected* implies that school leaders (and their staff) are being subjected to a form of surveillance, and could therefore be perceived as being at the whim of those doing the *inspecting*. Similarly, the Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis is also concerned with the exercise of power, and the way in which common understanding of reality is legitimised and shaped (Cheek, 2004). This could include the way in which Estyn, as one of the primary drivers of school-level accountability in Wales, is portrayed as inculcating 'a culture of fear' and 'inhibiting creativity' (Donaldson, 2018, p.23; see section *1.4*). Fundamentally, I was drawn to the capacity of FDA to explore 'how people think, what they know and how they speak about the world around us, and how their knowledge is culturally embedded' (Raby, 2002, p.30). Each of these foci chimed with my conception of inspection and its impact on school staff.

I explored a number of approaches to FDA in preparation for this study, including Parker's (1992) 20-step model, which I considered too political and operating at a more institutional level (rather than at the more localised level of practice pertaining to school leaders) for the specific needs of this research. Willig's (2008) six-stage application aligned more closely with my needs, in that it was suitably condensed and provided a framework through which data generated could be mapped against key areas of interest (such as those outlined in section *1.7*). Willig (ibid, pp.115-117) lists 'discursive constructions', 'discourses', 'action orientation', 'positionings', 'practice' and 'subjectivity' as being central to FDA, and the identification of these stages was useful in that they allowed for a richer analysis of the way in which both subjects and objects were framed. An adaptation of Willig's model of FDA, informed by my pilot study and pertinent to the overarching aim and questions presented in this research, is offered below:

Stage	Description	Adaptation to research questions
1. Discursive constructions	How is the discursive object constructed?	How do the school leaders describe inspection? On what are these descriptions based?
2. Discourses	Similarities and differences in constructions – location in wider discourses. What is	What are the similarities and differences in these descriptions (recorded in

	their relationship to one another?	*Stage 1*) and the wider discourses in which they are located?
3. Action orientation	Context – what constructions achieve; what are their purpose? The functions and gains generated through constructing the object in a certain way	What is the function of these descriptions (recorded in *Stage 1*)? What do the school leaders do, based on their understanding of the inspection (action), and why do they do it (orientation)?
4. Positionings	Subject positions in discourse – rights and duties. How are different people positioned?	Where are the school leaders positioned in relation to the discourse around inspection? How does this effect what they can and cannot do?
5. Practice	How subject positions open or close opportunities – what can people say and do given the positions made available in discourses?	How do school leaders' subject positions open up or close down opportunities for action?
6. Subjectivity	Feelings, thoughts and experiences – social and psychological effects on the subject	What can be felt, thought and experienced by school leaders? How does this impact on their behaviour and interactions with others?

Table 4: Adaptation of Willig's (2008) six-stage FDA

Using Willig's six stages as a frame, I identified a number of guiding questions related to school leaders' understanding of the inspection process, as outlined in *Table 4* (under '*Adaptation to research questions*'). These questions, together with their associated stages, provided a useful scaffold for my data analysis post-interview. In that respect, the adaptation of Willig's model, as shown above, served as a valuable 'roadmap' for my research, in that it gave direction but allowed room for manoeuvre. I was mindful of the need for adaptations broad enough to not prejudice the integrity of the interview process.

According to Willig (2008, p.96), 'FDA focuses upon what kind of objects and subjects are constructed through discourses and what kinds of ways-of-being these objects and subjects make available to people'. This conceptualisation was appealing to me, as it resonated

strongly with my research aim to better understand how school leaders in Wales interpret (i.e. through discourses) and respond to (i.e. ways-of-being made available to people) school inspection outcomes. Willig (ibid) also notes the interest of FDA in power dynamics, and the interconnectivity between discourse and legitimation – another focus of this study. She writes:

> Since discourses make available ways-of-seeing and ways-of-being, they are strongly implicated in the exercise of power. Dominant discourses privilege those versions of social reality that legitimate existing power relations and social structures. Some discourses are so entrenched that it is very difficult to see how we may challenge them.
>
> (Willig, 2008, p.113)

Willig's presentation of so-called 'dominant discourses' privileging certain versions of reality, that in turn legitimise existing power relations and social structures, is particularly pertinent to this research as it corroborates Foucauldian constructs of discourse explored earlier (see section *2.1.1*); for example, discourses as bodies of knowledge that 'systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972, p.54). Indeed, Willig's observation that some discourses are so entrenched that they are difficult to challenge could easily be applied to notions of performativity which, in this context, is based upon teachers' and school leaders' subjection to 'rules of formation' (Foucault, 2002, p.42) that govern what they do and how they behave. As explained by Ball (2003, p.216), the discourse of performativity presents 'a mode of regulation' that school staff are dutybound to follow (which is itself an exertion of power).

In the true spirit of post-structuralism, the study was conducted in the knowledge that meaning is constantly shifting and as such, the six stages of FDA outlined by Willig would be susceptible to change (Wetherell, 1998; Fadyl & Nicholls, 2013). Indeed, Willig's (2008, p.126) resolution that there is 'no one "world" that can be described and studied' and there are instead 'numerous versions of the world, each of which is constructed through discourses and practices' was central to this thought process.

4.5 Ethical considerations

Care was taken to ensure that the research adhered to the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018). Similarly, the study was undertaken in accordance with the University of Wales Trinity Saint David's Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice and Research Data Management Policy. Ethical approval was granted by the university's education ethics committee prior to research commencement. In addition to these general principles, I also considered a number of ethical issues specific to this study. One of the most significant related to the anonymity of participants, and ensuring no school leader could be identified at any point during the course of the research. Risk of identification was mitigated by providing each participant with a pseudonym and redacting the name of their schools. Other contextual details that could have led to their identification (e.g. exact location of school/number of pupils etc) were omitted and no direct quotes were drawn from the Estyn reports themselves. The Estyn reports were not dated and are referenced using a range of publication dates for the same reason.

The right of participants to withdraw at any point, without the need for explanation, was made clear in writing and orally to school leaders in advance of the study taking place. They were informed of the research aim and questions, and were given advanced notice of how their data would be used. They were told that the interviews would be transcribed for the purpose of data analysis and all recordings of what was said (verbal and written) would be stored securely, accessible in full only to me as the sole researcher. I explained that excerpts of the transcription would be published in the research report, but that no identifying details would be included so as to ensure participant confidentiality. School leaders participated voluntarily and there was no exchange of monies or financial reimbursement as a result of their involvement. Incentives were not offered in any form.

Given the high-stakes nature of inspection, and the pressure on schools to perform (see section *1.2*), I was mindful of the potential for school leaders to disclose during interview matters related to their own personal mental health and wellbeing. Minimising harm and ensuring participant welfare are key responsibilities for educational researchers, as outlined in BERA (2018) and the university's Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice, and so I was ready to take action in their best interests should the situation have necessitated such a

response. For example, in the event of a school leader sharing with me matters that raised concerns, I would have sought professional support from organisations such as *Taking Care of Teachers*, a mental health and wellbeing hub funded by the Welsh Government, and *Teacher Support Cymru*, a charity dedicated to improving the wellbeing of training, serving and retired teachers in Wales. In addition, I would have contacted the school's local authority education service for guidance and made the school leader's chairperson of governors aware of the situation, if I thought it appropriate. Ethical considerations relating to school leaders' mental health and wellbeing were accentuated following news of Ruth Perry's death, as described in section *1.5*.

I was very conscious of my obligation as a researcher to the people I studied, recognising that 'the lives and stories that we hear and study are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared them with us' (Denzin, 1989, p.83). In my case, that promise was made all the more pertinent given my prior relationship with participants, with whom I have established strong professional affiliation over a number of years. I ensured throughout the course of this research that I was approachable, honest and sensitive in my handling of school leaders' personal accounts and reflections on their inspection experiences. Fundamentally, I was diligent in ensuring that all school leaders were fully aware of the process in which they were taking part. Written consent to participate in the study was obtained at the outset, and every effort was made to ensure that data was generated and presented in a fair and reasonable manner. As such, I am confident that the findings I have produced and the conclusions I have drawn are based on evidence and not, as far as is possible, driven by my own personal beliefs. Nevertheless, I recognise that I do not sit 'outside' the process of data generation or analysis and, in accordance with my constructivist position, have been integral to the construction of research outputs (Holloway, 1997).

Interviews were conducted remotely and online, via *Microsoft Teams*, which was at the time of writing the only medium of this type available to researchers at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. Participants were able to participate in the interview at a location of their choosing – e.g. at home, at school or at another secure site with computer access/ connectivity, and necessary privacy – and at a date and time convenient to them. All data generation and analysis took place at my home, where data was secured and safely stored on a password-encrypted computer. Participant information sheets were provided to all participants explaining the overarching aim and purpose of the research, what was required

of them, and how their information would be used, stored and shared (see *Appendix 4*). In addition, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions before and after interviews took place, and given contact details in case of further query, or complaint.

4.6 Reflexivity

Reflexivity requires awareness of my role as researcher and the way it has influenced both my research processes and outcomes (Haynes, 2012). As outlined in section *1.6*, my perception of inspection and accountability, and its impact on school leaders, has been shaped by my own professional career in education, first as a specialist education journalist and, more recently, an educational researcher and policy analyst. Thus, whilst I have sought during these pages to be respectful of all views, and considerate of the strengths and weaknesses associated with current inspection arrangements, I acknowledge that my work has been heavily informed by these personal experiences. This is unavoidable, albeit I consider it a strength that my interactions with several hundred teachers and leaders in Wales, over an unbroken 14-year period, has allowed for the development of a much deeper understanding of the diversity of experience of the inspection process. In short, I have worked in various ways with schools, of different sizes, types and geographies, that have experienced the full range of inspection outcomes.

Whilst engaging in these activities, I became part of a rich network of influential stakeholders (including e.g. school leaders, teachers, academics and policymakers) and the centrality of my positioning within this community means I am well-versed in the language of policymaking, and understand clearly many of the challenges facing those employed to lead on educational change. This in turn supported my semi-structured interview of school leaders, as I could relate and respond to all of the constructions they presented. My innate knowledge of the Welsh education policy landscape, and particularly policy developments related to accountability and inspection, ensured I was well-placed to engage in and shape discussion, as appropriate, in line with my research aim and questions. It is also worth noting that I have enjoyed strong professional relationships with each of the last three HMCIs, which has added further insight to my knowledge of the Welsh inspectorate and its

evolution over time. Together, all of these experiences have influenced in some part the research that I have undertaken (Foote & Bartell, 2011).

During the process of transcription, it became apparent that I had explicitly sympathised with the school leaders on a number of occasions, and in one particular case (see section *5.4.6*), described as 'shocking' and 'dreadful' a school leader's revelation that her colleague had contemplated suicide. I noted, in hindsight, that the emotion of these responses likely contributed to the more elaborate and heartfelt comments made by the school leader subsequently. However, I am reassured by Behar (2014, p.273) that the tendency for researchers to 'ask for revelations from others but… reveal little or nothing about ourselves' can be counterproductive and limit the extent to which participants feel able to respond. Indeed, I make no excuse for being open and honest in the undertaking of the interviews, and am confident that by doing so, I was able to develop a better rapport and generate more trust with the school leaders. Equally, I am mindful that by offering little or no comment to some of their observations might have come across rude or been construed as being sympathetic to an alternative point of view.

It is taken for granted that the questions asked of participants will have helped shape their responses to them. For example, I accept that my interest in exploring how school leaders 'felt' at various times during the inspection process will have likely invoked an emotional response, based on my very clear orientation to those feelings. However, whilst it is natural in qualitative research for researchers to take different views of reality (Given, 2008), and my adoption of an interpretivist paradigm posits that 'objective reality can never be captured' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.5), what I can draw upon that others might not is extensive experience of conducting interviews based on my prior career as a journalist and professional interview training. As such, I am satisfied that the interviews presented in this study were conducted rigorously (see section *4.3.3*), and gave each participant a unique opportunity to talk about their experiences in a safe and secure environment. That all four school leaders were known to me, to greater or lesser extents, was of significant benefit in my view, as it allowed for a fuller and more open discussion about some of their innermost concerns and reflections regarding Estyn inspection than might otherwise have been the case had we never before met. I accept that my professional relationship with the school leaders may have influenced their responses, though I consider it an overwhelmingly positive thing that the

school leaders knew me well enough to trust that I would not attribute to them their very honest and personal reflections on their own experiences (see section *4.3.2*).

Pillow (2003, p.175) urges researchers to avoid 'wading in the morass of our own positionings', warning that 'we do not escape from the consequences of our positions by talking about them endlessly'. I will resist the temptation to do so here, albeit it is important to acknowledge the weight of expectation I felt as an educational researcher in the undertaking of this study. Given my aforementioned relationship with participants, I was extremely conscious of the need to relay truthfully and accurately their stories, so as to do justice to their experiences. In some cases, it was uncomfortable to hear participant responses to questions during interview, particularly when they spoke about their own misgivings about their futures in education and that colleagues had considered suicide (see section *5.4.6*). These are highly sensitive, deeply personal and emotive issues, and I was keenly aware of my personal and professional obligation to participants to record and share their feelings in an appropriate way. I am confident that this has been achieved, for reasons outlined above and in section *4.5*, and support the view that qualitative research interviews have a therapeutic quality (Wolgemuth *et al.* 2015) that allows participants to get off their chest things that are most troubling to them.

Initially, I was concerned about sample size (four school leaders not being enough), though as the research progressed I became increasingly confident that there would be sufficient data from which to draw meaningful conclusions, owing largely to the breadth of experiences shared. I was also reassured by the findings of my pilot study, which was useful in both informing the mechanics of this work and justifying its scope. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that a different researcher, with a different epistemological orientation and foci, might have taken a different approach to such an investigation. Indeed, my post-structuralist stance is evident throughout the study which was, from conception to conclusion, driven by an assumption that there *are* hierarchies of power at play in education and that discursive constructions of inspection shape practitioners' responses to it. My methodology and research tools were deliberately chosen with this in mind, and I am particularly pleased with the way in which Willig's (2008) framework for FDA gave structure to my data analysis as it allowed for a methodical and comprehensive consideration of key Foucauldian concepts in relation to my research aim and questions.

Chapter 5: Data analysis and discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a detailed analysis of the data generated during my research, and is effectively split into two parts. First, I present a brief retrospective review of each participant's school; this includes reference to the school's most recent inspection outcomes, contextual information related to school type, size and area of deprivation, and a rough guide (so as to avoid identification) as to how long the school leader has been in post. This background material provides the foundation for what follows in part two, with a comprehensive analysis of data generated through semi-structured interview. Findings are discussed and presented using Willig's (2008) six-stage FDA as a frame, as described in section *4.4* above.

5.2 Schools and school leaders: A retrospective review

In order to ensure the anonymity of participants, schools are referred to only as 'School A', 'School B', 'School C' and 'School D'. Their corresponding school leaders are given pseudonyms – 'David', 'Mary', 'John' and 'Karen' – to avoid identification. Contextual information (including reference to school type, size and area of deprivation) and inspection outcomes related to each school leader's school is presented in *Table 5*, which is deliberately vague, below. Dates of inspections and school geography have been redacted to avoid identification, although all four inspections were undertaken during the 2016-2022 inspection cycle and the relevant schools are reflective of a wide geographical area (e.g. north, south, east and west).

School	School leader	School context	School inspection outcomes
A	David	Secondary of fewer than 1,000 pupils; area of	Mainly 'Adequate and needs improvement'

		relatively high deprivation	
B	Mary	Primary of more than 500 pupils; area of relatively high deprivation	A mix of 'Excellent' and 'Good'
C	John	Secondary of fewer than 1,000 pupils; area of relatively low deprivation	Mainly 'Adequate and needs improvement'
D	Karen	Primary of fewer than 500 pupils; area of relatively high deprivation	A mix of 'Excellent' and 'Good'

Table 5: Participating school leaders and school characteristics

In line with criteria outlined in my sampling approach (see section *4.3.2*), the participants chosen to take part in this study are reflective of schools of different types, sizes, geographic locations (no school included is located in the same local authority area), areas of deprivation (based on their proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) – a recognised proxy for deprivation (Taylor, 2018)) and that cover a range of outcomes in their last inspection. A full interview schedule is presented below (see *Table 6*), followed by a more detailed narrative on each school and its school leader:

Participant	Pseudonym	School	Date	Location	Duration
1	David	A	June 2022	*Microsoft Teams* (school office)	50 minutes
2	Mary	B	July 2022	*Microsoft Teams* (home)	60 minutes

| 3 | John | C | July 2022 | *Microsoft Teams* (school office) | 40 minutes |
| 4 | Karen | D | July 2022 | *Microsoft Teams* (home) | 45 minutes |

Table 6: Interview schedule

5.2.1 School A: David

David is School A's headteacher, a position he had held for more than two years prior to the school's inspection. School A is a secondary of fewer than 1,000 pupils, located in an area of relatively high deprivation (according to its FSM eligibility). According to Estyn (2016-2022a), its performance at the time of its last inspection was weak, as evidenced by a series of 'Adequate and needs improvement' judgements. Based on Estyn's description of these judgements, this means that the school's 'strengths outweigh weaknesses, but important aspects require improvement' (Estyn, 2020b, p.3).

David was interviewed online in June 2022 whilst in his office in school. The interview lasted for approximately 50 minutes and was recorded using *Microsoft Teams*.

5.2.2 School B: Mary

Mary is School B's headteacher. She was appointed to her position more than two years prior to the school's inspection. School B is a primary of more than 500 pupils, located in an area of relatively high deprivation (according to its FSM eligibility). According to Estyn (2016-2022b), its performance at the time of its last inspection was strong, as evidenced by a mix of 'Excellent' and 'Good' judgements. Based on Estyn's description of these judgements, this means that there was evidence of 'very strong, sustained performance and practice', and 'strong features, although minor aspects may require improvement' (Estyn, 2020b, p.3).

Mary was interviewed online in July 2022 whilst at her home. The interview lasted for approximately 60 minutes and was recorded using *Microsoft Teams*.

5.2.3 School C: John

John is School C's assistant headteacher, a position he had held for more than two years prior to the school's inspection. School C is a secondary of fewer than 1,000 pupils, located in an area of relatively low deprivation (according to its FSM eligibility). According to Estyn (2016-2022c), its performance at the time of its last inspection was weak, as evidenced by a series of 'Adequate and needs improvement' judgements. Based on Estyn's description of these judgements, this means that the school's 'strengths outweigh weaknesses, but important aspects require improvement' (Estyn, 2020b, p.3).

John was interviewed online in July 2022 whilst in his office in school. The interview lasted for approximately 40 minutes and was recorded using *Microsoft Teams*.

5.2.4 School D: Karen

Karen is School D's headteacher, a position she had held for more than two years prior to the school's inspection. School D is a primary of fewer than 500 pupils, located in an area of relatively high deprivation (according to its FSM eligibility). According to Estyn (2016-2022d), its performance at the time of its last inspection was strong, as evidenced by a mix of 'Excellent' and 'Good' judgements. Based on Estyn's description of these judgements, this means that there was evidence of 'very strong, sustained performance and practice', and 'strong features, although minor aspects may require improvement' (Estyn, 2020b, p.3).

Karen was interviewed online in July 2022 whilst at her home. The interview lasted for approximately 45 minutes and was recorded using *Microsoft Teams*.

5.3 Preparing data for analysis

The preparation of data ready for analysis was undertaken in five steps, outlined in *Table 7* below:

Steps of data preparation	Details
Step 1: Transcribe interviews	Listen to and transcribe all interviews (electronically) using recordings made via *Microsoft Teams*
Step 2: Check transcriptions against recordings, clean text and print off	Listen again to all interview recordings, checking transcriptions for accuracy. Clean text (focussing on e.g. spelling, punctuation, grammar) and ensure consistency in styling. Print off hard copies of all four transcripts ready for highlighting (see *Appendix 1*)
Step 3: Read through and highlight text pertaining to six stages of FDA	Read through all transcripts individually, highlighting in different colours the text that aligns, based on my experiences and review of literature, with each stage of FDA (e.g. discursive constructions = green, discourses = blue, action orientation = red etc). An example of this is given in *Figure 3*
Step 4: Collate highlighted text into separate documents	Collate highlighted text into six separate documents, pertaining to each stage of FDA (see *Appendix 2*)
Step 5: Generate themes for analysis	For *Stage 1*, undertake a coding process (described below in section *5.3.1*) to generate themes. Develop themes a priori in *Stage 2*, and themes based on my own judgement in stages 3-6 (this is further explained in section *5.3.1*)

Table 7: Approach to data preparation

Step 1 involved transcribing all interviews in typed (computer) form using recordings made via *Microsoft Teams*. I completed this process within weeks of the interviews being held, so

that they remained fresh in my mind and I could recall the context in which certain things were said (mindful of the potential for brief, technical glitches that might make certain words/phrases more difficult to decipher). This process of transcription was itself helpful, in that it allowed not only refamiliarisation with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), but allowed me to recognise and acknowledge aspects of participant responses that I had not initially considered, such as speech errors, pauses (in the form of 'ums' and 'ers') and changes in emphasis.

I decided to retain these 'spoken disfluencies', instead of editing them out, as I considered them to be an important part of participants' thought process and an indicator that the speaker was thinking carefully about what they were saying (Collins *et al*. 2019, p.655). I was mindful that the way in which something is said can affect its meaning (Willig, 2008) and so felt this additional layer of transcription would give a more complete view of the discussions that took place. A useful demonstration of this can be seen in *Excerpt 52* of my data analysis (see section *5.4.6*), in which one of the participating school leaders spoke with great emotion about the impact of inspection on one of her colleagues (i.e. 'so when she said to me that it had made her, um, go into a very dark place, um, and that she had contemplated suicide, I just, I just couldn't believe it'). Speech errors and pauses were typed verbatim in roman, with changes in emphasis acknowledged using italics (see *Figure 3* for a working example).

In Step 2, I listened again to all interview recordings and checked transcriptions for accuracy. In so doing, I ensured all text was clean (focussing on e.g. spelling, punctuation, grammar) and ensured consistency in styling throughout. I chose not to employ a computer package to support transcription and instead handled data in written form. I did so because I felt more comfortable handling data in this way, and it allowed me to see more clearly early connections between blocks of text (e.g. it helped to be able to position documents side by side). Once text had been checked and cleaned, I then printed off hard copies of all four transcripts ready for highlighting (Step 3).

In Step 3, I read through each transcript again, this time highlighting with different colour pens the text that I considered to align most clearly with each of Willig's (2008) six key stages. For example, in *Figure 3*, below, I highlighted in red two paragraphs of text that I deemed to be most associated with Willig's interpretation of action orientation (*Stage 3*). Using my adaptation of her six-stage FDA, outlined in *Table 4*, as an aide, I aligned Mary's (School B)

reference to 'playing the game' with school leaders' descriptions of inspection (responding specifically to the questions presented in *Stage 1* of *Table 4*, namely: 'How do the school leaders describe inspection? On what are these descriptions based?').

To exemplify how I prepared the data for analysis, in this example I made the decision to associate 'playing the game' with school leaders' descriptions of inspection (a manifestation of action orientation) based on my earlier review of literature, which found that in some cases, inspection is seen as 'a game' that school leaders need to prepare his or her 'team' for (Watts, 2012, p.4). I was also struck by Mary's suggestion that she would adapt her school's practice so as to ensure inspectors are given 'what they want to see'. This was, I felt, reminiscent of the 'gaming' of the inspection process by practitioners to curry favour, as described by Allen & Burgess (2012, p.14). Indeed, in his paper drawing on an earlier study of six school leaders' experiences of inspection, Courtney (2016, p.632) refers to schools and their leaders 'playing in a game with moving goal posts', in which they are 'ordered to comply with… changing criteria'. This, to my mind, bore similarities with Mary's reference to 'putting in what you know needs to be shown'.
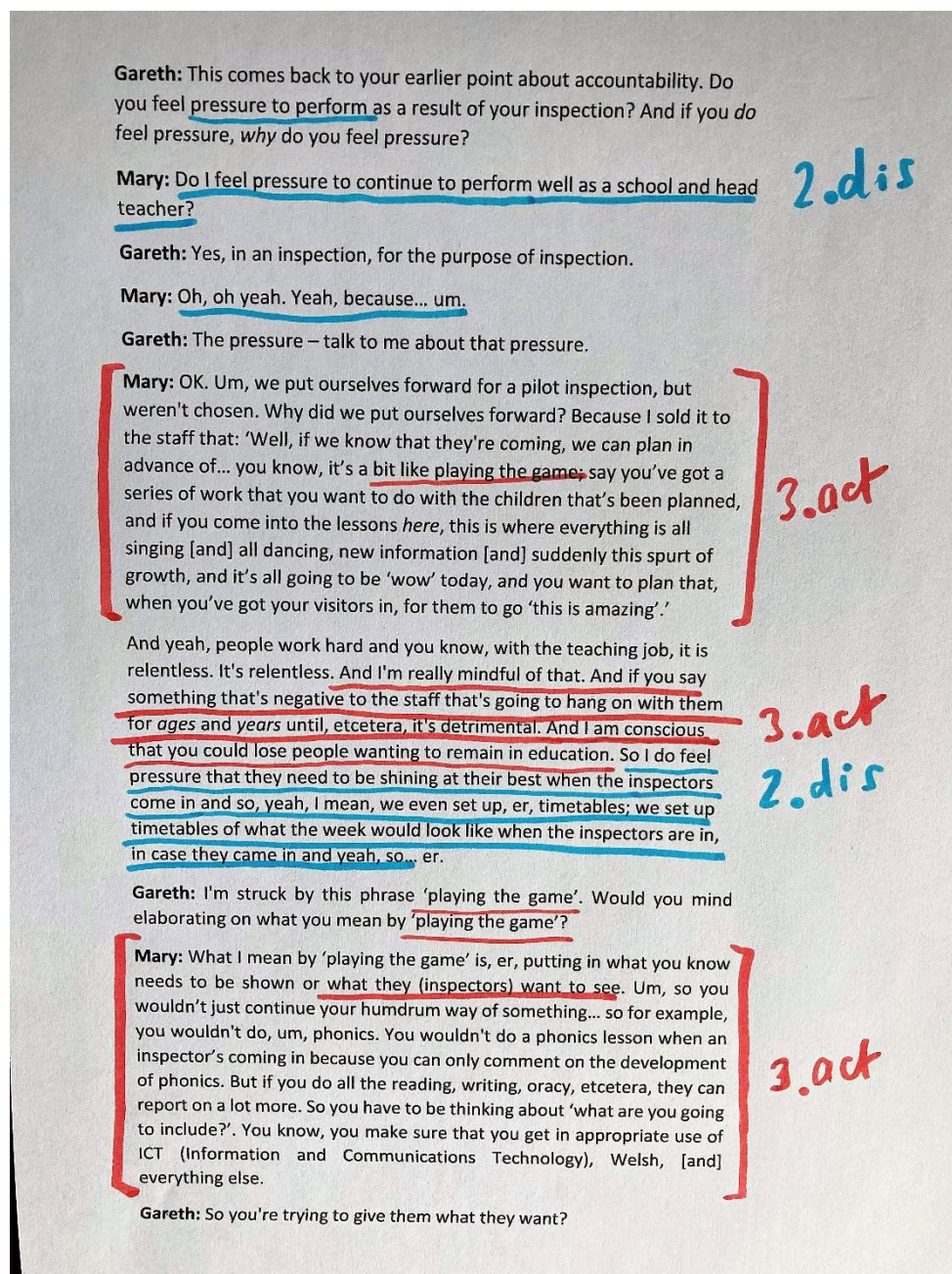
Figure 3: Excerpt of transcript and researcher notes

Also highlighted within *Figure 3* is my interpretation of Willig's *Stage 2* – discourses. I annotate

in blue Mary's reference to feeling pressured to perform and for staff to 'be shining at their

best when the inspectors come in'. These sentences were highlighted because I considered

them to be representative of the underlying discourse of performativity (responding to the

question presented in *Stage 2* of *Table 4*, namely: 'What are the similarities and differences

in these descriptions and the wider discourses in which they are located?') that regulates

school leaders' behaviours and makes them respond to inspection in particular ways (Ball,

2003). As described in section *2.1.1*, the pressure to perform in my view stems from school leaders' adherence to the 'rules of formation' (Foucault, 2002, p.42) that govern the inspection process.

It is important to acknowledge that my preparation of data (particularly in relation to steps 3 and 5) has been shaped by my prior engagement with school leaders and issues pertaining to inspection in Wales. In Step 3 specifically, decisions on what text to highlight, and with what colour (pertaining to each of Willig's key stages), were informed by my own experiences of working with schools. As such, they are highly subjective and, in keeping with my post-structural lens, predicated on a view of the world that is ever-changing and permanently unstable. Willig's (2008, p.126) assertion that there is 'no one "world" that can be described and studied' serves as a useful reminder in this context. For example, the idea that school leaders are compelled to evidence their performance in line with expectation, or in other words, demonstrate compliance with 'the rules', is one that I am particularly aware of given my long association with scores of schools across Wales. I have been reminded on numerous occasions during my many conversations with school leaders over a number of years, that making visible to inspectors 'what they want to see' is crucial to a favourable inspection outcome.

Similarly, I recall being sympathetic to Mary's concerns, recorded in *Figure 3*, about the potential of inspection judgements to upset staff ('I am conscious that you could lose people wanting to remain in education'), having been told before about teachers leaving the profession due to the high-stakes nature of inspection (e.g. Sims, 2016). This perhaps meant that I was more likely to highlight (in red, for action orientation) this part of Mary's interview transcript for inclusion in data analysis. In his opinion piece on the future of inspection in England, Richards (2020, p.512) notes that 'reality judgements cannot be characterized as totally objective or be regarded as incontestable'. The same is true of the reality judgements I made here, albeit they were made with the benefit of an innate knowledge and understanding of the inspection process in Wales, developed during my professional career. I consider this prior knowledge and understanding a strength, given it has allowed me to draw more rounded conclusions based on my own real-life experiences.

Having been through and highlighted relevant text within all four transcripts, I then collated in a separate document the excerpts pertaining to each stage (this forming Step 4 of the data

preparation process). This resulted in six new documents, labelled stages 1-6. I chose to do this because it divided out more clearly the sections of text that I had attributed to each of Willig's key stages and made it easier to generate themes pertaining to each stage. This initial sorting process also made it clearer to me that there was a strong resonance between what the participants had said, and that it might be beneficial to group the responses together when analysing, instead of working through each interview in turn. As such, Step 4 was also a key determinant in how I presented my findings (see section *5.4*).

5.3.1 Coding process

With my chosen data separated into six new documents, I began a coding process (Step 5) to help organise the data at a more granular level (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). I did this for the document pertaining to *Stage 1* only, as documents related to stages 2-6 did not lend themselves to this sort of categorisation. *Stage 1* required the identification of school leaders' own descriptions of inspection, whereas stages 3-6 were more open to interpretation and based on my own perception of what was being inferred by school leaders through their responses. Given the specific interest of *Stage 2* in discourses, themes were chosen a priori using the discourses of performativity and professionalism, which are set out in section *2.1.1* as being of central interest to this study. All other themes were deduced a posteriori.

The inductive coding process used for *Stage 1* involved assigning labels (codes) to segments of text – in some cases sentences, but in others longer excerpts – that would act as a summary of what was being said (Knott *et al*. 2022). In some cases, these codes represented exact phrases or terms used by the participants themselves (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). In the act of coding, I retained participant identifiers so that I could make clear in my presentation of data who had said what (recognising that school context and inspection outcomes were important contributory factors). An example of the coding process related to *Stage 1*, is offered in *Figure 4*, below:
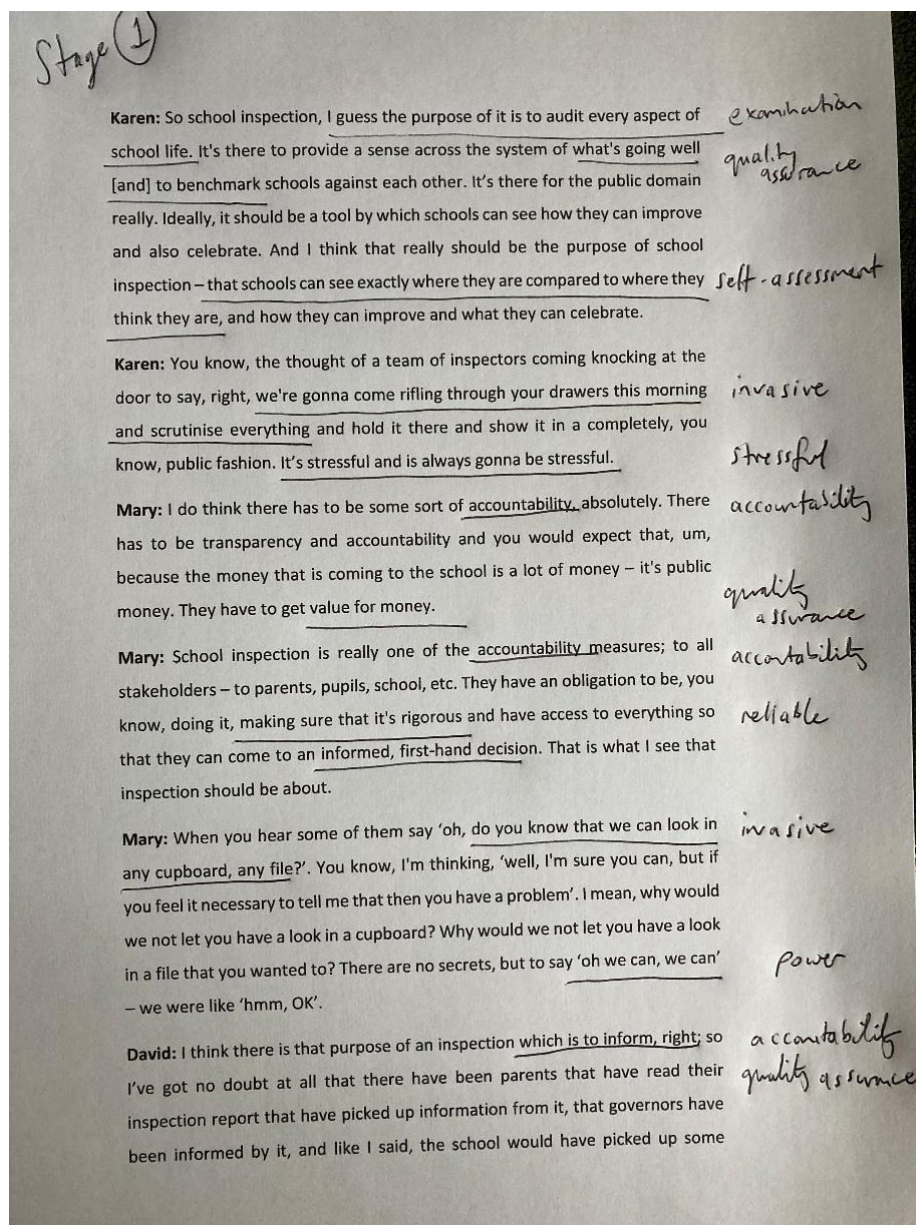
Figure 4: Stage 1 data extract, with codes applied (on right)

In *Figure 4*, an extract of transcription data related to Willig's *Stage 1* – discursive constructions – is presented. On the right of the document, I have added in longhand a series of codes that I felt best represented the topics and issues being discussed in the participants' narratives (Sutton & Austin, 2015). For example, at the top of the page, I associate Karen's (School D) reference to auditing 'every aspect of school life' to a form of examination, and her sense that inspection is designed to benchmark schools against one another as a method of quality assurance. The coding process concluded with the distillation of codes into themes. I did this by grouping similar codes together, using a table to separate the groups of codes

within the *Stage 1* document. By sorting the codes in this way, I was able to consider how different codes could combine to form an overarching theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process is exemplified in *Table 8*, below, which shows the 21 codes and four overarching themes generated from data attributed to *Stage 1* (discursive constructions). In this case, the themes were developed in response to the questions attached to *Stage 1*, as laid out in *Table 4* (i.e. How do the school leaders describe inspection? On what are these descriptions based?):

Accountability	Intrusive	Feared	Necessary
Pressure	Invasive	High-stakes	Reliable
Quality assurance	Inevitable	Power	Rigorous
Self-assessment process	Stressful	Lasting impact	Public confidence
Repercussions	Clinical	Stressful	Stimulating
Accountability	Examination	Traumatic	Plays a role
			Informative

Table 8: Stage 1 codes with themes as headers in bold

I used the themes developed through the coding process (highlighted in bold, above) to scaffold my data analysis and discussion in *Stage 1*, as laid out in section *5.4.1*. It is important to note, however, that coding was done in light of my research questions and the application of data to Willig's key stages (as outlined in *Table 7*), which meant that only relevant material was included. Themes were developed based on my own interpretation of the groups of codes, recognising that 'a researcher's subjectivity is always part of the interpretive process' and themes do not simply 'lift themselves off the page, fully formed' (Varpio *et al.* 2017, p.43). As Saldana (2016, p.14) makes clear, coding is not an exact science and 'qualitative researchers are not algorithmic automatons'. Such researchers cannot, therefore, be separated from the analytical process, albeit I consider my preparation of data to be well-informed, based on my experience in the field. A *Stage 1* code book, in which I describe each code and provide an example from the data generated, is available in *Appendix 3*.

As described, *Stage 2* themes (performativity and professionalism) were pre-determined, given my specific interest in prominent discourses, and required a demonstration of how the discourses were manifested in the data. The presentation of themes in stages 3-6 were derived from the descriptions of inspection outlined in *Stage 1* (via a process of inductive coding). For example, my interpretation in *Stage 3* of what school leaders do, based on their understanding of inspection (action), and why do they do it (orientation), was shaped by their descriptions of inspection as accountability, as being intrusive, as being necessary, and as something to be feared. Deeper analysis of these descriptions for me highlighted the notion of 'playing the game'; the liberating effect of inspection on some school leaders; how school leaders had become shackled by their recommendations; the effects of having a lengthy period of time between inspection visits; and the different layers of accountability that can arise after inspection. A complete list of themes by stage is offered in *Table 9*, below:

Stage	Themes
1. Discursive constructions	Accountability, intrusive, something to be feared, necessary
2. Discourses	Performativity, professionalism
3. Action orientation	'Playing the game', liberating effect, shackled by recommendations, length between visits, layers of accountability
4. Positionings	Subordinate, powerless, incapacitated, social outcasts
5. Practice	Restricted access to professional opportunities, knowing your place, manifestations of resistance, re-storying themselves and their schools
6. Subjectivity	A feeling of failure/sense of rejection, suicidal thoughts

Table 9: Final themes, by stage

As noted in section *2.1*, this research subscribes to the view that what we know to be true is a construct of the material world in which we live (Cresswell, 2009) and that meaning can never be finally fixed (Wetherell, 1998). Indeed, my interpretivist approach 'acknowledges the research's integration within the research environment' and thus my own unique role in

its setting and scope (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2013, p.14). This is further explored in my earlier section on reflexivity (see section *4.6*), a process which 'positions the author in relationship to the field, the act of research, writing and the production of knowledge more generally' (Haggerty, 2003, p.158).

5.4 Semi-structured interviews: Key findings

In this section, my analysis of the data generated and discussion of subsequent findings are presented alongside excerpts taken from the interview transcripts, in line with my interpretivist epistemology and interest in making connections between what school leaders understand by inspection outcomes, and their subsequent actions/behaviours. These connections are central to the analytical process, and so it made sense to present both a selection of first-person accounts and my reflections on them together in the same section. Having undertaken all interviews and reflected on the data generated, I considered it appropriate – and pragmatic – to group all responses together within the same FDA. As noted in the previous section (section *5.3*), the recurrence of a number of common strands did not warrant the separation of data into four distinct FDAs (e.g. one per interviewee), and I did not want my analysis of data to become unnecessarily burdensome for me, as researcher, or repetitive for readers.

By treating the data generated from all four interviews as one complete whole, I was able to better disaggregate the individual contributions of participants and pull out more nuanced distinctions between their reflections of the inspection process. The consideration of all data in Step 3 of my preparatory process ensured that nothing was lost (and all points I believed to be of most relevance were documented) in the adoption of this approach. I acknowledge, however, that there are specific issues related to schools of different sizes and combining data sets in this way may have limited opportunities for more in-depth comparisons between primary and secondary settings. I am therefore conscious of the distinction between schools, but satisfied with my approach given the study's primary focus was the interpretations and actions of school leaders as individuals. Findings and discussion related to each of Willig's (2008) six stages are presented in turn, below.

In *Stage 1* of my FDA, I used the following questions (as outlined in *Table 4*) as a scaffold for my data analysis:

How do the school leaders describe inspection? On what are these descriptions based?

School leaders described inspection in myriad ways, although there were a number of recurring themes that arose during the course of my interviews. The most obvious, shared by all participants, was the role of inspection as a form of accountability. Other descriptions included the perception of inspection as being intrusive, something to be feared and a process that is necessary. These descriptions were drawn out using a coding process (as described in section *5.3.1*) and include both implicit and explicit references to how inspection was constructed through language (Willig, 2008).

Inspection as accountability

All those interviewed made reference to the obligation of schools to account for their performance in some way, with a shared understanding that schools are held accountable for the quality of education they provide. Participants described the inspection process as an 'audit' (Karen, School D) and a mechanism by which the inspectorate could 'inform' various stakeholders about how their schools are faring (David, School A). Taking this thinking forward, it was apparent in the responses given by school leaders that 'vertical accountability' was most prevalent, with accountability manifested in a 'top-down and hierarchical' way (Burns & Köster, 2016, p.25). This is demonstrated by Karen in the following statement:

> So school inspection, I guess the purpose of it is to audit every aspect of school life. It's there to provide a sense across the system of what's going well [and] to benchmark schools against each other. It's there for the public domain really. Ideally, it should be a tool by which schools can see how they can improve and also celebrate. And I think that really should be the purpose of school inspection – that schools can see exactly where they are compared to where they think they are, and how they can improve and what they can celebrate.
>
> (Excerpt 1: Karen, School D)

Karen's reference to the benchmarking of schools against one another is interesting, and plays into the narrative outlined earlier (see section *1.5*) that there are 'winners and losers' emanating from the inspection process (Cunningham, 2019, p.55). However, whilst Karen makes specific reference to the potential for comparisons *between* schools, she also notes the possibility that schools will seek to contrast where they perceive themselves to be (e.g. a form of self-assessment), with a more external and presumably objective evaluation of their performance (i.e. 'that schools can see exactly where they are compared to where they think they are').

The idea that the purpose of inspection 'is to audit every aspect of school life' speaks very clearly to the discourse of performativity, with schools having to quantify how well they are functioning against a set of nationally-agreed criteria (the way that performativity plays out in this context is unpacked further in *Stage 2*; see section *5.4.2*). This criteria, in the form of Estyn's (2021d) common inspection framework, provides the basis for inspection and is the means through which inspectors can audit areas of interest. That Karen believes so firmly that 'every aspect of school life' is inspected, gives an indication of her perception of the breadth of the inspectorate's activity.

In conversation with Mary (School B), she discussed inspection as a form of accountability and the need for schools to demonstrate 'value for money' in their offer to children. The link between public services and delivery, as explored in *Section 3.3.2*, is highlighted by Mary in the paragraph below:

> I do think there has to be some sort of accountability, absolutely. There has to be transparency and accountability and you would expect that, um, because the money that is coming to the school is a lot of money – it's public money. They (taxpayers) have to get value for money.
>
> (Excerpt 2: Mary, School B)

In a subsequent response, Mary noted the obligation of the inspectorate to pass judgement on schools for the benefit of a wider group of people:

> School inspection is really one of the accountability measures; to all stakeholders – to parents, pupils, school, etc. They (inspectors) have an obligation to be, you know, doing it, [and] making sure that it's rigorous and have access to everything so that they can come to an informed, first-hand decision. That is what I see that inspection should be about.
>
> (Excerpt 3: Mary, School B)

The perception that inspection speaks to an audience much wider than the school itself is a feeling shared by David, below:

> I think there is that purpose of an inspection which is to inform, right; so I've got no doubt at all that there have been parents that have read their inspection report that have picked up information from it, that governors have been informed by it, and like I said, the school would have picked up some information that they would have found useful and areas that we would have needed to work on, but there's always an element in my mind that thinks that inspection exists in a system that needs inspections to justify the sense of accountability that is just there. I think sometimes the system feels scared and feels like it needs some sort of formal mechanism to show what is, irrespective of what is going on in a school, the fact that inspections are taking place. It allows politicians to be able to say to the public 'inspections are happening [and] we know what is going on in our schools, and if schools are failing we're gonna crack down on them'.
>
> (Excerpt 4: David, School A)

David makes a number of interesting observations in this statement. He begins by citing a range of different groups with an interest in school inspection outcomes, namely parents, governors and the school itself. This is, to some extent, to be expected given these groups form part of the wider school community. What is to me more striking, however, is David's reference to the needs of 'the system' more generally. David describes the system, which I interpret as being all facets of education (e.g. schools, regional consortia and government etc), as feeling 'scared' of what might happen in schools and therefore requiring inspections to take place in order to maintain control. The picture David paints has strong neoliberal connotations (see section *3.2.2*), with schools under pressure to perform and justify their performance to others. He insinuates that inspection exists as a means of reassuring the public that schools are being properly monitored, and that presumably, standards are being maintained. This reflects my earlier conceptualisation of surveillance, and inspection as a form of regulation and display of power over schools (see section *2.1.2*).

In this case, David makes explicit the want of politicians to demonstrate their authority to the electorate, by making clear that they 'know what is going on' in the schools they preside over. Returning to the work of Simkins (1992, p.7) and his framework for accountability, it could be argued that David is describing the 'political model' of accountability that relies on policy conformance as the main measure of success. Indeed, David's suggestion that politicians will 'crack down' on schools that are deemed by the inspectorate to be 'failing' is further evidence

of what Foucault (1977, p.215) might consider the 'anatomy of power', a form of discipline that is pervasive and unchallenged.

There are certainly parallels between David's reference to politicians 'knowing what is going on' in schools and Bentham's exploration of the panopticon, described by Poster (1990, p.214) as the 'imposition of a structure of domination'. So too are there similarities between what Fiske (1999, p.218) describes as the 'watchers' and the 'watched', which in this case, are politicians (through the process of inspection) and schools. As Beckert (2020, p.320) suggests, neoliberal governance 'advocates punishing those who do not play according to its rules'. The rules, in this context, are laid out in Estyn's common inspection framework that provides the quality criteria against which all schools are judged (see section *1.1*).

John (School C) reinforced the idea of schools having to comply with pre-determined rules, noting that while inspection is 'an accountability measure', it is ultimately designed 'to make sure that they (schools) reach the required standards'. The standards, in this case, are agreed by Estyn and it is incumbent on schools to demonstrate that they are met. Karen (School D) took this thinking a step further, arguing that 'it's almost as if the system and school leadership has become about pleasing Estyn, and ticking Estyn's boxes'. In this case, I interpret Karen's reference to 'the system' as being different to David's, as she appears to be referring more to the operational mechanisms through which education – and school leadership – are delivered. There is also a sense within their conceptions of inspection as accountability that inspection is as well a necessary process (e.g. one that is designed 'to make sure that they (schools) reach the required standards'), which is a theme I explore in more depth later in this section.

Inspection as intrusive

Another prominent description of inspection by school leaders was that of inspection being an unwanted distraction, intrusive and something that impacted negatively on the day-to-day running of a school. This was neatly encapsulated by Karen, who described the process of inspection as 'stressful':

> You know, the thought of a team of inspectors coming knocking at the door to say, right, we're gonna come rifling through your drawers this morning and scrutinise everything and hold it there and show it in a completely, you know, public fashion. It's stressful and is always gonna be stressful.
>
> (Excerpt 5: Karen, School D)

There is much to consider here. First, Karen's depiction of inspectors 'coming knocking at the door' could be seen as having troubling connotations, given its association with the giving of bad news. I am reminded of a police officer knocking the door of someone's next of kin after a serious incident. Second is the idea that inspectors have the liberty to 'come rifling through your drawers', which suggests to me an encroaching on one's personal space as, perhaps, an unwanted intruder might. John (School C) made a similar comparison in his response to questioning, likening the inspection process to 'someone coming into your house and ransacking it, [and] then telling you what's wrong with it and leaving it in a mess'. Both this and Karen's depiction of inspectors 'rifling through drawers' adds to the presentation of the inspectorate as an unwelcome visitor that does more harm than good.

Excerpt 5 concludes with reference to the public sharing of the inspectorate's findings. This, as was explored earlier (see section *3.3.6*), often leads to heightened pressure on schools to perform (Vinson & Ross, 2001; Gustafsson *et al*. 2015) and can be construed as 'naming and shaming' (Bevan & Wilson, 2013, p.245), particularly if a school is considered to be failing. Together, all of these observations tie in with earlier presentations of inspection as being invasive, and appear to support Foucauldian notions of discipline and surveillance (i.e. inspectors rifling through drawers and scrutinising everything for public consumption). There are certainly parallels between this and what Jeffrey & Woods (1996, p.326) describe as the 'intensive and critical gaze' inspectors have over teachers.

Mary made a similar observation in her response to questioning, albeit from the perspective of a peer inspector. Peer inspectors are people who have teaching experience and a managerial role in a school, and who have been recruited and trained by Estyn to take part as full members of an inspection team (Estyn, 2022b). As well as being headteacher of a school inspected by Estyn, a position she still holds, Mary has fulfilled the voluntary peer inspector role on a number of occasions. Reflecting on her peer inspector training, Mary described feeling 'uncomfortable' by the want of her fellow inspectors to 'look in any cupboard':

When you hear some of them say 'oh, do you know that we can look in any cupboard, [and] any file?'. You know, I'm thinking, 'well, I'm sure you can, but if you feel it necessary to tell me that then you have a problem'. I mean, why would we not let you have a look in a cupboard? Why would we not let you have a look in a file that you wanted to? There are no secrets, but to say 'oh we can, we can' – we were like 'hmm, OK'.

<div align="right">(Excerpt 6: Mary, School B)</div>

Although not directly related to her own school inspection, Mary's reflections on her peer inspector training are useful as they appear to support the perception of inspection as being intrusive and something quite disturbing for those being inspected. Take, for example, her suggestion that inspectors revelled in the ability to 'look in any cupboard' and in 'any file'. Such actions could be considered a manifestation of the power that inspectors believe themselves to hold. This is different, of course, to the power that school leaders believe inspectors to have. In this particular case, the act of looking in any cupboard or file, apparently at their own discretion and with no authority from the teachers who are responsible for them, is to me a very clear demonstration of an inspector's perceived superiority over the people they are inspecting.

At a basic human level, it would be considered inappropriate to search through another person's cupboards and files, particularly without consent and the owner's approval. From the picture Mary has painted, this approval is not guaranteed, although the fact inspectors want to make it known that they *can* search, could be interpreted as a sign of a thirst for power. There are certainly similarities between this and what Alexander (2010, p.33) deems the 'policing' of schools, with inspectors prepared to use any force necessary to 'get to' what they want.

Inspection as something to be feared

Underpinning all of the descriptions of inspection by school leaders was the idea that inspection is something to be feared. David used a particularly vivid analogy of the 'car crash' to describe the process from his perspective:

> I've said a few times that in the run-up to that inspection it was like watching a slow motion car crash – I knew it was coming and there wasn't anything I could do about it. And then the car crashed and you kind of think you're done, but then you realise, no it's not done because the car crash is going to last for ages.

<div align="right">(Excerpt 7: David, School A)</div>

In UK parlance, the expression 'slow motion car crash' is used figuratively to describe a serious situation that people can foresee but do little to prevent. David's use of the phrase suggests he knew what was coming (i.e. the inspection), but that he was helpless to do anything about it. It encapsulates what he perceives was his lack of control over the inspection process, with the inspectorate holding all of the power. The excerpt also suggests that David may have anticipated the outcome of his inspection would be challenging.

I interpret the second sentence, in which the car has crashed and David realising his ordeal is not over, as meaning the inspection process impacts long after the inspection event itself. It appears to me that David differentiates between the actual visit of inspectors (and their judgements) and what followed, noting that 'the car crash is going to last for ages'. The context to David's interview is important here, with his school having performed relatively poorly in its last inspection. What I consider to be reference to the negative aftereffects of inspection are, presumably, directly related to his school's negative inspection outcomes. In other words, I suspect that the car crash would not have 'lasted for ages', nor perhaps happened at all, had his school performed strongly in its inspection.

John described inspection as a 'very traumatic experience', which he said stemmed from the possible ramifications resulting from a poor set of outcomes. He said Estyn judgements can have 'wide and deep implications for people's careers and jobs', as well as a damaging effect on a school's reputation. This made him fearful of what was coming. What made the inspection all the more difficult to deal with, he said, was that potential consequences 'can happen very quickly, [and] within a few days'. He warned, in the following excerpt, how negative consequences could be far-reaching and impact in myriad ways:

> The knock-on effects it can have on your community, on the school, on the school budget, on the authority… and the reputation, not only of the staff in the school, but of the school as a whole.

<div align="right">(Excerpt 8: John, School C)</div>

John made reference to the 'fallout' from inspection as being particularly concerning, citing the reputational damage of a poor inspection on the school and, by association, its staff as something he was very mindful of. He said the inspection process had been 'very painful' and that he 'wouldn't want to put other people through what we went through'.

For both David and John, their negative inspection outcome appears to have contributed more noticeably than the other interviewees to the perception of inspection as something to be feared, albeit all school leaders (including those whose schools had performed relatively well in their inspection) implied that the inspection process was something they would prefer to avoid. For example, Karen (School D) described inspection as 'stressful' and 'really quite a negative experience', David (School A) considered it 'difficult and challenging', while Mary (School B) said the process was 'unpleasant' and 'uncomfortable'. In my view, all of these descriptions of inspection have at least in part been informed by school leaders' own experiences.

The presentation of inspection as something to be feared corroborates findings presented by Hopkins *et al.* (2016) in their paper on teachers' views of school evaluation and external inspection processes. In their study involving teachers from 25 primary and secondary schools in England, Hopkins and colleagues found that whilst self-evaluation processes tended to be conducted in a supportive way, the impact of inspection was talked about as being 'damaging emotionally and professionally' (ibid, p.59). They argued that teachers' stress about inspection derived from the fact that 'so much depends on it' (ibid), which chimes with Mary's (School B) description of inspection as being 'high-stakes' – a notion explored in greater detail in section *1.2*.

Inspection as necessary

Despite the broadly negative perceptions of inspection as intrusive and something to be feared, there was a feeling amongst participants that inspection is nonetheless a necessary process, closely connected to the need to build and maintain public confidence in schools as educational institutions. This was evident in *Excerpt 4*, within which David (School A) made reference to the need for politicians to be able to say to the public that 'inspections are happening [and] we know what is going on in our schools'. There was certainly recognition on

David's part that while there were aspects of the inspection process he did not enjoy or condone, 'there's always something you learn from an inspection' and inspection outcomes were on the whole informative. He added that he 'never felt that it's (inspection) been a pointless thing' and he saw the benefit in having visitors come to the school to offer constructive support and challenge.

> I think that there's always some people on an inspection team that you have loads of time for, that you kind of think 'that's a good person who's giving some good advice that you wanna pick up on', um, but it's not always like that.

(Excerpt 9: David, School B)

John (School C) was of a similar opinion, noting that his school's inspection judgements had helped quicken the school's development. He agreed with inspectors that 'things needed to be changed' and said the school's inspection report had given senior leaders added impetus to move the school forward. However, John was not satisfied that the inspection was conducted in the correct manner, arguing that 'it could have been less painful, and we still could have got the change'.

> You know, I acknowledge that the fallout was so harsh it changed things quickly. So yeah, I get that. But I don't agree with how it was done; I wouldn't want to put other people through what we went through. That's not how it should be.

(Excerpt 10: John, School C)

John suggested that the inspection team was not as supportive as it could have been, and he and his colleagues were left to pick up the pieces of a negative inspection outcome. He said: 'It would have been better if there was challenge and support with it, rather than just they left the building and that was it.' In this case, John appears aggrieved that the inspectorate did not support more obviously his school after their inspection visit, which reinforces the perception of inspection as being a one-off event at a specific moment in time (Donaldson, 2018). What happens to a school after inspectors 'leave the building' is much less clear, albeit John is of the view that schools such as his have to shoulder the burden of improvement entirely on their own.

Mary's (School B) earlier reference to inspectors' 'obligation' to inspect in a way that is 'rigorous' and evidence-informed further justifies the process of inspection as a necessary

and worthwhile endeavour. Karen's (School D) reflection that inspection is designed to allow schools to 'see exactly where they are compared to where they think they are, and how they can improve and what they can celebrate' further reinforces this view. Mary later noted that while she did not feel that her school's inspection outcomes had been particularly useful to her or her team, they *were* of interest to her parent community.

> I think that the only impact the outcomes had was to give a big tick to parents that what we were doing was validated by Estyn, which gave them confidence. And I would say that that matters. And [for] new parents who have come to the school, I've said 'oh, why haven't you chosen your catchment area school?', and they've said 'oh, we looked at your inspection report and Estyn said this, so we've chosen your school because of what Estyn say and not the local school'. So that's important.

(Excerpt 11: Mary, School B)

There is some alignment in what Mary says in *Excerpt 11* to the perception of inspection as accountability, particularly around notions of validation, but the idea that parents should be comforted by a positive inspection outcome, and the confidence they can gain from it, underpins the general belief among school leaders that inspection is a necessary process. Another observation worthy of note here is the potential for parents to select schools on the basis of their inspection outcomes, thus contributing to what Gustafsson *et al*. (2015, p.49) describe as 'stakeholder pressure'. The threat that parents may choose a school out of catchment, or if their child is already in the school, move them elsewhere (if post-inspection improvement is not forthcoming), is they argue part of the pressure on schools to act on inspection recommendations. It is a feeling shared by Wilkins (2011, p.392), who notes that teachers' professional reputations are often dependent on their popularity with prospective parents and a less than enthusiastic inspection report 'can have devastating results'.

Indeed, in *Excerpt 11*, school quality (as adjudged by Estyn) appears to trump school geography; being a high-performing school in the eyes of the inspectorate is considered more important to parents than its proximity to their home. Levin (2009, p.93) makes a similar observation, noting that: 'The strength and future of public education depends on the extent to which people believe their children and their money are in good hands.' All of this has resonance with the neoliberal ideology explored earlier (see section *3.2.2*), given its focus on competition and consumer choice as a mechanism for raising standards (McDonald *et al*. 2017).

5.4.2 Stage 2: Discourses

In *Stage 2* of my FDA, I responded to the following question (as outlined in *Table 4*):

What are the similarities and differences in these descriptions (recorded in Stage 1) and the wider discourses in which they are located?

In this section, I aim to 'locate the various discursive constructions of the object within wider discourses' (Willig, 2008, p.115). This means exploring how inspection as accountability, as being intrusive, as something to be feared and something that is necessary links with wider discourses associated with the process of inspection. As such, this section explores how the discursive constructions presented in *Stage 1* align with or contradict the prominent discourses of performativity and professionalism, which are explored in more detail in section *2.1.1* and considered throughout this research.

Performativity

Drawing on Ball's (2003, p.216) description of performativity as 'a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change', it is clear from the data generated that school leaders considered inspection as embodying performative characteristics. At a basic level, that inspection was so heavily associated with accountability, and the idea that 'one party has an obligation… to account for their performance of certain actions to another' (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2011, p.22), is in itself contributing to the discourse of performativity given the pressure so keenly felt by school leaders to perform. For example, the suggestion by John (School C) that inspection is designed 'to make sure that they (schools) reach the required standards' is performativity in action, as schools work to meet the demands asked of them, and thereby conform to what are in effect its 'rules of formation' (Foucault, 2002, p.42). It is the rules around what constitutes 'required standards' that ultimately drive schools' behaviour; in other words, it is not so much the actual *development* of a school that is of most significance, as the school's capacity to demonstrate it has achieved in line with set expectations. It is in the execution of this latter activity that Ball (2003) considers regulatory, with schools having to prove their adherence to

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pre-determined success criteria (in this case, the indicators of success laid out in Estyn's inspection framework), rather than evidence tangible improvement.

Failure to conform, as demonstrated by David (School A), could result in the 'cracking down' on schools by elected members. In the event that happens, John (School C) explained the potential for 'wide and deep implications for people's careers and jobs'. He elaborates further in the following excerpt, reflecting on his own experience of what followed the publication of inspection outcomes:

> [There was] a complete change of leadership; I can't remember the exact timescale but for a fair bit of time the reputation of the school deteriorated locally, in the community; um, staff lost motivation, lost belief in the leadership team, [and] um, lost pupils to local schools… we're in an area where we have to market ourselves really well to gain pupils. It's not a case of pupils come to us because we're the secondary school – there are lots of schools near us. For me personally, it was the lowest point in my career. I actually nearly gave up teaching, and that's the absolute truth. It was devastating.
>
> (Excerpt 12: John, School C)

John's testimony paints a vivid picture of what it is like to receive a negative inspection judgement, from the perspective of a school leader. Estyn's judgement that his school was, for the most part, 'Adequate and needs improvement', and thus not performing in line with expectation, had a significant and material effect on many elements of the school. Reputational damage, dwindling staff motivation, lost faith in leadership and a decline in pupil applications were all very real consequences resulting from the school's inability to perform against what Estyn considers, via its common inspection framework (Estyn, 2021d), to be of most value. If we accept Estyn's framework as the inspectorate's 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1976, p.112), a regime that frames school improvement and how quality is assessed, then it is incumbent on schools to respond both positively and effectively to inspection or risk some form of reprimand. The human cost of such admonishment is laid bare in John's admission that he 'nearly gave up teaching' after his school's inspection outcomes were awarded, which coincided with 'the lowest point' in his career. This deeply personal account serves to strengthen the claim that inspection is something to be feared, arising largely from a fear of what might happen if things do not go to plan.

The 'fallout' from inspection, as John (School C) describes it, is in effect a form of punishment for the school's failure to satisfy the inspectorate that its pupils are reaching expected levels

and performing in line with national standards. Indeed, we are reminded by Beckert (2020) that in a neoliberal environment, there is a tendency to punish those who do not play by the rules. Only this punishment is not linear and comes in many forms, and it is important to distinguish between the initial rebuke of the inspection judgements themselves, and the more prolonged and deep-seated consequences arising from their publication; David's (School A) reference to the 'car crash' that 'lasts for ages' is a useful example of this. On the basis of evidence presented here, I would argue that the fallout from inspection comes in stages and the cost of failing to perform is spread over a much longer period than the immediate aftermath of inspection alone. That there should be any manifestation of punishment, post-inspection, is an exertion of the inspectorate's disciplinary power. Returning for a moment to the work of Foucault (1977, p.170), the combination of 'hierarchical observation' (by the inspectorate) and 'normalizing judgement' (inspection outcomes) through a process of 'examination' (the inspection process) speaks to what school leaders have articulated in their descriptions of inspection as a form of accountability.

Baxter's (2014, p.27) reference to 'normative discourses' that legitimise the work of inspectorates and 'influence the way in which standards… are understood and conceptualised' is useful here, as it reinforces the idea that schools are compelled to do as they are told and powerless to set their own agendas. Ball (2003, p.216) describes the terrain in which schools operate as a 'field of judgement', in which 'the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization' is effectively determined by those in control of the field. The net result, he says, is that complex social processes and events are reduced to simple figures or categories of judgement that call into question the very purpose of education and what it means to be a teacher. So instead of doing what *they* believe to be right, a culture of performativity requires that teachers set aside personal beliefs and 'organize themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations' (ibid, p.215). This submission to the control of dominant forces means, according to Ball (2003, p.215), that practitioners 'live an existence of calculation' in which they prioritise the aspects of their practice that will be measured or compared. Karen (School D) alludes to this notion of calculation from a school leader's perspective in the following excerpt:

It's making sure that you've got everything lined up and then it's that worrying that something could go wrong and that you're not showing yourself in that best light. And it's knowing as well that you're not going to have a lot of time to show, you know, the lived experience… it's also that, as a school leader, you are not able to set an agenda that shows everything that your school is about.

(Excerpt 13: Karen, School D)

The suggestion by Karen that she was unable to set her own agenda further reinforces the idea that she was powerless to do anything about the inspection and the way it was conducted. This is interesting, as it feeds into Foucauldian notions of power and what he describes as 'the multiplicity of force relations' (Foucault, 1976, p.92); in this case, force relations between the inspector and the inspected or, to put it another way, the *powerful* and the *powerless*. That Karen feels, as a school leader, she is 'not able' to set an agenda speaks very clearly to the sense that Estyn, as the holder of power in this relationship, is the dominant force that must be obeyed. Karen appears to *want* to resist the inspectorate's rule over the process of inspection, and take a firmer grasp over what inspectors do and see during their visit to her school, but seems unwilling, at least in this excerpt, to defy what she believes to be accepted practice. She is, in effect, conscious of the 'law of truth' that prevents her from taking more noticeable action (Foucault, 1983, p.212). She wants to lead, but the normative discourse that surrounds inspection means she cannot; her capacity to respond is constrained.

There are also performative connotations associated with the construction of inspection as intrusive. This stems largely from the idea that inspectors are let into school to do as they wish, regardless of whether or not school leaders and their staff actually want them to. The process of inspection, and allowing inspectors onto the school premises and into classrooms has become accepted practice, and something school leaders have no option but to go along with. As explored in *Stage 1* (see section *5.4.1*), when school leaders spoke of the inspectorate ransacking (John, School C), rifling through drawers (Karen, School D) and looking through cupboards (Mary, School B), there is a feeling that inspectors are allowed into areas where they are not necessarily wanted. After all, to ransack one's home, or to rifle through one's drawers or cupboards are all highly invasive and particularly unpleasant actions that constitute a lack of respect and consideration for another person's property. Typically, these actions would be considered inappropriate by most law-abiding and principled citizens, yet when the inspectorate calls to forewarn school leaders of their visit, they are greeted genially

and welcomed into school with some fanfare (even if such displays of geniality are in fact disingenuous). I am reminded again of David's (School C) analogy of the 'car crash'; my interpretation is that he let inspectors into school to scout around in the knowledge that the inspection was going to end badly for him and his school. He did so, presumably, because he felt he had no other choice; after all, it was he and his school that were under surveillance and like inmates in the panopticon, he was powerless to do any different.

John (School C) made reference to inspectors 'coming in and having a say on what's going well, what's good and what needs looking at', which contributes to the portrayal of inspection as being both intrusive and somewhat clinical, with the inspectorate given authority to 'come in and have a say', often at great cost to schools. He added:

> The reasons for having inspections, for school improvement, that's fine, but they are offset by the, I suppose, tremendous pressure on you as a school, and as individuals within that school, to perform well.
>
> (Excerpt 14: John, School C)

As explored earlier in this section, it is in Estyn's power to decide what constitutes 'performing well' and John seems acutely aware in this excerpt that for schools to succeed in inspection, they have to prove that they are meeting the requirements set for them via Estyn's common inspection framework (Estyn, 2021d). Further elaborating on this point, John explained that, in his view, 'Adequate and needs improvement' (the headline judgement awarded to his school) meant that performance 'isn't good enough in terms of what they expect'. Interestingly, John's description of what 'Adequate and needs improvement' means differs to that presented by Estyn itself, which considers that 'strengths outweigh weaknesses, but important aspects require improvement' (Estyn, 2020b, p.3). It could be argued that 'isn't good enough' is more conclusive and clear-cut, whereas the suggestion that 'important aspects require improvement' is more subtle and not necessarily demonstrative of poor all-round performance. It may be, therefore, that John has drawn his own conclusions as to what 'Adequate and needs improvement' represents, based on his own knowledge of the inspection process and the perceptions of others regarding particular outcomes. This suggests that individual interpretations of judgements may have been skewed over time, dependent on school leaders' own experiences.

There was another notable demonstration of performativity that arose during the course of my interviews, that relates specifically to the conduct of inspectors themselves. On one occasion, in particular, the potential for inspectors to perform a certain role, under the banner of the inspectorate, was explored. Mary (School B) recalled working with one such peer inspector, who was very open about her responsibility to act and behave in a particular way:

> She did all the things that you're not supposed to do. So she would say, when she's talking to staff, she'd say, 'oh, I'll just take my *Estyn* hat off… and why don't you do it like this? Why don't you do it like that?' And then she said: 'I'm just putting my Estyn hat back on' and then starts a different conversation. So they do all the things that you're not supposed to do.
>
> <div align="right">(Excerpt 15: Mary, School B)</div>

Mary described the inspector's conduct as displaying 'a lack of professionalism'. This, presumably, owing to the inspector's verbalising, publicly, of the two contrasting perspectives (i.e. teacher and inspector) from which she sat. Mary appears agitated that the inspector has separated out so clearly the role of the inspector from that of the teacher she is inspecting. In so doing, the inspector is effectively creating an 'us versus them' mentality, which apportions more power and greater authority to the version of herself with her 'Estyn hat on'. With her 'Estyn hat off', she is positioning herself at the level of the teacher; in other words, she becomes 'one of them' and the conversation they can have together (i.e. the inspector and the inspected) is more open and collegiate. This is an interesting concept, and suggests that some inspectors may themselves be conscious of the role they must fulfil during the process of inspection, and the characteristics they must employ as a consequence. What the inspector describes here could be likened to having a split personality; on the one hand, she wants to separate herself from the inspection process and talk to – and advise – teachers on their level, and on the other, she wants to tell them more formally what to do in line with Estyn expectations. This could be viewed through the lens of performativity, with the adoption of her 'Estyn hat', or perhaps professionalism (in its 'bottom-up' form), in which the inspector is interested more in the development of practice to support learning than simply the school's ability to meet certain criteria (a theme explored further in the coming subsection).

In *Excerpt 15*, Mary suggests inspectors are free to use figurative 'hats' interchangeably, and flit relatively easily between the perspective of the inspector (those doing the inspecting) and

the perspective of the teacher (those being inspected). However, whilst this might work to the advantage of the inspector in question, in that they feel able to separate out their two perspectives, it does not necessarily help those they are inspecting and can open up problems for school leaders and their staff. In situations where inspectors are willing to jump between roles, and behave differently dependent on which hat they are wearing, it is possible for school leaders to feel a greater sense of insecurity; in short, they are not sure who or what they can trust. By drawing attention to what could be construed as their split personality, inspectors such as that cited here call into question their own integrity and raise the potential for possible conflict of interest. Clearly, such practice is not applicable to *all* inspectors, and there is nothing to suggest that such blatant separation of roles is commonplace during the inspection process. Indeed, it is perhaps more understandable that peer inspectors engage in these sorts of 'performances' given they are, for the most part, *serving* school leaders unlike full-time HMIs (Estyn, 2022b).

Professionalism

There was another prominent discourse evident in school leaders' descriptions of inspection, namely that of professionalism. To help make this notion of professionalism more visible within the data generated, it is worth reflecting on what have been called the two different levels of professionalism: from inside the teacher (I have characterised as 'bottom-up'), whereby a teacher identifies and responds to gaps in their own knowledge and skills 'without any external force', and from outside the teacher (I have deemed 'top-down'), 'in which teachers are made to develop professionally by higher-order authorities… in order to receive job-related credits in their career' (Dehghan, 2022, p.707). The focus, in this case, is on the latter, as school leaders respond to what they consider – and the system has determined – to be a 'higher-order authority'. Troman's (1996, p.476) perception of professionalism as that being 'defined by management and expressed in its expectations of workers and the stipulation of tasks they will perform' is useful here, as it helps to cement the transactional relationship between the inspectorate, Estyn, and the people being inspected. There is, as Troman suggests, an expectation that workers (in this context, school leaders) will do as they are told by management (Estyn, for the sake of exemplification), who in turn decide what

course of action their workers should take (Estyn's recommendations to schools, based on inspection outcomes).

This is manifested in the data generated in a number of ways. The most obvious is that school leaders prepare diligently for inspection so as to present the best possible version of themselves and their staff. They do this both to respond to the performative culture that surrounds the inspection process (i.e. because the discourse of performativity requires that they *have* to), and as a symbol of their professional pride in what they are employed to do (i.e. because of their inherent professionalism, they *want* to prepare well). Take for example, Mary's (School B) admission that she encouraged her staff to 'plan in advance' in readiness for the visit of inspectors, as she 'didn't want to leave anything to chance'. That she does so in my view exemplifies her professional want to present well to inspectors, which to some extent derives from a performativity culture that requires her school to perform in a certain way and meet pre-determined standards.

Similarly, Karen (School D) noted her desire to make sure 'that you've got everything lined up' ahead of inspection, and suggested that if something does not go according to plan, there is a risk 'that you're not showing yourself in that best light'. That Karen is having to prepare at all reinforces the performative discourse associated with inspection, in that the process of inspection drives such preparatory behaviours, but so too does it reflect a sense of professionalism on her part, in that she wants to show herself in the 'best light'. She knows, as explored in *Stage 1*, that there are potentially damaging reputational risks related to poor performance in inspection, and she wants to be seen as being a successful school leader, who has presided over strong inspection outcomes.

In the following excerpt, Mary reflected on the professionalism of her staff more broadly, noting how hard teachers worked to support the children in their care:

> You know, you put so much effort into your school, you love it. You work, and I do think about this… when you, when you come across something that 'oh, that's not quite right, and that *does* need to be improved'… if you put it into perspective of how hard people work; nobody comes to work wanting to do a shoddy job unless there's capability and you need to be looking at something. But in the main, the staff are committed to making things better for the children and their families and their parents; they're dedicated individuals who put in so much time.

> (Excerpt 16: Mary, School B)

Mary's suggestion that teachers 'love' their school and work hard shows the level of care and attention she believes staff give to the cause. She is, in effect, describing a form of professionalism on the part of teachers, who are 'committed to making things better' for the communities they serve, and trying to justify the work they do in order to counteract or override the inspectorate's judgements. It appears to me that Mary is keen to present her own personal view of what her staff are capable of and, perhaps conscious of the criticism teachers can attract following more negative school inspections, hints that Estyn might be more considerate of the dedication and industry of teachers within a school setting, regardless of outcome.

This was a feeling shared by Karen (School D), who described her school's inspection outcomes as a 'kick in the teeth' and not a true reflection of how the school and its staff were performing. Karen felt her staff deserved better, and it took time for everyone employed by the school 'to pick ourselves back up again' following the visit of inspectors (this despite her broadly positive inspection outcome). In what could be considered an act of defiance, she recalled continuing with a pre-scheduled pupil singing performance on the evening of the final day of her school's inspection 'because we had to be showing, you know, the school to be working in a certain way'. That Karen went ahead with the performance, when she and her staff had been so focussed on impressing visiting inspectors, serves to evidence her commitment to teacher professionalism, and her desire to show the wider school community that her team was dedicated to supporting the children in their care, regardless of external distractions. In so doing, she created an air of 'business as usual', and instilled in parents attending the singing performance a feeling of reassurance that teachers were in control.

David (School A) acknowledged the want of staff to prepare for and do well in inspection, but was more unequivocal about where ultimate responsibility for inspection outcomes lay. He said: 'I don't think they (staff) ever pick up on it in the same way because they're not leading that life that you lead where everything is about it (inspection outcomes), but I think the senior team feel it.' In this short sentence, David is suggesting that school leaders shoulder a particularly heavy burden for inspection outcomes, and that other staff outside of the senior leadership team are more protected from the sharp edge of accountability. David's reference to 'that life that you lead' represents a clear separation of *his* life and work, as a school leader, from that of other teachers on the payroll. In his view, there is a clear distinction between

what he feels, and what the rest of his staff feels (a point supported by my earlier review of literature, see section *3.2.4*).

That his working life revolves around inspection outcomes (i.e. 'where everything is about it') is both performativity and professionalism in action, as David feels pressured to do something (e.g. perform in inspection), yet responds in a proactive way once judgements have been made. David later reflected that he 'squeezed the pips out of school' in the year following his inspection 'to get where we needed to get to'. To my mind, his 'squeezing of the pips' represents his professional response as a diligent and conscientious school leader determined to put right what Estyn had perceived to be going wrong (as well as his own exercising of power as the person ultimately responsible for responding to the inspectorate's judgements), whereas his determination 'to get where we needed to get to' is to me a clear manifestation of performativity in action (the school's targets having effectively been set for it by the inspectorate).

Interestingly, two of the four school leaders interviewed made explicit reference to a lack of opportunity for 'professional dialogue' with inspectors through the course of the inspection process. Karen (School D) and John (School C) both expressed disappointment that they were not given a chance to discuss in greater detail their inspection outcomes, nor sufficient opportunity to feed into scrutiny of school processes and practice during the inspection itself. Karen said 'there was a lack of professional dialogue' when inspectors visited her school, which led to 'a kind of die in the ditch conversation where one side is fighting for one word and the other side is fighting for the other'. Karen's portrayal of two 'sides' desperately trying to defend their respective viewpoints adds to the aforementioned 'us versus them' dynamic, with school leaders engaged in a metaphorical battle they are never likely to win.

> So an example of this during the last inspection that we had was where [the] ***position redacted to avoid identification***, you know, one of my hardest working senior leaders, did not have an opportunity to speak to inspectors, and no matter how hard we tried, she was told 'absolutely no' and had her hand pushed into her face. She poured her heart and soul into it… but the [inspection] team weren't really interested.
>
> (Excerpt 17: Karen, School D)

Karen was visibly annoyed during interview that her colleague did not get the chance to speak to inspectors, and that attempts to engage in conversation with them had been actively shut

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down. This could be considered an extreme case, as not only was the member of staff denied the opportunity to converse, she was also confronted with a physical action of a hand pushed into her face. It appears that Karen is frustrated that her colleague has been denied her basic right of reply, and that the inspection was very much led by a team of inspectors who had positioned themselves as superior to those they were inspecting. This evokes earlier notions of power and discipline, as the inspectorate dismisses abruptly teachers' requests to talk (i.e. 'absolutely no'). That the colleague in question had 'poured her heart and soul into it' suggests to me a good degree of professionalism on her part, albeit that this professionalism was not necessarily respected. Alternatively, it could be argued that the teacher's views had been disregarded because she had not properly understood what it was that the inspectors wanted to see.

John made similar representation about the conduct of those inspecting, recalling that the inspection process 'wasn't ultra friendly' and 'wasn't supportive'. Instead, he said, the inspection 'was done to us, not with us'. This suggests that John was not satisfied that the inspection had been undertaken in a collegiate way, and that the professionalism of him and his staff had not been sufficiently acknowledged or respected. Mary (School B) said the way in which inspectors 'conduct themselves personally' contributed to the power imbalance between school staff and the inspectorate.

> It's the way that they're framing the questions – the body language, the facial looks coming back. You know, it's not as an equal, you're not having a conversation with an equal professional. They make you feel that 'what I say can affect your career'.

> (Excerpt 18: Mary, School B)

There is an unspoken power at play here, which ensures that teachers are addressed 'not as an equal' (i.e. teachers as inferior to inspectors), and inspectors have the ability to 'affect your career' – in a negative way – should they see or hear something they do not like. It is apparent in this excerpt that Mary's professionalism, built on what she might consider her 'professional autonomy' and capacity to 'define the nature of [her] professional work' (Frostenson, 2015, p.20), is under attack and in danger of being disregarded altogether. Frostenson (ibid) describes such attacks as 'the hallmark of de-professionalisation, a process wherein professional actors lose the ability to influence and the power to define the contents and forms of their own work'. There is certainly some resonance between this description and

those presented by Mary, John and Karen, whose capacity to be agentic (see section *2.1.1*) appears diminished by inspectors' reluctance to engage in professional dialogue.

5.4.3 Stage 3: Action orientation

In *Stage 3* of my FDA, I responded to the following question (as outlined in *Table 4*):

What is the function of these descriptions (recorded in Stage 1)? What do the school leaders do, based on their understanding of the inspection (action), and why do they do it (orientation)?

In this section, I explore what school leaders did as a consequence of their descriptions of inspection (as identified in *Stage 1*), and why they took a particular course of action over another. This meant revisiting how inspection as accountability, as being intrusive, as being necessary, and as something to be feared made them act, in the context of the discourses in which they were situated. As Willig (2008, p.116) makes clear: 'A focus on action orientation allows us to gain a clearer understanding of what the various constructions of the discursive object are capable of.' The section considers what school leaders mean by 'playing the game'; the liberating effect of inspection on some school leaders; how school leaders had become shackled by their recommendations; the effects of having a lengthy period of time between inspection visits; and the different layers of accountability that can manifest after inspection.

'Playing the game'

A clear thread running through all interviews was the eagerness of school leaders to get their schools in the best shape possible ahead of the visit of inspectors. At a basic, practical level, this equated to school leaders prioritising certain aspects of their provision over others, and preparing assiduously what they considered to be areas of most interest to the inspectorate. These decisions were based largely on the contents of Estyn's (2021d) common inspection framework, and their own prior experience of the inspection process. In some cases, school leaders spoke of actively stopping certain activities, which might typically have been part of the fabric of day-to-day teaching in their school, in favour of showcasing something more in

tune with the needs of visiting inspectors. It is this realignment of priorities that talks to a highly performative orientation of action, with school leaders attending to what is deemed *most* important so as to demonstrate they are performing in line with expectation. Mary (School B) explains her justification for engaging in such practice in the following excerpt:

> It's a bit like playing the game; say you've got a series of work that you want to do with the children that's been planned, and if you come into the lessons *here*, this is where everything is all singing [and] all dancing, new information [and] suddenly this spurt of growth, and it's all going to be 'wow' today, and you want to plan that, when you've got your visitors in, for them to go 'this is amazing'.

> (Excerpt 19: Mary, School B)

Mary openly admitted in a subsequent response that she had adjusted teaching timetables, and removed some lessons altogether, in a bid to leave the most positive impression on those visiting the school. All of this has parallels with what Watts (2012, p.4) describes as the process whereby school leaders 'prepare his or her team for the contest'. The net result, suggests Ball (2003, p.222), 'is a spectacle… or what one might see as an "enacted fantasy", which is there simply to be seen and judged'. This fantasy, or 'fabrication', is likened by Perryman (2009, p.612) to 'preparing the school as one would prepare a stage for a performance'. Drawing on these similarities, I was interested in finding out more about Mary's preparatory tactics, and in particular, her interpretation of 'playing the game'. Our brief exchange is captured below:

> **Gareth:** I'm struck by this phrase 'playing the game'. Would you mind elaborating on what you mean by 'playing the game'?

> **Mary:** What I mean by 'playing the game' is, er, putting in what you know needs to be shown or what they (inspectors) want to see. Um, so you wouldn't just continue your humdrum way of doing something… so for example, you wouldn't do, um, phonics. You wouldn't do a phonics lesson when an inspector's coming in because you can only comment on the development of phonics. But if you do all the reading, writing, oracy, etcetera, they can report on a lot more. So you have to be thinking about 'what are you going to include?'. You know, you make sure that you get in appropriate use of ICT (Information and Communications Technology), Welsh, [and] everything else.

> **Gareth:** So you're trying to give them what they want?

> **Mary:** You're trying to give them enough to be able to write a strong report. Otherwise, if you don't give it to them, where are they going to get it from? You have to demonstrate it. So that's what I mean by playing the game – you make sure that your teachers are in and teaching and incorporating everything that you want to be written about.

> (Excerpt 20: Mary, School B)

In this excerpt, Mary is describing in very clear terms the performative practices she employs during the process of inspection. Her admission that she puts forward 'what they (inspectors) want to see' so as to 'give them enough to be able to write a strong report' is demonstrative of how Estyn and its inspection framework drives behaviour at a school level. Mary is, in effect, manipulating what could be considered 'normal' practice for the sole aim of impressing inspectors and achieving positive inspection outcomes. In so doing, she is presenting another version of her school, that may or may not reflect the lived experience outside of the inspection visit. This, according to Ball (2003, p.225), renders the heart of the educational project 'gouged out and left empty', its authenticity being replaced 'entirely by plasticity'.

Yet Mary does not appear in any way perturbed by such a routine; instead, her professional instinct to 'play the game' reflects a commitment, in her role as school leader, to do the very best by her staff. In this case, the benchmark of success is a positive inspection outcome, and Mary is willing to do whatever necessary to win inspectors' approval. This is akin to what Kemethofer *et al*. (2017, p.323) describe as the 'quest for legitimacy', although the quest has implications for the positionality of school leaders. As Webb (2008, p.139) notes, 'educators are not mere victims of an over-zealous policy environment but implicated, and often complicit, in its outcomes'. Although not explicitly referencing, as Mary did, 'playing the game', Karen (School D) explained a not too dissimilar preparatory process she would go through upon learning of the visit of inspectors:

> I like to think that, you know, I'm an experienced, confident headteacher [and] I'm proud of the school that I run. And yet, you know, if I were told that Estyn would be turning up next week, I wouldn't relax until that point; until I knew that I had every duck lined up and every piece of paperwork exactly where it needed to be.

(Excerpt 21: Karen, School D)

Like Mary, Karen is describing a performative practice (i.e. of getting ducks lined up and paperwork where it needs to be) that stems, at least in part, from earlier descriptions of inspection as a form of accountability and something to be feared. Karen prepares for inspection by getting her school in order, and will not rest (i.e. 'I wouldn't relax') until everything is in place. She does so, presumably, in the knowledge that failure to perform in inspection will likely result in some form of retribution; she knows that, as school leader, she is ultimately accountable for her school's performance and that poor outcomes could lead to

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very serious consequences (as explored in *Stage 1*, see section *5.4.1*). Interestingly, that she is both 'experienced' and 'confident' does not appear to make any difference – her nervousness about inspection persists, regardless.

Liberating effect

School leaders presented two contrasting views of what happens in the aftermath of inspection, when inspectors have left the school and outcomes have been published. These views appear almost entirely dependent on how a school has performed in its inspection, and what judgements have been awarded. I will begin by considering the actions and orientations of school leaders who had returned favourable inspection results, and whose schools had performed well against Estyn's (2021d) common inspection framework.

Mary (School B), whose school had received from Estyn 'Excellent' and 'Good' judgements in its most recent inspection, explained the liberating effect of inspection completion on her and her school. She described the end of the inspection process, culminating in the publication of her school's inspection report, as giving the school a new 'lease of life' to get on with its own priorities for teaching and learning. Mary suggested that in the run-up to and period of inspection, the school's attention had been drawn to different things that might not ordinarily have attracted such focus. However, safe in the knowledge that schools are inspected only once every seven years, Mary said she could begin planning confidently for the future post-inspection. Knowing that inspectors would not return for some time gave Mary a renewed sense of security, and feeling that she could 'experiment' in a way that she might not have done if Estyn were due to visit.

> We knew that Estyn weren't gonna be back for seven years, so it gave us a whole new lease of life. We never looked back at anything that Estyn had validated. It gave us a lease of life that we could really focus on going forward in a way that *we* wanted to experiment with and trial, knowing that nobody would come and say 'you haven't done two DT (Design and Technology) projects a term' and that, you know, 'you're not following the old curriculum', [and] 'you haven't done this, you haven't done that'. So that's what it gave us, a new lease of life to, to really develop the school. We didn't look back at anything that they said.
>
> (Excerpt 22: Mary, School B)

Mary said the inspection outcomes had given her 'the confidence to take the school off in the direction that we wanted to go in' and having 'seen the back of them (Estyn)', she could 'move forward without having to have to answer that scrutiny'. In that respect, Mary is able to separate out the inspection process from the day-to-day activity of running a school, with the former very much 'an event' that comes and goes. Her observation in *Excerpt 22* that 'we could really focus on going forward in a way that *we* wanted to experiment with and trial' suggests that the inspection had driven behaviours and actions that she did not necessarily support, and that completing the process had instead allowed her the freedom to do what *she* wanted. Interestingly, her admission that 'we didn't look back at anything that they said' implies that the inspection outcomes were irrelevant to how she wanted to develop the school, and is suggestive of a certain amount of distain for what the inspectorate had to say. It is not clear how Mary would have reacted had her school's outcomes been more negative and her school subjected to greater follow-up activity (insight into this contrasting response is offered in the following subsection).

Karen (School D) is of a similar view to Mary and, having returned her own mix of 'Excellent' and 'Good' judgements, was keen to drive her school forward in a direction *she* felt best suited its needs. That she was able to do so is in my view a consequence of her positive inspection outcomes; Karen has effectively earned her autonomy and, as explored in section *2.1.3*, benefitted from 'a space whereby a certain freedom was afforded' (Colman, 2021, p.279). Karen was asked if her school's inspection outcomes had made her rethink in any way her approach:

> No, they didn't change anything. I mean, I think we published a few case studies and, you know, we had a lot of people come to the to the school to sort of look at the learning environment, which was flagged as something of particular interest. But they didn't dramatically change anything that we were doing. We were well on the way in terms of the other work we were doing, so they didn't change anything at all, no.

> (Excerpt 23: Karen, School D)

In this excerpt, Karen makes clear that while the inspection outcomes were of interest to people external to the school (i.e. those who visited to look at the school's learning environment), they did not have a material impact on the school or its practice. Indeed, she notes that 'we were well on the way in terms of the other work we were doing', which

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suggests the school merely continued doing what it had already started. Curious as to the extent to which Karen's favourable inspection outcomes had created space for her to respond in this way, I followed-up by asking how she would have responded had her school been given an 'Adequate and needs improvement' or 'Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement' judgement. She said:

> I mean, you know, I haven't been in a situation where I've led a school into an inspection where I've had serious concerns. And if I was in that situation where I had serious concerns, then I would just want to be upfront and share those and have in readiness 'this is where we are, this is where I'm taking the school forward, and this is what's already in place'. And I would, you know, as a school leader then, I would expect to have that affirmed really.
>
> <div align="right">(Excerpt 24: Karen, School D)</div>

Like Mary, Karen displays a certain degree of confidence in her own ability to take the school forward. By her own admission, she would expect to have her plans for the school 'affirmed' by the inspectorate, as she positions herself as an authority on her school and her vision for the future. There appears to be no question in Karen's mind that the inspectorate will not affirm her plans, or disregard 'what's already in place'. In some respects, this could be construed as Karen wrestling back control of the inspection process, and reclaiming power from the inspectorate which is discursively constructed as something to be feared and respected. She is, in this short statement, shifting the power dynamic between the inspector and the inspected, and giving greater credence to her own voice as an experienced school leader. This confidence appears to derive from her never having led a school into an inspection about which she has had serious concerns.

There is also an element of defiance in Karen's being 'upfront' and honest about where her school is. She is not content with being subservient, and is determined instead to 'have in readiness' a clear assessment of how the school is performing and what it needs to do next. In some respects, this might be considered a form of resistance, and Karen's proactive response to inspection 'a starting point for an opposing strategy' (Foucault, 1976, p.101). In this case, Karen's strategy is one of *leading* the rhythm of inspection, as opposed to following what might be expected of her by the performative discourse that permeates the inspection process. Karen, unlike some of her colleagues, appears less willing to play by the inspectorate's rules, a point further demonstrated in the following excerpt:

What worries me is when people say 'oh, that will tick a box for Estyn'. And I think 'well, is that really school leadership, ticking boxes for Estyn?' Or, you know, should we be driven by a bit of moral purpose and responsibility for our children, first? It's almost as if the system and school leadership has become about pleasing Estyn, and ticking Estyn's boxes, and that could never drive me. No, Estyn isn't what drives me, Estyn isn't what gets me out of bed in the morning; it's the children and the parents and the staff, that's what gets me out of bed. I think it would be a sad situation if, you know, it was Estyn that drove what I did and what I was about as a school leader.

(Excerpt 25: Karen, School D)

Here, Karen appears to distance herself from performative practices associated with the inspection process by stressing that she is not 'driven' by the inspectorate, and is instead motivated by 'moral purpose and responsibility for our children'. In so doing, she suggests that responding to Estyn's inspection framework is at odds with supporting the pupils in her care, and that the former does not necessarily lead to the latter. This is interesting and is in direct contrast to Karen's earlier reference (in *Excerpt 21*) to having 'every duck lined up and every piece of paperwork exactly where it needed to be' (an action akin to 'playing the game').

On the one hand, Karen dismisses categorically the prospect of ever working to tick Estyn's boxes, emphasising that 'Estyn isn't what gets me out of bed in the morning', yet on the other hand, she is cognisant of the need to get ducks lined up and every piece of paperwork in place. This to me is reflective of both her professional pride as an autonomous and experienced school leader, coupled with the performative climate in which she works (i.e. her wanting to do what *she* thinks is right, versus the need to demonstrate adherence to what *Estyn* demands of schools). I infer that while Karen may not want to fall in line with expectation, and sacrifice her own professional autonomy in favour of what Estyn perceives to be 'right', she does so anyway because of the performative nature of inspection and the possible ramifications attached to poor performance.

Another point of interest in *Excerpt 25*, is Karen's reference to and characterisation of school leadership. She contrasts the want of some school leaders to 'tick boxes for Estyn' with her own inspiration to care for and tend for pupils, and implies that by having 'a bit of moral purpose', she is in some way a more principled and ethical leader. There is certainly a feeling running through this excerpt that not every school leader is like Karen, albeit she firmly believes that they should be. That she describes the possibility of being driven by Estyn as 'a

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sad situation' is an apparent broadside to those that are, even though she herself has displayed what can be considered highly performative actions (in the lining up of ducks and preparing of paperwork ahead of Estyn's visit).

Inherent in Karen and Mary's response to inspection is a determination to 'get on with the job' of school leadership, and to put the disruption of Estyn's visit behind them. Because their respective schools have performed well in the inspection process, as evidenced by their positive inspection outcomes, they can look ahead with confidence and begin planning for the future in the knowledge that inspectors will not be back for some time. They have, in effect, 'passed the test' of inspection, and held themselves accountable and open to scrutiny for the quality of education they provide. Or to put it another way, and returning to the agreed definition of quality in this thesis, the schools and their school leaders have demonstrated 'fitness for purpose' (Woodhouse, 1998, p.258; see section *3.3.6*). The fear surrounding inspection has therefore subsided, and having had their provision validated by inspectors, are now liberated to drive their schools forward in whichever direction they choose. However, whilst the publication of inspection outcomes can have a liberating effect for some, for others, it can have the opposite influence. Keddie (2013, p.21) explains:

> High performing schools… can adopt the policies of the audit culture without changing their core beliefs or dynamics. Other lower performing schools may need to radically alter their beliefs and dynamics to fit with performative demands. They may even engage in unhelpful or damaging practices in order to satisfy these demands.

It is these 'unhelpful or damaging practices', brought about by the 'performative demands' of inspection, that I will consider in the following subsection.

Shackled by recommendations

In stark contrast to the liberating effect of inspection outcomes on those who had performed well in inspection, those who had performed more poorly described a very different set of influences. In this subsection, I will explore in greater detail the stifling effect of Estyn judgements on two school leaders, David (School A) and John (School C), who explained how the inspection process had consumed their schools and their staff for many months after the publication of outcomes. David (School A) began by reflecting on the time visiting inspectors

told him his school would be receiving 'Adequate and needs improvement' judgements; an assessment that meant strengths outweighed weaknesses, but important aspects required improvement (Estyn, 2020b).

> When they were leaving after they gave us the feedback that it was 'Adequate and needs improvement', and my chair of governors is bristling next to me because he can't believe it, and I told him to 'shut up, it'll be fine, we'll get ourselves out of it', everybody was shaking my hand on the way out just saying 'good luck' like someone had died – do you know what I mean? I remember them thinking 'you've got a big job on your hands now, David'… and I thought 'that's not the tone that I was expecting', but that kind of followed on for a while after. You've gone from being the person lots of people talk to, to the person nobody talks to.
>
> (Excerpt 26: David, School A)

David's description of these very early stages post-inspection set the tone for what followed, and a period of activity that challenged many facets of David's leadership. There are a number of vivid images depicted in this particular excerpt. The first, is David's recollection of the response of his chairman of governors, who was 'bristling' and could not believe what judgements the school had been awarded. However, David's apparent confidence that the school would come through the additional scrutiny that follows outcomes such as his, seems to have dissipated somewhat after the 'good luck' gestures and handshaking. His comparison with the mournful response of people after someone has died is particularly powerful, and gives a sense of the severity of the outcomes and their potential impact on him and his school.

David appears surprised by the sombre tone of the inspectors, and it is interesting that he notes that the tone 'followed on for a while after' and far outlived the inspection process itself. The material effect of the inspection outcomes on him personally is neatly encapsulated in his final observation, that 'you've gone from being the person lots of people talk to, to the person nobody talks to'. This form of social rejection must have been particularly difficult for David, whose professionalism as a competent and effective school leader will have been likely challenged by the suggestion that his school 'required improvement' (Estyn, 2020b, p.3). David is effectively describing his own fall from grace through the medium of social interaction, and as a 'person nobody talks to', considers himself something of a social outcast or educational pariah.

For the first six months after his school's inspection, David said 'we were trying to fix everything in the world' so as to demonstrate to local authority and regional consortium

representatives (who had begun more frequent visits to the school as a result of its inspection outcomes) that the school was making progress. He was later advised by his school's 'challenge adviser', a designated regional consortium employee with responsibility for supporting the school's development (Welsh Government, 2014), to 'just focus on those inspection outcomes and tie everything to those inspection targets' to make it easier for the inspectorate to gauge improvement. David was conscious of being able to prove to inspectors that his school was moving in the right direction.

> It was a bit of a light going off in my head; my development plan was focussed only on the recommendations, and we just showed progress against them. It meant I could ditch everything else, [and] it created a momentum. But you pay a price for that, you know, because we properly squeezed the staff; we ramped up the accountability ridiculously during those years, [and] you know, we were keeping exclusions low, and so there were probably occasions where exclusions didn't happen that should have happened – and for the first time ever really, we had issues with trade unions and the threat of industrial action.
>
> (Excerpt 27: David, School A)

David's admission that he could prioritise Estyn's recommendations and 'ditch everything else' is an important observation, as it plays very clearly into the performative discourse associated with inspection. He is, in effect, changing his practice and that of his school so as to respond to the inspectorate's recommendations. In other words, the inspectorate has determined that David's school is not meeting its required standards, and David has thus resolved to focus his attention very clearly on the areas deemed by inspectors as requiring most attention. He is, therefore, shifting his priorities so as to demonstrate 'performance' against Estyn's key performance targets. That he was content to 'ditch everything else' suggests that there were things he chose not to do, that he might otherwise have done had Estyn not visited and passed judgement on his school. This reinforces the weight of the inspectorate, and its relative power over those operating in schools in Wales. It is also a demonstration of the highly performative behaviours driven by the inspection process, with David manipulating practice in order to show improvement, rather than focus on what he considers to be in the best interests of his school community.

However, David's intense focus on his school's recommendations came at a cost, and he noted how accountability on staff was 'ramped up' considerably in the years that followed the publication of inspection outcomes. This sheds new light on the layers of accountability

that exist through the process of inspection, with school leaders ultimately responsible for inspection outcomes, and therefore answerable to the inspectorate, and school staff being accountable to their school leaders. This redistribution of power, manifested in David's 'squeezing' of staff, is a useful reminder of the hierarchy of authority that exists during the course of inspection and its aftermath. A more specific, practical consequence of David's narrowed focus on Estyn's recommendations, was his desire to keep 'exclusions low' (born out of concerns over the school's high rate of pupil exclusion) by not excluding pupils who perhaps should have been. This is a good example of David taking action that he may not have felt wholly comfortable taking, with the sole intention of responding positively to one of the inspectorate's foremost recommendations. When asked how this made him feel, David said 'I never resented the focus that we put in on it, I think I just realised that that was the game you gotta play'. There are clear similarities between this and the performative tendencies associated with 'playing the game', described earlier in this section.

Also worthy of note in *Excerpt 27* is the implied link between David's heightened demands of staff (i.e. 'we properly squeezed the staff') and, 'for the first time ever', a dispute with trade unions. As well as demonstrating the potential fallout from a negative inspection outcome, this statement suggests to me that David is more comfortable with the possible involvement of teacher representative bodies, than he is ignoring the recommendations put forth by the inspectorate. It is as if the threat of industrial action is, for David at least, the lesser of two evils – and he is far better 'squeezing staff' and dealing with the consequences of what that might mean, than trying to curry favour with colleagues and keep Estyn at arm's-length. He appears to feel more content risking the possible wrath of trade unions than he is the inspectorate, such is the high-stakes nature of inspection and the potential ramifications his school could face should it fail to respond in a way Estyn deems to be appropriate.

John (School C), whose school also received 'Adequate and needs improvement' inspection outcomes, reflected on a similar pressure to perform, leading to a very clear and deliberate set of actions. This is perhaps best encapsulated in his recollection of when Estyn returned, some years after their initial inspection, to remove the school from monitoring and confirm it had met all of the inspectorate's headline recommendations.

It was a massive relief because it's almost like 'OK, great' and we can get on with what we wanted to get on with. We had new priorities we had in school; we had almost a new school improvement plan run by the side of the old one. But we couldn't get rid of the old one until we were taken out of monitoring. So it's a big relief, but it's also like 'right, next let's go forward'… there's no doubt it held us back and it wasted a bit of time.

(Excerpt 28: John, School C)

John described the school's inspection outcomes as being 'a major distraction' and something that dominated the entire school's work. He said that such was the additional scrutiny on the school, and the renewed pressure to perform post-inspection, that it had 'taken four or five years to actually turn things around again'. His admission in *Excerpt 28* that Estyn's judgements and subsequent recommendations 'held us back' and 'wasted a bit of time' puts into sharp focus the effects of inspection on the actual day-to-day practice of a school and its staff.

Like David, John implies that there are things he would have done had Estyn not visited, and the inspectorate had been more of a hindrance than a help to the school's development. Once again, this calls into question the strength of school leaders' professionalism, and the inspectorate's respect for it, as experienced leaders like John are compelled to go against their instincts as to what they believe is in their school's best interests, in order to comply with Estyn's recommendations for improvement. The power dynamic in this relationship is weighted heavily in favour of the inspectorate, as John parks his own view of what needs to be done (i.e. his 'new priorities' and 'new school improvement plan') so as to tend to what Estyn thinks is the more suitable course of action. He does this, presumably, because he believes Estyn to be more powerful and a voice that has to be heard and acted upon. The net result is that John and his school remains wedded to what he considers to be an outdated school improvement plan, in which he must show how improvement is taking place in a way that Estyn require, rather than focus his energies on the future and getting on 'with what we wanted to get on with'.

The strength of Estyn's voice as a driver of educational performance in Wales is evidenced in John's root and branch response to his school's inspection outcomes. John spoke about how the school restructured staffing, introduced a 'new teaching and learning philosophy', worked hard to change parental and community perception of the school, improved 'attitudes to learning' amongst pupils, and received more professional support from other schools. He

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described a change in leadership as 'the biggest thing' the school did following inspection, with a new senior team appointed to turn the school around. Summarising, he described the school's response as 'a kind of culture shift'. Interestingly, John acknowledged that certain aspects of the school's provision were substandard and in need of improvement, but was less complimentary about how the inspection itself was conducted and what support was available after the inspectorate had published its report. He spoke of his feeling 'left alone' in the immediate aftermath of inspection, particularly by those who had passed judgement on him and his school.

> It's a very surreal experience, I have to say; it left me flat, [and] I was devastated. And then eventually, though, it led to a change of leadership. It actually led to the school reinventing itself and changing, but that should've happened in a more supportive way, rather than we just pick up the pieces, and after a while we move on… with in between, lots of careers being changed and lots of fallout. You know, we were told areas to develop and things to work on… [but] I always think 'why were we told that and why was it such a devastating report?' Where was the local authority and the regional consortia? It shouldn't have been a massive surprise if systems were right.

(Excerpt 29: John, School C)

John's acknowledgement that the school 'reinvented itself' and changed post-inspection, can be interpreted as a positive thing; he is certainly intimating that the school changed for the better. However, he is clearly disgruntled that the school was left to 'pick up the pieces' with little or no external support. In the latter part of *Excerpt 29*, John appears to shift some of the responsibility for his school's inspection outcomes onto his local authority and regional consortium, which have a responsibility to support schools that fall within their geographical area, and are notified of inspections at the same time as schools (Estyn, 2021a). Specifically, the suggestion that his school's inspection report 'shouldn't have been a massive surprise if systems were right' can be considered a direct attack on those operating at a local authority and regional level, who he feels should have done more to prevent 'such a devastating report'. His reference to 'lots of careers being changed and lots of fallout' is further evidence of the often damaging, and long-lasting effects of inspection outcomes on schools deemed by the inspectorate to be underperforming. Nonetheless, while cognisant of the human impact of inspection on school staff, John intimates that the school's reinvention, however painful, might actually have resulted in a better functioning and more effective school.

Length between visits

On a similar thread, both David (School A) and John (School C) noted that the length between inspection visits was a particular hindrance for schools that are seen to be failing. Both school leaders described a sort of 'Sword of Damocles' hanging over them in the months and years that followed their inspections, and spoke openly about the cloud of uncertainty that follows disappointing results. John, in particular, was unequivocal that waiting two years to follow-up an inspection with a full monitoring visit was too long, and did not allow the school to move on in a more positive direction. Having been shackled by the outcomes and recommendations laid out in his school's inspection report, John explained the damaging effects of leaving a school to stew on its results for a length of time before returning to assess progress made.

> Being in monitoring definitely held us back. And, you know, we even had an Estyn inspector come in and work with us on teaching and learning, but that was done through himself, and he came and he said: 'You're good now, what I'm seeing doesn't resemble what I'm reading here.' But we couldn't do anything (until they came back), so it did hold us back. There's no doubt it held us back. We were in there (monitoring) too long – they should have come back a lot quicker.
>
> (Excerpt 30: John, School C)

John suggested that had inspectors returned to the school sooner, it would have been able to drive forward its change programme quicker, and thus recover from its inspection report at a much faster rate. Instead, the delay in their coming back to the school meant that the inspection process was more protracted and had a detrimental impact (i.e. 'being in monitoring definitely held us back'). He described the school as being 'in limbo', which led to challenges in recruiting staff and securing school budgets. To further embellish the point, John outlined how quickly things changed when the school *was* removed from Estyn monitoring.

> We're now a professional learning school, [and] we're getting money thrown at us by the local consortium. They wanna work with us a lot more. They wanna give us money for this and money for that, which obviously improves our budget, [and] improves our ability to improve. And it's almost immediate – as soon as you've got out of monitoring, you're invited back in to be a professional learning school because they know the stuff that you're doing. And that's the thing, once you're out of it, you can really go for it. But if you're stuck in it, you're stuck; it's almost like the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. There is that divide, you know.
>
> (Excerpt 31: John, School C)

What John describes here can be likened to the inspection 'haves' and 'have nots'; those who perform well in their inspection and are not subject to Estyn monitoring, are given additional responsibilities and resources. Whereas those that perform poorly and are under more intense Estyn scrutiny, are deprived of such benefits. However, transition between the two, says John, can be swift and, in his case, 'almost immediate' – John's school having been initially side-lined, and then brought back into the fold very quickly as a direct consequence of Estyn's validation. This is an important observation that shows how school leaders' opportunities for action can be limited or even shut down, dependent on how they are viewed by other key stakeholders operating in the same space (in this case, the regional consortia). It is as if, having performed poorly in inspection, schools and their school leaders become personae non gratae, and not considered competent enough to be associated with. There are clear performative connotations here, as schools are required to perform or risk exclusion, but also a strong nod to the inspectorate's power and authority over the education system more generally.

John implies that his school has been invited back into the professional learning fray (some schools having been designated 'professional learning schools', a denomination that allows them to offer consortia-approved professional support to other schools) quickly, because the regional consortium was already aware of the good work it was doing (i.e. 'they know the stuff that you're doing'). By the same token, he acknowledges that by apportioning funds and resources solely on the basis of inspection outcomes, 'the rich get richer and the poor get poorer' and 'there is that divide' between so-called 'good' schools and weaker ones. I am struck by the parallels between what John describes in excerpts 30 and 31, and Bentham's (1791) panopticon. Through the process of inspection, and the mere threat that it might take place, the inspectorate has the ability to control schools and their staff in the way that has been described. All that is needed, argues Foucault (1977, p.200), 'is to place a supervisor… in a central tower' so as to lock away workers in their cells. The role of supervisor, in this case, is assumed by the visiting inspectors themselves, having been employed to watch closely what their inmates in the metaphorical prison have been doing. However, such is the inspectorate's strength of dominion, manifested in its panopticon surveillance and 'structure of domination' (Poster, 1990, p.214), other key players in the wider community of education are implicated also. They too are cognisant of the inspectorate's power and are responsive to

it; take as an example the way in which inspection judgements inform how local authority and regional consortia money is spent (i.e. 'they wanna give us money for this and money for that').

But what happens when the supervisor disappears out of sight? What happens when the inspector leaves and does not return? The answer, according to John, is actually very little. The problem, as he implies, is that they can come back at any time and the threat of them reappearing never really goes away (i.e. 'we couldn't do anything (until they came back), so it did hold us back. There's no doubt it held us back.'). And it is this inescapable feeling of being watched and under constant surveillance that is, perhaps, most distressing for school leaders, who feel unable to escape the gaze (i.e. 'if you're stuck in it, you're stuck'). As Foucault (1977, p.201) explains, this is inherent in the work of the panopticon, as 'the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so'. As a result of its pervasive and relentless surveillance, the panopticon 'carried a permanent, omnipresent threat to all within its reaches' (Pratt, 1993, p.375) – the same could quite easily be said of school inspection, as John demonstrates.

Returning to the work of Foucault, I would argue that during the process of inspection, 'what was fundamentally invisible is suddenly offered to the brightness of the gaze' (Foucault, 1963, p.195). This means that practice and provision, ordinarily hidden from public view, is opened up to more obvious and visible scrutiny (manifested in its most literal sense by Mary's suggestion that inspectors revelled in the ability to 'look in any cupboard' and in 'any file' during her school's inspection). However, accepting that the 'brightness of the gaze' can be both lit and dimmed (schools being inspected only at a certain moment in time), it is worth considering how a school in difficulty, as determined by the inspectorate, responds once the surveillant eye has moved on. Perryman (2006, p.159), in her paper on school inspection in England and its effects on schools deemed to be failing, asks whether schools coming out of 'special measures' can ever truly be free of the inspectorate's surveillance:

> A regime which dictates that the normal is defined externally, where teachers earn to perform the normal under an intense and seemingly omniscient gaze seems too artificial a scenario to engender permanent change. When the 'gaze' leaves, what then for the school? Is the Panoptic prisoner truly reformed, or do schools released from the regime suffer an inevitable decline? Is the normalisation truly internalised?

These are salient questions in the context of this research, and in the case of John and David, in particular. For whilst release from Estyn monitoring can be considered a form of rehabilitation on the part of a school, it does not necessarily equate to a complete reformation; in other words, the school may have escaped the most intense form of the gaze, but it has not escaped the gaze altogether. The school, regardless of its inspection outcomes and recent performance during the inspection process, remains under surveillance, such is the power of performativity and culture of control (see section *2.1.2*).

Layers of accountability

David explained how this manifestation of performativity and control fed through into his own practice as a school leader, following the publication of his school's inspection outcomes. For example, he described how he began minuting fortnightly line management meetings with middle leaders, so as to evidence 'that I was holding my middle leaders to account'. He was particularly interested in pupil behaviour data, which had drawn the attention of inspectors. I asked David why he felt compelled to introduce such measures:

> In some ways, what you were doing was building accountability measures on paper, because you are already holding those people to account. I remember having this conversation during the inspection, when they were asking me how many people that I had on capability, or had had on capability – and I had none, and I still haven't had any. Now that didn't mean that if there were teachers that weren't up to scratch that I hadn't found ways to move them on, but what I didn't have is that paper trail that would evidence the fact that I was having these meetings with them every two weeks, bollocking them about their numbers... so you realise that you had to live in that world and so you had to put those things in place.

> (Excerpt 32: David, School A)

This is an interesting development, as it shows how David is building in his *own* accountability mechanisms, for the purposes of his school's accountability to the inspectorate. These layers of accountability fit neatly within the culture of neoliberalism that exists in Wales and, as I have previously demonstrated, 'imposes a particular systematic mode of social operation that claims specific forms of truth that are increasingly algorithmic' (Hall & Pulsford, 2019, p.247). In this particular example, David's minuting of meetings can be considered his systematic mode of social operation, and his 'bollocking them (staff) about their numbers', a form of

truth brought about by their failure to conform to his (and, in turn, Estyn's) rules regarding pupil behaviour.

What David describes in *Excerpt 32* is effectively a kind of audit, as he strives to build an evidence-base to demonstrate his school's adherence to the inspectorate's checks and balances. He is developing a paper trail that will serve as proof to visiting inspectors that he is addressing their recommendations and areas of concern. Indeed, his realisation that 'you had to live in that world' is a very clear nod to the neoliberal, performance-driven world in which the inspectorate wields considerable power over schools, which are in turn subject to near constant surveillance. David's admission that he had found ways to move on 'teachers that weren't up to scratch' further plays into the depiction of school inspection, as a form of accountability, as high-stakes (see section *1.2*).

In a separate conversation, John (School C) noted the pressure on schools 'to produce' and 'show improvements within a certain amount of time' when they are being monitored by Estyn. The notion that schools have to improve (or 'produce') to appease inspectors is well understood, but it is important that we also consider the haste in which that improvement must come about. Like John, David recognised the pressure on schools to show improvement, and do so quickly.

> This question of pace came up quite a lot after [the inspection], where you had to talk about how quickly you were making those improvements… so you'd end up with this system where we were RAG (Red-Amber-Green) rating against the recommendations to show how much things were changing, and how quickly we were making progress.

(Excerpt 33: David, School A)

In keeping with the discourse of performativity, and notion of school leaders having to hold more obviously their own staff to account for their performance, Mary (School B) reflected on the pressure she felt to keep staff 'shining at their best'. She confessed to being 'conscious that you could lose people wanting to remain in education' if pushing staff too hard, but that holding staff accountable was an essential part of being a school leader. In this respect, the school as an organisation becomes what Shore & Wright (1999, p.570) might consider an 'auditable commodity'. Pulling all of this together, Hutt & Lewis (2021, p.474) resolve that in some cases:

Headteachers report that higher-stakes accountability systems significantly prompt high levels of activity in schools that are as likely to be pragmatically and functionally focused on meeting the demands of specific indicators as they are on developing teaching and learning.

5.4.4 Stage 4: Positionings

In *Stage 4* of my FDA, I responded to the following question (as outlined in *Table 4*):

Where are the school leaders positioned in relation to the discourse around inspection? How does this effect what they can and cannot do?

In this section, I explore the positioning of school leaders in relation to the discourses of performativity and professionalism. In so doing, I consider how their positionality effects what they can and cannot do, recognising that discourses construct *subjects* as well as objects and 'make available positions within networks of meaning that speakers can take up' (Willig, 2008, p.116). I also explore school leaders' relationship with others involved in the inspection process, including consideration of the role of inspectors themselves, and by implication, how their positionality allows them to behave and interact with school leaders and their staff. Four prominent positionings were drawn out based on my own interpretation of what impact notions of performativity and professionalism had had on school leaders, namely: school leaders as being subordinate to the inspectorate; as powerless to do anything about their inspection outcomes; as incapacitated during the inspection process and unable to function effectively; and as social outcasts. There were no obvious redeeming positionings in the data generated, and whilst there was evidence of some agentic action, e.g. in participants' rejection of Estyn judgements (see section *5.4.5*), they were not prominent enough to be considered here. Such displays of agency were, to me, one-off events rather than positions.

School leaders as subordinate

The positioning of school leaders as being subordinate to visiting inspectors was a feature of all four interviews. However, subordination was not total and, in many cases, did not endure for the entirety of the inspection process. Or to put it another way, some school leaders were more subordinate (and thus submissive to a higher authority) than others, and at different

times. Take John (School C), for example, who describes a high level of subordination at the time of his final meeting with inspectors:

> When Estyn walked in on the Thursday afternoon to deliver their verdict – verdict! – it *was* actually a verdict, it seemed like. It was a bit surreal – we all had to stand up as they walked in and they sat down and just went through it, and there was no interaction... It was almost like a verdict in a court and then off they went and left us to, like, pick up the pieces. It was a very surreal experience, I gotta say, it left me flat. Actually, I was devastated.
>
> <div align="right">(Excerpt 34: John, School C)</div>

In court, the way in which those present rise to their feet as the judge delivers their verdict is both a display of respect to the higher authority, and a practice that has become normalised over time (and is thus part of the discourse of law and order). That John and his colleagues felt it appropriate to rise in such a fashion, suggests to me that he too is respecting of his higher authority (e.g. inspectors) and has been programmed into behaving in a more formal and courteous manner (a symptom of the performative culture in which he operates), befitting of his subordination and in congruence with the 'rules of formation' (Foucault, 2002, p.42) that dictate how a school leader should respond. His reflection that 'we all had to stand up as they walked in' is not a literal representation of what happened; the staff did not *have* to stand up as inspectors entered the room. They did so because they felt it an appropriate course of action, based on their prior experience of what the inspectorate is and does. I therefore interpret that it was John's perception of the inspectorate, as something to be feared and something that holds schools to account, that made him respond in this way.

John's courtroom analogy provides a useful reflection of the situation, in that there is no immediate right of reply for him as school leader; as in a court of law, once a judge has delivered their verdict there is very little one can do about it. Yes, an appeal may be lodged at a later date, but in the act of passing sentence, the defendant is subordinate to their higher authority and effectively powerless to make any further representation. In general terms, the courtroom analogy is a good one in the context of inspection – the evidence is gathered and presented, a select group of people pull everything together and pass judgement, and a subsequent sentence decided. In the case of inspection, it is the lead inspector and collective group of inspectors that assume the roles of judge and jury, and have the power to decide on a school's fate.

In conversation with Mary (School B), it transpired that she believed some aspects of her school's provision had been unfairly summarised, and were deserving of a higher grade. She noted that while a number of areas had been deemed 'Excellent', other areas she felt befitting of the top grade were rated only 'Good'. Specifically, she said: 'I did think some of the other 'Goods' were 'Excellent' in some aspects… but I think you're just glad to get through it without something unexpected coming up.' Mary appears almost apologetic for her disappointment at the 'Good' judgements, focussing instead on 'getting through' the inspection 'without something unexpected' happening. When challenged, Mary confirmed that she did not debate the outcomes with inspectors, such was her apparent subordination, as she was more concerned about avoiding the potential for 'something big that crashes down on you'. It was not, it appears, a battle worth fighting.

School leaders as powerless

David (School A) described what could be considered a similarly high level of subordination, albeit manifested in a slightly different way. He spoke of his regret that visiting inspectors had clamped down so heavily on his school's pupil behaviour statistics, despite them having seen little evidence of poor behaviour during their time in school. He explained:

> It (behaviour) was the one thing during the inspection that I felt that I had any control over… because I know what to do to make the school run really smoothly for a week and, you know, I pulled every trick out of the book in order to do it. Yet we had this recommendation around behaviour, that behaviour had to improve because it was 'Adequate and needs improvement', on the basis that we'd had an increase in exclusions. But, you know, exclusions go up and down – that's kind of the point of exclusions – and I remember saying at the time 'have you seen any instances of poor behaviour?' and they said: 'None… none at all.' So they'd gone through the entire week without seeing any incidents of poor behaviour, but then wrote in our report that it was 'Adequate and in need of improvement' on the basis of the [parent/carer] questionnaires and this data on the number of exclusions, which I could explain.

> (Excerpt 35: David, School A)

In this excerpt, David presents an interesting juxtaposition between what he *believed* he had control over, and what, in reality, he did not. He describes how he 'pulled every trick out of the book' to 'make the school run really smoothly', yet his intervention did not have the desired effect on his school's inspection outcomes. He appears to resent the fact that

behaviour was adjudged 'Adequate and needs improvement' (i.e. 'exclusions go up and down – that's kind of the point of exclusions'), and while he displayed some challenge to inspectors by asking them if they had seen any instances of poor behaviour, is powerless to do anything about the resulting judgement. David later reflected, in reference to behaviour, 'that decisions had already been made before they came in' and 'I don't think there was anything they would have seen that would have changed it (their judgement)'.

David made clear in his response to questioning his belief that inspectors had made their minds up on his school before they had arrived through the door. The fact that the inspectorate had based their determination on behaviour at least in part on the questionnaire responses given by parents/carers does not appear to have dissuaded him from that view. Instead, he said 'it (Estyn's interpretation of his school's performance) was done from the minute they walked in; you just knew and so it was just damage limitations'. This impression, he later clarified, was based largely on the school's recent exam performance and unfavourable behaviour data.

> I remember thinking at the time that there was loads of stuff that they had already worked out. I think schools are perceived in a certain way and sometimes they (inspectors) have a positive view of you, and sometimes they don't… there's a portrait being painted of your school and they pretty much just go along with it; it didn't feel like they were looking for opportunities to push back against that.

> (Excerpt 36: David, School A)

Here, David appears resigned to his fate; he is clearly perturbed by his perception that inspectors had a pre-conceived view of his school (i.e. 'sometimes they have a positive view of you, and sometimes they don't') that influenced their inspection judgements, but is powerless to do anything about it (i.e. 'it was just damage limitations'). There is subordination to the inspectorate present in this depiction, but it is weaker than that displayed by John (School C), who offered no interaction with inspectors.

Interestingly, John was also of the opinion that inspectors had pre-determined his school's inspection outcomes ahead of their visit to the school. Similar to David, he said pupil performance in external examinations and feedback from parents/carers had been accentuated and, as a consequence, severely hampered his school's chance of a positive inspection result.

> Our results a year before the inspection were our poorest for a while [and] really put us into that Estyn monitoring and really set the tone, I think, for the inspection. You know a lot of it was fair, I think, but we were always up against it. I think the parent and the pupil survey, which goes out before they (inspectors) come in, and [from] where they draw their lines of inquiry, was, you know, really important and they took that and really went in with a real focus on it. OK, so fair enough, but I don't think we had a chance of getting anything less than Adequate before they came in; I think they had their mind set on it.

(Excerpt 37: John, School C)

Here, John is effectively suggesting that the process of inspection itself was, to some extent, rendered futile by the weight inspectors placed on prior pupil achievement in examinations and feedback from parent/carer and pupil questionnaires, submitted ahead of the inspectorate's visit. He notes that, on reflection, 'we were always up against it' and 'I don't think we had a chance', regardless of how well the school presented to inspectors in person. Indeed, he later resolved that 'whatever we said and did and showed, it didn't make much difference at all', and inspectors had already made up their minds as to how well his school was performing. Karen (School D) was of a similar opinion:

> My experience is that before lead inspectors come to a school, they have a fixed view; and that they almost see that they then have to find the evidence to back up that fixed view before they arrive. You know, it's a time at which schools need to make sure that every 'i' is dotted and every 't' is crossed. And unfortunately that is not, well it's not unfortunate, it's just not school life. And it's not the way we live our lives, is it? School life and the way that schools evolve means that that in real-time, everything is changing.

(Excerpt 38: Karen, School D)

Karen's reference to inspectors having 'a fixed view' about schools that they then try to justify and 'find the evidence' for is, in effect, a challenge of their objectivity (see section *3.3.6*), and calls into question inspectors' conduct ahead of *and* during the inspection process. However, this does not prevent her from dotting every 'i' and crossing every 't' in preparation, which demonstrates both a subordination, in that she accepts what she believes to be the fixed view of inspectors, and a feeling of powerlessness, arguing that while 'it's not the way we live our lives', she prepares diligently for inspection anyway. David took this thinking a step further, noting that while he fundamentally disagreed with the judgement of one aspect of his provision, he felt he had no option 'but to go along with it'. He claimed that any representation to the contrary 'wouldn't have fit in with the narrative that was being drawn up at that point', and thus chose not to pursue his frustration with inspectors.

School leaders as incapacitated

This positioning has connotations with the previous two described in this stage, but I have afforded it its own subsection because of its inherent relationship with the discourse of professionalism. In fact, the positioning of school leaders as being incapacitated during the process of inspection, and unable to function in a way befitting of their role as school leader, could be construed as a direct attack on their professionalism, manifested in a lack of respect for what they are qualified to do. To illustrate this point, I will first refer back to *Excerpt 13*, and Karen's (School D) concern that 'as a school leader, you are not able to set an agenda that shows everything that your school is about'. There are some things, she says, that her and her staff were particularly proud of, yet drew little or no attention from visiting inspectors. She was unable to persuade her guests that certain aspects of provision were worthy of greater consideration.

> The experience that we had was that they (inspectors) just didn't really get a feel of everything that the school was about and, you know, the whole concept of ***provision redacted to avoid identification*** has been something that's been really, really important to me... and there would have been a strong aspect of that work going on at the time that wasn't seen, and it equally wasn't valid because it wasn't a feature [of the inspection]. There were specific aspects that I wanted to celebrate that the inspectors were not interested in, and certainly the lead inspector was not interested in.
>
> (Excerpt 39: Karen, School D)

This is an interesting development, as it highlights the personal journey Karen is going on during the process of inspection. From a position of relative strength, with her being able to direct and lead her staff during the day-to-day operation of her school, she now finds herself in a position of relative weakness, not able to orchestrate the inspection as she would like to. That inspectors chose not to pursue aspects of the school's work that Karen 'wanted to celebrate', could be considered a slight on her professionalism, in that they do not appear to recognise or value what she is telling them to be worthy of closer scrutiny. Also worthy of note here, is Karen's indirect reference to Estyn's (2021d) common inspection framework. She notes how a particularly strong aspect of her school's work was overlooked and 'wasn't valid' because it did not align with the inspectorate's core areas of interest. This serves to reinforce the legitimacy of the inspection framework, as the quality criteria against which schools are judged (see section *1.1*), and its direct impact on practice.

In their paper on inspection frameworks and how they are used to evaluate and assess schools, Scheerens & Ehren (2015, p.44) note how inspection and monitoring systems 'are particularly about controlling compliance as its first goal is to make sure that schools comply with predetermined norms fixed by law and administrative rules and regulations, such as the availability and use of procedures, policies and protocols'. This practice of 'controlling compliance' is a key part of the inspectorate's raison d'être, as it bids to both promote and enforce its 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1976, p.112) that identifies what and how education should be delivered in schools. In *Excerpt 39*, Karen appears to recognise that her own personal interest in a certain aspect of her school's provision is, to some extent, irrelevant because it does not form part of the inspectorate's pre-determined inspection framework. The framework acts as a guide for inspectors during the process of inspection and anything that sits outside of the framework is, in Karen's view, invalid. As such, her professional opinion that specific aspects of practice were worthy of celebration, is delegitimised and disregarded because it does not comply with 'predetermined norms' (Scheerens & Ehren, 2015, p.44).

The material effect of this is neatly summed up by Karen, who reflected on her position as school leader, a role that is typically defined by the capacity to lead and shape what happens in school on a daily basis. Looking back on how the inspectorate limited her ability to direct what inspectors saw and heard, she said: 'You know, as headteacher, you are the gatekeeper aren't you – but it's almost as if that is taken away.' Karen's sense of loss that something has been 'taken away', is in this case related to what she feels is an assault on her authority, or perhaps more fundamentally, her professional *agency* and what Heikkilä & Mankki (2021, p.4) consider 'an individual's power to act'. By the same token, Karen recognises that in order to valorise her work and that of her school, she must have 'every duck lined up and every piece of paperwork exactly where it needed to be' (see *Excerpt 21*). Buchanan (2015, p.705) makes clear Karen's predicament:

> The policy paradigm of accountability with an emphasis on what can be standardized, measured, and compared gives rise to particular professional practices that teachers and schools must engage in to remain legitimate.

This process of legitimisation is worthy of closer interrogation. Naz (2021, p.7) contends that educational institutions, like Estyn, 'are primarily concerned with the construction of knowledge, who defines knowledge, how knowledge should be understood, and what counts

as knowledge and what does not'. And so it is the inspectorate that decides what is legitimate, and how that legitimisation is judged. This serves as a useful reminder of the strength of disciplinary power that the inspectorate holds over its subjects; it is able, through its inspection framework, to define knowledge (e.g. what constitutes effective practice), how it should be understood (e.g. what teachers should do) and what counts/does not count (i.e. as demonstrated by Karen in *Excerpt 39*). It is the exertion of power by Estyn, via its 'rules of formation' (Foucault, 2002, p.42), and the subsequent threat of repercussion (for failing to conform), that drives school behaviours and makes them do certain things.

This subsection brings into sharp focus the impact of this performative process on school leaders' professionalism, which is without doubt in my view inhibited by the need to demonstrate their obeyance to established truths. As Foucault (1991, p.11) reminds us, 'practices are… not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that [are] imposed upon him by his culture, his society and his social group'.

School leaders as social outcasts

Another less prominent, although no less significant positioning, was that of school leaders as social outcasts. This was best demonstrated in evidence provided by David (School A) and John (School B), whose schools had performed relatively poorly in their inspections. Earlier, in *Excerpt 26*, David explained that as a result of his disappointing inspection outcomes, he went from 'being the person lots of people talk to, to the person nobody talks to'. The idea that David's popularity amongst his peers had diminished following his school's inspection, is something that cropped up again later in our interview. I asked David how inspection outcomes are used by other stakeholders within the education system.

> I think that's the bit that you realise after [the inspection], so like to go back, nothing changed in terms of the attitude of parents; you know I'd have the odd parent telling me that behaviour was awful in school, but they would have told me that before anyway… our numbers weren't particularly affected, you know, our community know the school really well, so that didn't change. Um, I think what changed is like literally it was like *everybody* stopped inviting you to parties, you know what I mean?

(Excerpt 40: David, School A)

In this excerpt, David is making a distinction between the material effects of his inspection outcomes on his *school* (i.e. the attitude of parents, pupil numbers, response from the community etc), and the actual, real-time social and emotional effects on him as a school leader. That he was no longer 'invited to parties' could be considered a form of public humiliation; he was once considered worthy of invitation and now, as a consequence of what is perceived to be his negative inspection, he is not. David has suffered a fall from grace and it is seems that even his own educational colleagues have turned their backs on him.

From a more material and practice-based perspective, David explained how his school was dropped from supporting other schools, and contributing to the development of the new CfW (having lost its 'Pioneer School' status). But for him, being unable to mentor new and emerging headteachers was a particularly difficult pill to swallow.

> You know, we'd been a Pioneer School, we were a school where we had departments that were kind of linked in with other things, and I was an NPQH (National Professional Qualification for Headship) mentor and used to do leadership stuff with ***name redacted to avoid identification***, and I used to do the stuff for ***name redacted to avoid identification***, then it was like, literally, 'well you can't do any of those things anymore'. And I think the one that bit most was the leadership one, because *I* hadn't changed, and I still think that I gave good advice and I think everybody that I'd mentored up until that point had got through the NPQH process and become heads – I still talk to them all the time, they're good headteachers, and I like to feel like I had a part in that, um, but *literally*, it felt like overnight because of where you were, it was like a knock-on effect.
>
> (Excerpt 41: David, School A)

Rather like Karen's (School D) earlier commentary relating to the apparent attack on her ability as a school leader to lead, David's admission that the consequence of his school's inspection outcomes 'that bit most' – his inability to continue supporting the next generation of school leaders – is closely associated with his own professional pride as a capable and experienced school leader. That he was denied the right to support aspiring headteachers is particularly hard to take, as it suggests that he is no longer qualified to discharge the responsibilities afforded to someone in a mentoring role. Interestingly, his reflection that '*I* hadn't changed' could be viewed as another attempt by David to separate the plight of his school from his own perceived plight as a school leader. In other words, David does not appear to want to associate fully with his school's inspection performance, which while damaging to the school itself, need not necessarily damage David's career or reputation as an effective

school leader. Indeed, he provides further evidence of his effectiveness by noting his relative success in mentoring new headteachers (i.e. 'I still think that I gave good advice and I think everybody that I'd mentored up until that point had got through the NPQH process and become heads') and, more to the point, 'they're still good headteachers'.

By countering the perception of him as a less effective, or in some way incapable headteacher, David is challenging the narrative that school leaders who preside over negative inspection outcomes should be prevented from engaging in activities that are external to the school itself. He is, in effect, questioning the suggestion that school leaders in schools requiring Estyn monitoring or 'special measures' are any less deserving of professional opportunities outside normal school practice. He does not appear to agree that his school's inspection outcomes should result in an inability to support colleagues, and he is striving to disaggregate the school's performance from that of himself as school leader. There are however more material consequences arising from poor inspection outcomes, that can have serious implications for how a school actually functions. David explained how this works in practice:

> I had really strong departments that had spent years supporting other schools on all sorts of things, and then all of a sudden we couldn't do any of them, which has a financial implication because that money didn't come into school again... so, you know, you're talking tens of thousands of pounds of income [that] kind of just disappeared, and we had to make the school smaller in terms of our staffing and there were loads of implications like that... but it was more about, personally, just feeling about what it's like to be on the naughty step – I was no longer the golden boy. Oddly now, I think I'm kind of glad I went through all that because it taught me loads about what's real, and who will stand by you and who won't.

> (Excerpt 42: David, School A)

There are a number of points to be made here. Firstly, David reinforces that failure to perform in inspection can lead to some form of penalty (in this case, being denied the opportunity to support other schools). Next, he reflects on the monetary cost of those penalties, with 'tens of thousands of pounds' being lost as a consequence. The direct knock-on effect appears significant, with David having to 'make the school smaller' and reduce staffing levels. There is therefore a direct correlation between his school's inspection outcomes, and job losses; people's livelihoods will have been severely affected by the school's performance in inspection.

Excerpt 42 ends with David returning to his own personal feeling of rejection; as in *Excerpt 41*, he struggles to separate the effects of inspection on his school with the effects it had on him. Having begun by reflecting on the school's punishment, he quickly defers back to how it made *him* feel; that he likens his positioning to being 'on the naughty step' is an indication of the public shaming he experienced following his school's inspection result. In an educational context, being 'on the naughty step' could be associated with an unruly school pupil, awaiting reprimand from their disappointed headteacher. Only in this case, David is, in his vision of the inspection process, the unruly headteacher awaiting reprimand from the disappointed inspectorate. He was, continuing the analogy, 'no longer the golden boy'; a label often given to those seen to be excelling.

The scorn with which people have responded to David post-inspection appears to have hit him hard, and there is a residual and lasting bitterness about the way he was treated (i.e. 'I hadn't changed', '*everybody* stopped inviting you to parties', 'on the naughty step' etc). However, David makes an interesting confession, namely that 'I'm kind of glad I went through all that because it taught me loads about what's real, and who will stand by you and who won't'. In post-structural theory, 'what's real' is developed through a process of discursive construction; the process of inspection, for example, is born from a discourse of performativity, and gains legitimacy through its 'rules of formation' (Foucault, 2002, p.42) that govern how schools should be held accountable to the people they serve. In this case, David's interpretation of what is real is both shaped by discourse, and what he believes to be real in the context of inspection, and his own personal and thus subjective construction of reality. As such, his better understanding 'about what's real' represents merely a more concrete understanding of *his own* perception of reality – there is no objective reality that is universally accepted. Holmes & Gagnon (2017, p.6) argue that, in a post-structuralist world, 'our understanding of a phenomenon is therefore a matter of perspective; it is not based on absolute truths'.

This is problematic, as David, while confident that he now knows *more* about reality, cannot assume that his version of reality will remain steadfast and unchallenged; what he believes to be real is subject to change and can be 'read against the grain' if necessary (Baxter, 2016, p.43). According to Radford & Radford (2005, p.76), there is no fixed reality to which any form of classification can relate, and 'the only reality we have is the reality given to us by our

patterns and structures'. David's reality, or knowledge 'about what's real', is therefore derived from the patterns and structures that surround inspection, and what it means to be inspected. With that in mind, one wonders how David's perception of reality might have altered had his school returned more favourable inspection outcomes. The famous Sartre (1958, p.21) quote – 'man is nothing else than what he makes himself' – feels entirely apposite here, given the centrality of David's own epistemological stance to his understanding of inspection and the wider educational sphere in which he operates.

The net result of David's positioning as a social outcast was a loss of confidence in his ability as a school leader, and with it, his willingness to support others, either directly (via school-to-school collaboration) or indirectly (by presenting at conferences). When asked for more specific detail, he said his inspection outcomes meant 'I don't want to share as much' and 'I'm less collaborative'. In addition, David said he no longer volunteered to present at conferences as 'you don't want to set yourself up for a fall'. He described being 'more protective' of himself and his school in the time since his school's inspection. This sense of scepticism about what might be inferred from his presentations at conferences, as well as David's reluctance to collaborate, is in my view a by-product of the status inspection has within the education community. Such is the legitimacy of the inspection process within the wider system, those associated with poor performance in inspection are considered in some way inferior to those with a more positive experience, and thus their professional expertise, however extensive, is viewed as being less attractive and somewhat diminished. It is the validation of inspection outcomes by others in the education community that gives Estyn judgements authenticity, and in a culture of performativity, determines who is 'successful' and who is not. There is resonance here with Baxter's (2014) earlier reference to Ofsted being both the producer and effector of discourses that in turn influence the way in which standards are understood and conceptualised (see section *2.1.1*).

5.4.5 Stage 5: Practice

In *Stage 5* of my FDA, I responded to the following question (as outlined in *Table 4*):

How do school leaders' subject positions open up or close down opportunities for action?

In this section, I consider the relationship between the discourses of performativity and professionalism and their impact on practice. I explore how school leaders' subject positions, explored in greater detail in *Stage 4* (see section *5.4.4*), opened up or closed down opportunities for action, recognising that 'by constructing particular versions of the world, and by positioning subjects within them in particular ways, discourses limit what can be said and done' (Willig, 2008, p.117). In doing so, I connect the more ethereal view of school leaders' positioning within the inspection process, to their more practical and material responses arising from the often limited opportunities available to them. Based on my own interpretation of these responses, *Stage 5* is distilled into the following areas of interest: restricted access to professional opportunities; knowing your place; manifestations of resistance; and the notion of school leaders re-storying themselves and their schools.

Restricted access to professional opportunities

There is a material consequence to the positioning of school leaders as subordinate, powerless and incapacitated, which was neatly encapsulated by John (School C) in his reflections on his school's restricted access to professional opportunities post-inspection. Earlier, in *Excerpt 31*, we considered John's assessment of the fallout from inspection on the school's involvement in external activities. Most notably, John reflected on how his school was in a much healthier place financially now it had been reinstated a 'professional learning school', and thus able to offer paid-for professional support to other schools. However, this was not an opportunity available to John during his school's time in Estyn monitoring; his school's 'Adequate and needs improvement' judgements were enough to severely limit his ability to support the development of other schools, and in so doing restrict access to valuable additional funding streams. John elaborated further:

> It stopped us being a school for ITE (Initial Teacher Education), [and] it stopped us being a professional learning school in the region… but now we're back being a professional learning school, which is brilliant because we're now on the cutting-edge of, um, things like CfW, [and] local and national priorities. But when you're not a professional learning school, and you can't have [ITE] students or whatever, you almost feel cut off so it's almost unfair in a way, I think, that that's put on the school.

> (Excerpt 43: John, School C)

John's description of how his school had been denied the right to educate future teachers, despite having done so for a number of years previously, was symptomatic of its now limited access to professional opportunities. Prior to inspection, School C had been a 'partner school' in a Welsh ITE partnership, involving one of the country's ITE-approved universities, and while there was no suggestion that the education given to student-teachers on placement at the school was of poor quality, the school's association with Estyn monitoring meant it was removed from the partnership's list of approved placement schools. There is a resonance here with David's (School A) inability to continue participation in delivering leadership development programmes, simply because of his school's now tainted reputation, post-inspection (see *Excerpt 41*). As with John's case, there was no indication that David had performed poorly in his support of the NPQH, but his involvement in the qualification process was considered inappropriate given the context of his school's inspection.

Also noted by John in *Excerpt 43* was his school's designation as a 'professional learning school', a label withdrawn following the publication of inspection outcomes. As explored in *Excerpt 31*, this by itself had major financial implications and meant that the school could no longer benefit from its involvement in regionally-delivered professional learning. Common in both these examples (i.e. the school's exclusion from ITE and professional learning delivery) is the response of affiliated institutions to the school's performance in inspection. There is nothing to suggest that School C's ITE partnership or regional consortium was in any way alarmed by the quality of provision the school provided, yet both institutions took immediate steps to revoke their association with the school regardless of its track-record. That they did so demonstrates the strength of Estyn's opinion, and the weight institutions such as those described attribute to the inspectorate's judgements (as discussed in *Stage 4*, see section *5.4.4*). It is reasonable to assume that neither the ITE partnership nor the regional consortium would have taken steps to sever ties with the school, had these judgements not been made and shared with the wider education community.

Excerpt 43 reinforces the power held by the inspectorate, which has driven very clearly the behaviours of two independently-minded and run educational institutions. It shows how these institutions have been programmed to respond to Estyn's view of what 'good', and indeed 'bad', looks like. The perception of the ITE partnership or the regional consortium does not matter nearly as much as the inspectorate's, whose assessment of quality and with it,

'fitness for purpose' (Woodhouse, 1998, p.258), is the determining factor in who works with a school and who does not. This is an important point, and supports the view that Estyn's legitimising of practice is sacrosanct – it is the inspectorate's voice that carries most credence and renders the voice of interested others (in this case, the ITE partnership and the regional consortium) almost totally irrelevant. This process can be considered an embodiment of disciplinary power, 'exercised through observing and measuring individuals, and the normalising judgements that are made as a result of these observations and measurements' (Ninnes & Burnett, 2003, p.282).

In the Welsh context, the normalising of Estyn's judgements, as statements that are universally recognised and endorsed, if not necessarily accepted by those subject to inspection, means that power can be both exerted and used to control how schools and affiliated organisations (such as those institutions referenced here) respond. As such, it is important to note that the effects of this power can be felt well beyond the school implicated; power transcends the relationship between simply the inspected and those doing the inspecting, and threads institutions together on the basis that Estyn's measure of quality is not to be ignored. John's reference to ITE (*Excerpt 43*) is particularly pertinent in this regard, as it highlights the link between Estyn judgements and a school's ability to provide teacher education. In its criteria for the accreditation of ITE programmes in Wales, the Welsh Government (2018b, p.14) makes clear that providers should consider working only with 'effective' schools that 'will normally have been identified as such by Estyn and/or the national categorisation process'. It is therefore likely that School C's affiliated ITE partnership and regional consortium ended their relationship with the school because of its negative inspection outcome and a perception that it would not be considered 'effective' in the eyes of Estyn.

Regardless of actual stipulations within the accreditation criteria, the ITE partnership and regional consortium's continued involvement with the school might have resulted in reputational damage for them, which in a competitive market (of student recruitment and sale of services to schools), could bring about serious consequences (both monetary and in terms of accreditation/adherence to regulation). In this representation of disciplinary power, it matters little if the judgements made by the inspectorate are robust and reliable; what matters is that the judgements have been made by a group of individuals recognised *across*

the entire education system as being purveyors of quality and standards. Using Estyn's common inspection framework (Estyn, 2021d) as a guide, school inspectors are empowered to validate or discredit a school's work, and with it, determine the extent to which that school is able to work collaboratively with others (as explored in section *5.4.4*). Ninnes & Burnett (2003, p.282) consolidate this thinking, with reference to Foucauldian theory, in the following extract:

> Such disciplinary power is used to control individuals and constitute them as subjects through the creation and maintenance of regimes of truth. In other words, power is exercised by researchers, bureaucrats, teachers, case workers, and so on as they gain knowledge about people through various forms of observation and measurement. The people who observe and measure are then able to proclaim the truth about the objects of their observation and measurement. Foucaultian analyses therefore are not concerned so much with what is true, but how the particular ideas about what is true are used and with what effects.

This serves as a useful reminder of the centrality of the 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1976, p.112) constructed by Estyn through its common inspection framework (Estyn, 2021d). And as Gustafsson *et al*. (2015) make clear, such frameworks define expectations of quality for both schools *and* their stakeholders (including e.g. ITE partnerships and regional consortia). There is another point worthy of note here. In *Excerpt 43*, John makes specific reference to CfW ('we're now on the cutting-edge of, um, things like CfW'), and the new learning opportunities available to him and his school as a result of School C's improved inspection outcomes. The reinstatement of School C as a 'professional learning school' appears to have led to more active participation in CfW development (the school now being on the 'cutting-edge' of CfW reform), and in so doing, given the school an advantage over other schools not afforded the same designation. This casts doubt over schools' capacity to properly engage in curriculum reform (as described in section *3.2.3*), and make the most of support mechanisms available to them, if they are deemed by the inspectorate to be failing.

In the case of School C, it could be argued that Estyn's judgements – of 'Adequate and needs improvement' – deprived the school of the same access to professional learning related to CfW (relative to other, more successful schools), thus hampering its capacity to improve. In other words, not only does depriving the school of professional learning opportunities limit the school's knowledge and understanding of new curricular developments, it has the potential to advance its decline as other schools begin to feel the benefit of the additional

support that they, in turn, are unable to access. It is a point that John himself makes reference to in *Excerpt 31* ('but if you're stuck in it, you're stuck; it's almost like the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.').

Knowing your place

In this subsection I wanted to draw attention to an interesting positioning presented by Mary (School B), which had a direct and constricting impact on her opportunity for action. Over the course of our interview, we explored the consistency in approach to inspection, and whether or not judgements gave a fair reflection of a school's overall performance. In so doing, Mary recalled during one of her visits to a school as a peer inspector, an initial meeting with an individual who would assume the role of lead inspector during that school's inspection. Mary appeared shocked by what she had heard, as evidenced in the following exchange:

> **Mary:** I think it's the different personalities within Estyn that make this an inconsistent body. There are some people who are exceptionally professional, [and] would, um, follow everything, and then there are others that really aren't, that have got different personalities, [and] that love the control, [and] the judgement… So it's that inconsistency across the whole system that makes me sceptical about it, and in particular, one of the inspections I went on. I had happened to notice on the table when I had got there (the school), that the registered inspector had already written the PowerPoint of his findings, which I believed were the findings from the school development plan etcetera, and that I thought would be the sort of starting point. But when he had his first team meeting, he said to us, he said: 'I never, in any inspection, I never put anything as "Excellent" because I don't believe anything could be "Excellent". So we won't have anything that's "Excellent".' And I was like, oh, OK, this is different.
>
> **Gareth:** And that was *before* Mary, *before* anything had even happened?
>
> **Mary:** Before anything had happened, yes.
>
> **Gareth:** Wow.
>
> **Mary:** He told us as a team that: 'I had never put anything as "Excellent" because I don't believe in it.'
>
> <div align="right">(Excerpt 44: Mary, School B)</div>

This is revealing in a number of ways. Firstly, it demonstrates very clearly that, on occasion, inspectors' pre-conceived ideas *can* inform how they inspect and what judgements they allocate to schools (as explored in section *3.3.6*). In this brief exchange, Mary highlights her

lead inspector's dim view of excellence in the context of inspection. In stating that he 'had never put anything as "Excellent" because I don't believe in it', the inspector had effectively revealed his disregard for Estyn's common inspection framework, which in practical terms meant that no school he inspected would ever be awarded the highest available judgement, regardless of their perceived quality. This, one assumes, would likely mean that some schools deserving of such an accolade (and that would otherwise have been awarded an 'Excellent' grade) were denied what was owed to them, simply because of an individual's own vision of how schools should be inspected. This chimes with Courtney's (2012, p.8) reflection, cited earlier, that inspectors 'all have their own hobby-horses'.

In this case, the lead inspector's 'hobby-horse' could have had wide-ranging and potentially significant consequences for teaching and learning within the school in question. For if we assume that excellence is the inspectorate's ultimate seal of approval (equivalent to 'very strong, sustained performance and practice' in the eyes of its framework), then anything less than that will require some form of intervention. Take, for example, Estyn's perception of what 'Good' means; namely that a school is displaying 'strong features, although minor aspects may require improvement' (Estyn, 2020b, p.3). If the best a school can achieve under this particular inspector are judgements of 'Good', then the school may be required to demonstrate improvement in certain aspects of provision that do not necessarily warrant it. Examples such as this will simply serve to fuel critics of the inspection process, especially those who believe that objective judgement is not possible when making what Gaertner & Pant (2011, p.89) consider such 'a highly complex diagnosis of an organisation'.

There is another important observation to be made about *Excerpt 44*, that relates specifically to what Mary feels able to say and do given her subject position as school leader, or more importantly in this case, peer inspector. The first, and most obvious point is that Mary does not immediately challenge the lead inspector's dismissal of the 'Excellent' judgement. In fact, she appears to accept it ('And I was like, oh, OK, this is different.'). Later, as the conversation with Mary developed, it transpired that she managed, with a colleague, to talk the lead inspector into reversing his stubborn refusal to award an 'Excellent' grade, leading to at least one aspect of the school's provision being given the top mark. However, this came much later in the inspection process and that Mary chose not to intervene earlier, around the time of the inspector's revelation, suggests she did not feel confident enough to do so. Despite her clear

discomfort at what the lead inspector had said, she chose instead to remain silent and his comments went unchallenged. This is interesting, as it demonstrates a power dynamic within the inspection team itself; Mary, although an experienced school leader, does not feel able to confront the lead inspector, who is superior in rank to her as peer inspector. Fundamentally, she is answerable to the inspection lead, regardless of how controversial his views. Foucault's (1977, p.27) assertion that power is manifested in 'localized episodes' that have 'effects on the entire network in which it is caught up' seems entirely relevant here.

The centrality of the lead inspector to the inspection process was further evidenced in my interview with Karen (School D), who was adamant that the person responsible for leading her school's inspection had determined ahead of their visit that a series of 'Excellent' judgements was not going to be possible. Karen explained:

> In the self-evaluation report, you had to say what [you thought] your judgements would be. So, you know, I was quite upfront and I said: 'Five Excellents, that's what this school is.' And she (the lead inspector) said on the first day, she said: 'So you're setting yourself up for this?' And I said: 'Yes, because I am certain that's where we are.' And, you know, there was a very definite sort of roll of the eyes, as if to say: 'Oh well, we'll see; I really don't see that you're gonna pull this off.'

(Excerpt 45: Karen, School D)

Manifestations of resistance

In this subsection, I focus attention on manifestations of resistance, as explored earlier in section *2.1.2*. Foucault's work makes clear that power can be undermined, exposed, made fragile and thwarted (Foucault, 1976). Yet for the concept of resistance to be properly understood, it must be explored in context and is reliant upon its relationship with the object or thing being challenged; in other words, resistance 'always points beyond itself, to something, which is being resisted' (Flohr, 2016, p.39).

Several examples of such resistance became apparent during the process of data generation. For instance, two of the school leaders (their identities have been further protected to guarantee anonymity) made formal complaints to Estyn about the conduct of inspectors on their school's inspection team. One school leader complained that an inspector had been 'power mad… to the point it was unpleasant', whereas another felt it necessary to share with

the inspectorate ways in which inspectors had been disrespectful, adding: 'I couldn't imagine allowing anybody else to come into our school and to, you know, to treat us in that way.' Such complaints can be considered a more practical and, to some extent, scaffolded form of resistance, based on inspection protocol. Recognising the inspection process as a carefully planned event, both school leaders were aware of their right to make their views about the event known to the inspectorate's hierarchy. In so doing, they understand that the visiting inspection team is part of a much bigger organisation and, as explored in the previous subsection (*Knowing your place*), there is a chain of command that ensures all individual inspectors are answerable to a higher body. Interestingly, both complainants appeared less confident in their ability to challenge successfully what the inspectors actually decided as part of their inspection visit. In other words, they were more comfortable criticising formally the *conduct* of inspectors (i.e. what they did and how they behaved) than what the inspectors actually *had to say* (i.e. their judgements).

The idea that challenging, and overturning, inspection judgements is a forlorn hope was a recurrent issue neatly demonstrated in the following exchange with Karen (School D), who sheds more light on this from her perspective:

> **Gareth:** Was there anything arising from the inspection report that you felt you needed to challenge?
>
> **Karen:** The biggest thing for me was the standards, because as far as I was concerned the progress that the children make is excellent and therefore standards are excellent.
>
> **Gareth:** And did you feel that you could challenge? Were you confident enough to take them on over that?
>
> **Karen:** Oh yes I took them on repeatedly – but it fell on deaf ears.
>
> **Gareth:** Right. So…
>
> **Karen:** That judgement had been made and no matter what I said or did, it wouldn't have made any difference.
>
> (Excerpt 46: Karen, School D)

Karen's confession that she 'took them (inspectors) on repeatedly' shows that she was prepared to challenge inspectors' judgements about her school, and thus use her professional agency to take what could be considered 'principled action' (Anderson, 2010, p.541; see section *2.1.1*). However, her protestations were ultimately futile ('it fell on deaf ears') and she feels certain that 'no matter what I said or did, it wouldn't have made any difference'. This is

interesting, and suggests that, in Karen's view at least, the inspectorate is unable to alter its perception of something, once a judgement has been given. Also worthy of note is Karen's absolute confidence in her school's 'standards', boldly declaring that, to her mind, 'the progress that the children make is excellent and therefore standards are excellent'. It is apparent that Karen vehemently disagrees with some of the decisions made about her school, which in turn triggered her challenge to the visiting inspectors. What this example shows, however, is that while school leaders can and do resist, in a more literal sense, conclusions drawn by the inspectorate, it does not necessarily lead to a change in the inspection outcome.

The situation was slightly different for Mary (School B), given she was broadly content with Estyn's judgements, and did not therefore feel compelled to challenge any of her school's headline outcomes. Nevertheless, Mary did confirm that in the event she did not agree with judgements made, she would have been prepared to challenge inspectors to defend her school's position.

> Yeah, definitely. I definitely would have. I would challenge anything, really, to try and up it. Because yeah, it matters; it matters to people.

(Excerpt 47: Mary, School B)

So whilst Mary expresses a willingness to challenge and engage in what might be considered 'resistance practices', described by Lilja (2018, p.420) as 'counter-conducts and anti-authority struggles', she does not on the basis that her inspection outcomes are broadly in line with her own expectation. This is an important point I will return to later in this section (see *Re-storying themselves and their schools*).

Prior to that, I want to explore briefly David's (School A) resistance to power, demonstrated by his 'fight' with inspectors over the school's decision to enter all pupils for a particular GCSE qualification. According to David: 'They (inspectors) were saying we hadn't created a path for less able kids to pass, so we did challenge that.' David justified his school's decision to enter pupils for the GCSE qualification, instead of entering them for an alternative that the inspectorate perceived to be more appropriate for some learners, based on the alternative qualification's recent adaptation and a feeling it was an 'unknown entity' not worthy of risk. 'But they wouldn't have it,' said David, 'and my deputy had a meeting to really push our position, but they didn't listen – it was a real fight'.

David's framing of his disagreement with inspectors as a 'fight' can be considered an acute representation of resistance in action, with the positioning of school staff and inspectors as rivals battling it out physically like boxers in a ring. This is an important juxtaposition, as not only does it demonstrate the potential for school leaders to resist authority – in the kicking back against inspectors' judgements – but it also separates those engaged in the fight as being from two entirely different camps, creating an 'us versus them' mentality (as explored in section *5.4.2*). David's use of language is revealing here; in his view, this is not a minor dispute but a *fight* and a fracas that could, to develop the metaphor, result in one of the participants exiting with a bloody nose.

In this case, it appears that David and his team came off worse from the exchange, based on his frustration that 'they wouldn't have' his argument and 'didn't listen'. In other words, David's resistance to the inspectorate's power (itself an agentic act) was ultimately fruitless and despite his protestations, the inspectors maintained their view that he should not have entered his pupils for the GCSE qualification. There is some resonance here with Karen's (School D) challenge of inspectors, as described earlier in this section, that 'fell on deaf ears'. It is important to note by way of conclusion, then, that the act of resisting does not by itself lead to a material change in approach; indeed, the evidence presented here suggests resistance can result in a doubling-down by inspectors of their original, challenged position. Furthermore, given that inspection is based so intrinsically on human interaction, one wonders whether professional challenge of judgements might, somewhat perversely, actually embolden inspectors during the exercise of inspection and with it, strengthen their power over those being inspected.

Flohr (2016, p.47) reminds us that power is productive, rather than prohibitive, and 'functions by constituting a field of possible action, but remains relatively open as to what exact actions will follow from it'. We can take from this that responses – or reactions – to power can vary, and it is not guaranteed that school leaders will seek to challenge or *resist* the judgements bestowed upon their schools. Neither, though, can we expect school leaders to sit quietly and accept a judgement that they feel is not reflective of their school's achievements. In the same vein, Flohr (ibid. p.50) argues that resistance is not futile, 'rather it emphasizes the potential of resistance to constitute new and alternative configurations of power'. These new and alternative configurations could simply be, in the case of Karen and David, a more defiant

inspector who is agitated by the challenging of their judgements (taken as an attack on their superiority), and a more despondent school leader, bruised by what could be viewed as defeat in the inspection 'fight'. And so while the school leaders may *believe* that their resistance to judgement was ultimately hopeless (e.g. 'no matter what I said or did, it wouldn't have made any difference'), the mere fact they have chosen to resist is likely to have changed in some way the dynamic of power relations (i.e. between the inspector and those being inspected). Whether this change works in favour or against school leaders appears dependent on how both parties respond to one another, based on their own perception of the resistance and the case for challenge.

Re-storying themselves and their schools

I conclude *Stage 5* by considering a different form of resistance, played out by Karen (School D) in her refusal to accept her school's inspection judgements. This could be considered a more extreme manifestation, in so far as it disregards totally the judgements made and instead positions the views of the inspectorate as not worthy of consideration. Rather than simply resisting Estyn's assessment of her school, Karen actively seeks to devalue it, describing how the judgements 'didn't feel right' or 'something I wanted to give value and credence to'. By dismissing her school's inspection outcomes in this way, she is in effect delegitimising the inspectorate's voice as a respected authority on educational standards. The following excerpt provides useful insight into Karen's thinking:

> Thinking back to my last inspection report, that was a real cause for celebration – you know, they didn't give away a lot of Excellents at that time, and yeah, that was a really great celebration of where we were at the time. When we got to the next inspection, it should have been as good, um, so to have ***judgements redacted to avoid identification*** was, I dunno, we just didn't want to be bothering with any of the banners and going on about it; yes, we said we've had an inspection and yeah it was OK, and there we are, but it was very much 'let's get on with it' because the process didn't feel right. Had we come out and I felt that, you know, ***judgements redacted to avoid identification*** was good and we got ***judgements redacted to avoid identification***, I'd have been happy to say 'Oh look, isn't this great?', um, and if we'd come from a place that was less than good and we'd got there, and it was something to celebrate, then that would have been fine. But it didn't feel fair, it didn't feel right, it didn't feel like something I wanted to give value and credence to.

> (Excerpt 48: Karen, School D)

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Karen said the school's inspection outcome 'wasn't what we wanted' and that the school had deserved better. As a result, instead of challenging the judgements, in what might be viewed as a more typical expression of resistance, she simply chose to ignore them. This could be considered an agentic response or 're-storying', as Stronach *et al*. (2002) put it, of her inspection experience. So convinced is Karen that her school's judgements are not a fair reflection of her school's current performance, she has disregarded them completely and opted instead to 'get on with' the job of schooling, irrespective of Estyn's verdict.

In his paper examining the role of resistance in Foucault's work, Flohr (2016, p.47) contends that resistance can be limited to affirming the power exercised over it or, alternatively, 'exceed and subvert the power relation that occasioned it'. What Karen describes here appears to conform with the subversive version of resistance, as she not only disagrees with but actively rejects the judgements awarded. Indeed, her re-storying is evidenced by her conviction that the school's inspection outcome 'should have been as good' as the previous, and she appears unwilling to accept anything less. We can draw from this that Karen and the visiting inspectors have adopted different versions of reality; by disregarding Estyn's view of what excellence looks like (Karen appearing convinced that her school was deserving of 'Excellent' grades), she is attempting to wrestle back control of the quality narrative from inspectors. And that is an important distinction, as while she is powerless to effect – and reverse – the judgements given, she does have some ability to control what is *said* about the school, and how the school is portrayed to a wider audience beyond that of the immediate staff themselves. It is this re-storying that allows her, as school leader, to shape and regulate the key messages emanating from the inspection process that she feels warrant greater exposure.

Interestingly, Karen is not against the idea of celebrating or putting up banners to promote her school's inspection outcomes, provided they are in line with her own professional judgement as to how her school is performing ('thinking back to my last inspection report, that was a real cause for celebration'). For Karen, the outcomes are not worthy of celebration if they do not fit with her own interpretation ('we just didn't want to be bothering with any of the banners and going on about it'). Part of this frustration might stem from what Bauman (2004, p.47) describes as being 'haunted by the spectre of exclusion', a state in which individuals are troubled by the prospect of being categorised in what they consider to be the

wrong category (as demonstrated by David in section *5.4.4*). One suspects that Karen is able to dismiss and re-story the judgements because the inspection was, broadly speaking, more positive than it was negative (yielding a mix of 'Excellent' and 'Good' judgements). Despite not quite being to the standard she was anticipating, the inspection report does, nevertheless, generate what Colman (2021, p.279) regards as 'a certain freedom' for her to respond in a way that she chooses (in this case, dismissing the outcomes altogether). Had the report been more negative by comparison, it is unlikely that Karen would have been able to resist quite so obviously Estyn's judgements, such is the 'performance-orientated culture' (McDermott *et al.* 2007, p.248) in which schools operate. In the same way so-called struggling schools are subject to 'greater and expanded degrees of surveillance' (Vinson & Ross, 2001, p.19), the glare on schools deemed to be less problematic is not nearly as intense.

Implicit in all of this, returning to my earlier review of literature (see *Chapter 3*), is that power is fragile and can thus be thwarted (Foucault, 1976), provided there is an appetite on the part of the subject to resist and fight against existing hierarchical structures. Building on the conceptualisation of agency as something that people *do* rather than a quality or condition that people *have* (Priestley *et al.* 2015), I would argue that in rejecting Estyn's judgements Karen has taken part in an *agentic act*, in which she has abandoned her statutory identity (Foucault, 1977) as a school leader who must abide by the inspectorate's word, to one who feels empowered to counteract and re-story herself 'in and against the audit culture' (Stronach *et al.* 2002, p.130).

5.4.6 Stage 6: Subjectivity

In *Stage 6* of my FDA, I responded to the following questions (as outlined in *Table 4*):

What can be felt, thought and experienced by school leaders? How does this impact on their behaviour and interactions with others?

The final stage of my analysis considers the relationship between discourse and subjectivity. Willig (2008, p.117) contends that 'discourses make available certain ways-of-seeing the world and certain ways-of-being in the world' and construct both social and psychological realities. It is these social and psychological realities that are of most interest here, building

upon the positioning of school leaders in relation to discourse around inspection explored in *Stage 4* (section *5.4.4*) and the impact of discourse on practice in *Stage 5* (section *5.4.5*). Since there is no direct association between language (as used during the interview process) and various mental states, *Stage 6* is, according to Willig, the most speculative and 'we can do no more than to delineate what *can* be felt, thought and experienced' by particular individuals (Willig, 2008, p.122). With that in mind, I offer in this section what I consider to be the most overwhelming subject positions adopted by school leaders, evident to me during the course of our discussions. Namely: a feeling of failure/sense of rejection, and most alarmingly, the potential for suicidal thoughts.

A feeling of failure/sense of rejection

A common thread running through a number of interviews was an underlying feeling of failure on the part of participants, who considered their school's inspection outcomes a negative reflection of their own performance as school leaders. For Mary (School B), this feeling is prevalent after all inspections, regardless of judgement awarded. She described 'this sinking feeling after an inspection, no matter what the outcome is' and the tendency of teachers to hold onto even the smallest of criticisms, such is their professional pride in their work. She spoke of 'that tiny chunk of a development area' that 'hangs with you and makes you feel rotten for ages' as being reflective of a teacher's desire to do their best by the pupils in their care. It is evident that even the slightest inference that standards are in some way below expectation, can have a significantly greater demoralising effect on those being inspected. Mary said the sense of rejection is particularly acute when teachers have been 'working around the clock' in preparation for inspection, such is the intense pressure on school staff to perform. This is an interesting observation, as it suggests in some cases teachers feel deserving of praise for the hours they put in *ahead* of inspection, as opposed to what is reflected in the inspection outcomes alone. This is contrary to existing Estyn guidance, which clearly states that inspectors should 'report as they find' during the time they spend in school, and 'substantiate their judgements on the basis of sound evidence' (Estyn, 2021a, p.17).

Colman (2022, p.18) notes how the disciplinary gaze of the inspectorate 'invokes in leaders feelings of anxiety and fear, amid relentless pressure to perform'. Similar feelings were

surfaced during conversations with David (School A) and John (School C), who both questioned their own futures as school leaders as a result of their inspection experience. In a more intense articulation of his own feeling of failure, David recalled a series exchanges, with his wife, a local authority adviser and his deputy, in the weeks that followed publication of his school's inspection outcomes and the school's subsequent downgrading in the *National School Categorisation System*.

> **David:** It was at that point I went back and talked to ***name redacted to avoid identification*** at home and said 'look, I might have to do something else', you know, because you were really at that point of thinking, you know, 'I don't know how I'm going to turn this around now', because it was just one bad thing after another bad thing.
>
> **Gareth:** So you questioned your position?
>
> **David:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. I had a conversation with ***name redacted to avoid identification*** at the local authority and said: 'If I don't do this, what can I do?' And me and my deputy had a meeting about 7 o'clock in the morning after we'd had this conversation about categorisation, and he said to me, he said: 'Right, what are you going to do? Have you got the fight to do this left in you?', and you know, I really questioned whether I did, and you know I said 'yes' because I'm stupid. And then, um, I think actually once I'd made that decision, then I thought 'right, I'm going to fight this now' and I was lucky that there were people with me to point me in that direction of just giving me some way of getting the ball to roll the other way.

(Excerpt 49: David, School A)

In this excerpt, David is seen contemplating his capacity to 'turn around' the school's fortunes and even enquires, in his conversation with a local authority advisor, as to what other jobs might be available to him if he were to step back as headteacher ('if I don't do this, what can I do?'). In doing so, David is effectively doubting his own professionalism, and questioning his ability to fulfil the requirements of his role as school leader. This chimes with observations made by Perryman (2006, p.158) in her paper on school inspection in England, in which she describes the sense of de-professionalisation teachers can feel from having to perform 'in order to demonstrate their competence'. In this context, failure to 'perform' could be considered reflective of teacher *incompetence*, and a failure to carry out their function as teachers.

Also interesting here is David's reference to 'the fight', an illustration that resurfaces again after his earlier reference in *Stage 5* (David having 'fought' back against inspectors'

disapproval over the school's decision to enter all pupils for a particular GCSE). This time, David's fight is more a personal battle of his own will and determination to carry on as headteacher in the face of adversity. So scarred is he by his inspection experience, and subsequent downgrading in categorisation, he is not certain whether he has the energy or 'fight' left in him to battle back and help rebuild the school from its perceptively low position. His reference to needing to 'get the ball to roll the other way' brings with it gambling connotations; David needing an element of good fortune to have the school's prospects turn in a more positive direction. I am reminded at this point of the 'high-stakes' nature of inspection, and its association with card games and casinos (Barzano, 2009) that create winners and losers (see section *1.2*). In this case, David appears cognisant of his 'loser' status (his school having performed poorly in its inspection) and is keen for his luck to change and 'the ball to roll the other way' (so as to 'win' the inspection game). A similar analogy is used by Maden (2001, p.314), in her book on effective schools in disadvantaged areas, who writes of school staff being frustrated by the 'heroes and villains drama' created by the inspection process.

David was not the only school leader to contemplate his future post-inspection, with John (School C) having entertained similar thoughts. As noted in *Stage 2* (see section *5.4.2*, *Excerpt 12*), John described fallout from his school's inspection report as 'the lowest point in my career' and confessed to having nearly given up teaching as a profession. He later explained in greater detail a conversation he had had with his partner regarding his future as a school leader, and what he might do instead.

> **John:** As I said to you, I could have, I could have given up; like, my partner ***name redacted to avoid identification***, she runs a delivery firm, like a delivery service, and she said to me one morning 'christ, I just can't get drivers' and I honestly, right, I nearly said to her…
>
> **Gareth:** Wow.
>
> **John:** I honestly did, that's how low it was, I honestly saw driving around delivering things as a… that would have been a complete relief than going back into school every day at a time when it was horrible. So that's how bad it got.
>
> (Excerpt 50: John, School C)

John's reference to the possibility of him leaving school to become a delivery driver, and it being 'a complete relief' compared to what was facing him as a school leader, shows the emotional toll his inspection experience had on him personally.

Suicidal thoughts

The most extreme response to inspection that arose during interview, was the prospect of school leaders taking their own lives as a result of their experience. This particular thought was not entertained by the participating school leaders themselves, but by a colleague – a serving headteacher of another school – of one of those participating. It is not therefore a feeling, thought or experience directly felt by school leaders involved in this study, but given it was brought to my attention and came to light during the course of our conversation, I chose to include it here as a demonstration of the intensity of possible social and psychological effects on those who oversee school inspection. What was described to me also resonates strongly with the recent case of Ruth Perry, a serving headteacher whose negative inspection experience is said to have contributed to her death by suicide (see section *1.5*).

The shocking revelation that a school leader known to one of the participants in this research had contemplated taking their own life following their school's inspection was surfaced during an exchange with Mary (School B), outlined below:

> **Mary:** There was an inspector who was the lead inspector of a colleague's school in ***name redacted to avoid identification*** and she was so awful that my colleague, um, she was made to feel suicidal.
>
> **Gareth:** Goodness.
>
> **Mary:** Um, and, um, she yeah; and actually she then wanted to, she raised a complaint through ***name redacted to avoid identification*** about the way that the staff were spoken to and treated, and the attitude, and I know exactly what she means.
>
> (Excerpt 51: Mary, School B)

Mary said that nothing became of the complaint and the inspector continued in their role, despite the severity of the accusations made against them and the impact the inspector had had on her colleague, in particular. I asked Mary how she reacted when she heard that her colleague had contemplated suicide.

> I think if within Estyn, if you just shoot them (school leaders) down and just tell them that they're not doing enough and make them flustered… and actually the member of staff is exceptionally strong, you know, as a person. So when she said to me that it had made her, um, go into a very dark place, um, and that she had contemplated suicide, I just, I just couldn't believe it. And that's why, you know, it had to be raised.

(Excerpt 52: Mary, School B)

Mary's comments show that *all* teachers and leaders are susceptible to intense psychological trauma, regardless of how experienced or strong they are perceived to be, and the pressure associated with inspection can be so great that the consequences of adverse experiences can be extremely serious. The notion that *any* teacher is vulnerable to such severe distress is at odds with the suggestion, by teachers participating in a study by Hopkins *et al*. (2016, p.59), that 'it gets less stressful the more experienced you are'. Unlike this research, the study involved teachers from 25 primary and secondary schools in England, who were interviewed to illicit their thoughts and feelings about how their teaching is evaluated by others.

Perryman (2007, p.174) notes that 'the focus on the effects of inspection is more often on aspects of stress relating to overwork, but the emotional consequences can be far more important'. Indeed, it was reported in March 2023 that that the stress caused by school inspections in England was cited in coroners' reports on the deaths of 10 teachers in the previous 25 years (Fazackerley, 2023). While the availability of similar statistics applicable to Wales is not known, the statistics bring into sharp focus the measures some school staff are willing to take as a result of their inspection experience. That Mary's colleague was prepared to take the same course of action shows that inspection's links to suicide is not a factor specific to England and is an issue for Wales as well. In their report on Estyn's contribution to Wales' education reform agenda, researchers at Cardiff University noted among its explanations for why some stakeholders were less satisfied with the inspectorate that 'inspections and outcomes can cause considerable stress and anxiety amongst practitioners' (Taylor *et al*. 2018, p.ii).

In his seminal paper on what he calls the 'terrors of performativity', Ball (2003, p.216) describes the ongoing 'struggles' over who determines what counts as valuable, effective or satisfactory performance in the educational sphere. In so doing, he makes the following observation, that is particularly pertinent to the discussion around teacher stress and the potential for suicidal thought:

The ground of such struggles is often highly personal. Expressed in the lexicons of belief and commitment, service and even love, and of mental health and emotional well-being. The struggles are often internalized and set the care of the self against duty to others.

(Ball, 2003, p.216)

What Mary describes in excerpts 51 and 52 resonates with Ball's notion that performativity, and the struggle over what counts as effective performance, can be 'highly personal' and 'internalized'. The toll on Mary's colleague's mental health and emotional wellbeing is clear and appears to have stemmed, at least in part, from her having been 'shot down' and told 'they're not doing enough'. In this case, it could be argued that the headteacher's 'duty to others' (allied to the perception that she had not done enough) has taken precedence over her own 'care of the self'.

Interestingly, however, the root cause of the headteacher's suicidal thoughts appears more directly related to the conduct of the inspector themself, rather than the school's overall inspection judgements. This chimes with an earlier finding (see *Stage 5*, section *5.4.5*), in which school leaders appeared more comfortable criticising the *conduct* of inspectors, than what the inspectors actually *had to say*. I am reminded, in particular, of comments made by Mary in Stage 2 (see section *5.4.2*, *Excerpt 18*), in which she said the way inspectors 'conduct themselves personally' implies that 'you're not having a conversation with an equal professional'.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

6.1 Overview

This thesis was motivated by a desire to better understand how school leaders respond to inspection outcomes, and the extent to which their own interpretation of Estyn's judgements informs their subsequent actions. Conscious that my own views on the effects of inspection on school staff had been shaped by my own previous interactions with teachers and leaders, I was keen to explore in greater depth and with the benefit of more robust educational research the way in which inspection influences how school leaders, as those ultimately responsible for inspection outcomes, behave and respond. The study provided valuable opportunity to challenge my own thinking, question some of my long-held biases, and test the assumptions I had developed over time to explore much more rigorously the impact of inspection on school leaders.

The study's overarching aim, to better understand how school leaders in Wales interpret and respond to school inspection outcomes, provided a guiding framework for my investigation. In responding to this aim, I was driven by three research questions:

- **How do school leaders understand inspection as a concept (i.e. their interpretation of what inspection is for/does)?;**

- **How do school leaders interpret inspection outcomes (i.e. what they understand by key judgements)?; and**

- **How do school leaders respond to inspection outcomes (i.e. what they do as a result)?**

The findings from my research show that school leaders' understanding of inspection as a concept, and what it is for and does, is built upon two key themes. The first relates to inspection as a form of accountability, and the obligation of schools to account for their performance. Participants understood that as publicly-funded institutions, schools must be held accountable for the quality of education they provide and inspection offered a mechanism by which schools could be benchmarked against one another. It should be, according to one of the school leaders, 'a tool by which schools can see how they can improve and also celebrate'.

The second prominent theme related to participants' understanding of inspection as a concept was that it is a necessary process, principally designed to build and retain public confidence and provide assurance to stakeholders that a given school is functioning appropriately. School leaders recognised the sense of validation attached to an inspection report, positive or negative, and the weight Estyn judgements carried in the wider school community. In most cases, and regardless of inspection outcomes, participants valued the opportunity to test their work with an external audience and accepted that inspectors' feedback could be useful in driving positive change and moving their schools forward. However, school leaders' experience of the inspection process was not without issue.

Participants described a process about which they were fearful; this sense of fear stemming largely from the high-stakes nature of inspection, and the potential consequences of a negative inspection outcome. One school leader used the analogy of a 'slow motion car crash' to articulate his sense of helplessness during the inspection process, while another reflected on a 'very traumatic experience' with far-reaching and deep-seated knock-on effects. What they perceived as the intrusive nature of inspection was also problematic for school leaders, who spoke of a group of visitors to the school looking in cupboards and rifling through drawers. Likening inspection to a form of burglary, one of those interviewed described the process as akin to 'someone coming into your house and ransacking it, [and] then telling you what's wrong with it and leaving it in a mess'. There was certainly a feeling discernible during conversation with school leaders, that inspection can be somewhat inhumane, with inspectors desensitised to the feelings of those being inspected. Participants reflected on a 'stressful' and 'really quite a negative experience' that was as 'unpleasant' as it was 'uncomfortable'.

All of this gives rise to an important finding that reoccurred throughout the interview process; namely, that school leaders' overwhelmingly negative view of inspection was not so much fuelled by their inspection outcomes (and whether or not they thought they had been harshly treated in the award of inspection judgements), but by the way in which the inspections themselves were conducted. Participants appeared particularly aggrieved about what visiting inspectors did and how they behaved during the inspection process, with one reflecting that they 'couldn't imagine allowing anybody else to come into our school and to, you know, to treat us in that way'. Others described inspectors as being 'power mad... to the point it was

unpleasant' and the way in which inspectors conducted themselves implied that 'you're not having a conversation with an equal professional'. Indeed, there was a strong feeling of 'us' and 'them' running through our discussions, with school leaders viewed as inferior to the more powerful team of inspectors.

This was perhaps most apparent in the comparison drawn between a school and a courtroom, in which one of those interviewed described standing up as inspectors walked in 'to deliver their verdict'. The school leader reflected on a 'surreal experience', with no opportunity to challenge or discuss, that left him 'devastated' and faced with the prospect of 'picking up the pieces' without requisite support. Those who *were* given chance to question inspectors' judgements did not get very far, with school leaders describing inspectors who 'didn't listen' and queries that 'fell on deaf ears'. Also disappointing from the perspective of participants was the sense that inspectors had arrived at their schools with pre-conceived ideas about how their schools were performing. The objectivity of inspectors was called into question by all four interviewees, who spoke of inspectors' 'fixed view' and 'having their mind set on' a particular judgement prior to the inspection event. One school leader was of the opinion 'that they (inspectors) almost see that they then have to find the evidence to back up that fixed view before they arrive', while another suggested that arguing against popular perceptions of a school would be dismissed as it 'wouldn't have fit in with the narrative that was being drawn up at that point'. One of the participants took this thinking further, suggesting that there had been 'a portrait being painted' of their school that 'they (inspectors) pretty much just go along with'.

The case of one inspector in particular was brought to light during interview, which added to the perception of inspection as being prejudiced and based too heavily on individual interpretation. One of the school leaders expressed their surprise when, visiting a school as a peer inspector, she was told by the inspection's lead inspector that he had never before awarded an 'Excellent' grade because he did not believe in it. She later reflected that 'different personalities' make Estyn an 'inconsistent body' and while there were some inspectors who were 'exceptionally professional', 'there are others that really aren't'. Broadly speaking, it appeared that school leaders were more comfortable criticising the *conduct* of inspectors, and what they did, than what the inspectors actually *had to say*. In other words, their primary grievance was not necessarily with the inspection outcomes, as how the

outcomes were arrived at and the process inspectors had gone through to get to them. This aligns with the findings of Brunsden *et al*. (2006, p.28), whose research into inspection in England found that 'it is the inspection experience itself and not its outcome that is generating psychological distress' amongst teachers.

While two participants acknowledged some learnings from their inspection, and the catalytical effect of inspection in driving schools forward, the other two described a process that was almost totally irrelevant, and more a hindrance than a help. One reported having 'a new lease of life' to develop her school post-inspection, and that 'we didn't look back at anything that they (the inspectorate) said'. Another went a step further, and instead of using her school's outcomes to drive positive change, chose to ignore them altogether; the judgements were not, in her words, something she wanted 'to give value and credence to'. That half of the participants in this study could not pinpoint an obvious developmental or quality-enhancing impact from their inspection is at odds with Estyn's (2021a, p.6) proclaimed goal to 'guide providers to implement improvements' and 'support educational reform'. Indeed, in some cases the exact opposite appears true, with school leaders explaining how the liberation from inspection, and knowing inspectors would not return again for some time, gave them a renewed sense of security and feeling that they could 'experiment' in a way they might not have otherwise.

As anticipated, discourses of performativity and professionalism, explored in detail in section *2.1.1*, were clearly evident in school leaders' depictions of inspection and manifested in myriad ways. Performative tendencies were apparent very early on in participants' exploration of inspection as a form of accountability. Describing an 'audit' of their provision against pre-determined inspection criteria, school leaders painted a picture of how they are monitored, their practice quality assured and the pressure on them to 'perform' in line with Estyn expectation. Arousing visions of the panopticon, considered at length in section *2.1.2*, participants described what Poster (1990, p.214) might perceive as a 'structure of domination', in which disciplinary power is exerted and behaviours driven. Indeed, it was said by school leaders that 'inspection exists in a system that needs inspections to justify the sense of accountability' and irrespective of what is going on in a school, the system 'feels scared and feels like it needs some sort of formal mechanism to show… that inspections are taking place'. The mere presence of inspection as an accountability mechanism was considered by school

leaders in this study a way of reassuring the public that 'inspections are happening [and] we know what is going on in our schools, and if schools are failing we're gonna crack down on them'.

However, school leaders appeared cognisant that they were being watched, and with the threat of inspection so ubiquitous, there was a tendency for them to watch themselves, in so far as they would tailor practice in a way that was considered to be preferable to Estyn's taste. As Harland (1996, p.101) makes clear: 'The exercise of continuing surveillance through the process of monitoring and evaluation means that those concerned also come to anticipate the response.' This does not mean though that school leaders were any more confident, or successful, in fighting back against these dominating structures, reaffirming panoptic performativity's status as the most efficient, totalitarian and hardest to resist form of power (Fiske, 1999). The net result, argues Ball (2003), is that teachers disregard their own personal beliefs and instead give credence to the targets, indicators and evaluations that shape the environments in which they work.

Returning to Foucault, it is Estyn's (2021d) common inspection framework that assumes the most concrete exhibition of the 'rules of formation' that govern the inspection process, and requires that school leaders have to demonstrate and prove their adherence to set aims and objectives (Foucault, 2002, p.42). Building on Ball's (2003, p.216) definition of performativity as a 'a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change', the inspection event provides a temporal space for the act of regulation to take place. Perryman (2007) concurs, arguing that performativity is inextricably linked with the increased accountability and surveillance under which teachers find themselves and their schools being judged. She describes a process of 'jumping through hoops' to present one's practice in the best possible light, only doing so 'can lead to teachers' sense of emotional dissonance, as they lose their sense of professional independence' (Perryman, 2007, p.176). At its most extreme, this can manifest in particularly distressing ways, as was explored in section *5.4.6* with the revelation that one of the school leaders' colleagues had contemplated suicide following their inspection.

Shortly before the writing of this conclusion, and as outlined in *Chapter 1*, the death by suicide of Ruth Perry, a headteacher of a school in England, attracted news headlines across the UK. Ms Perry was reported to have taken her own life in January 2023 as a consequence of her

school's Ofsted inspection (Weale, 2023). One trade union leader described it as a 'watershed moment' for school inspection in England, arguing that school leaders were being placed under 'intolerable pressure' by the current approach (Roberts, 2023, pars.2-10). As well as calling for a pause on inspections, he called on Ofsted to 'commit to giving urgent consideration to reform of the inspection system to make it fairer and less punitive' (ibid, par.14). At the time of writing, debate regarding the future of inspection in England remains a live issue, although the findings of this study suggest that such extremities, involving the potential for intense emotional distress amongst those subject to inspection, are not unique to England and are of relevance to Wales also.

Another unfortunate consequence of the panoptic imposition of power and surveillance over schools and school leaders is that it tends to make them more protective of their practice, as opposed to wanting to share the celebrated aspects of their work. This was demonstrated most obviously by the school leader that had, following his inspection experience, declined to present at conferences for fear of setting himself up for a fall. He noted also the material impact on him as a school leader, and the feeling that he was 'on the naughty step' as a result of his poor inspection outcome. He described how his colleagues had stopped inviting him to parties and he had learned the hard way 'who will stand by you and who won't'. This sense of being ostracised, and being removed from the headteachers' inner circle, appeared to weigh heavily on the interviewee in question, and from 'being the person lots of people talk to, to the person nobody talks to' was a particularly difficult reality to bear. At a time when schools in Wales are being actively encouraged to collaborate (Welsh Government, 2023), that inspection makes school leaders do the exact opposite seems to me entirely perverse.

The discourse of professionalism, meanwhile, presented most notably in two ways. Firstly, in adhering to the rules that constitute inspection, and by developing practice in line with Estyn's (2021d) common inspection framework, school leaders were in effect demonstrating their professionalism; to be recognised as a respected and effective school leader, it is incumbent upon them to be able to demonstrate their value as a practitioner by ensuring their school meets the inspectorate's expectations. It is the process of conforming, and the validation they receive by doing so, that earns them cachet within the system and contributes to their reputation as a successful school leader. Returning to earlier literature (see section *2.1.1*), this can be considered a form of 'prescribed professionalism', as teachers respond to what is

expected of them as prescribed by relevant authorities (Dehghan, 2022). This level of professionalism, unlike the more transformative type that refers to the way in which teachers view, reflect on and develop their own practice, is 'top-down, institutional, and other-oriented', meaning those involved have less capacity to adapt their work as they see fit (ibid, p.706).

There were many examples of prescribed, or 'top-down' professionalism (to me, closely related to notions of performativity), in action, with participants explaining the lengths they went to in order to ensure 'you've got everything lined up' ahead of inspection. Keen to show themselves and their schools 'in that best light', school leaders spoke of 'squeezing the pips' in the aftermath of inspection 'to get where we needed to get to'. One of the interviewees described how they would be unable to relax until they knew they 'had every duck lined up and every piece of paperwork exactly where it needed to be', this despite their demonstrable experience and self-confidence as a headteacher. The suggestion, from that same school leader, that 'you are not able to set an agenda that shows everything that your school is about' serves to reinforce the idea that notions of professionalism were top-down and dictated from on high. That two of the four school leaders interviewed made explicit reference to a lack of opportunity for 'professional dialogue' with inspectors during the course of their inspections further adds to this dynamic.

These interactions are reflective of what Evans (2008, p.29) considers 'professionalism that is demanded or requested (such as that reflecting specific professional service level demands or requests made of an occupational group or individual workforce)'. This drive for regularity is ultimately counterproductive, however, in that it ignores individuality and stifles the potential for innovation. Evans (ibid, p.28) offers the following warning, which is useful in this context:

> If professionalism is essentially accepted as a collective commonality of approach to and execution of the key roles, responsibilities and activities that constitute the work undertaken by the profession, then its existence is undermined by a diversity that negates its essential features. Whilst such commonality – indeed, uniformity – may feature within a conception of professionalism that is required, or even demanded, of an occupational group, it is bound to dissipate into impracticable rhetoric at some stage during the translation from what is required to what is enacted because a wide, diverse range of individuals' professionalities is entered into the equation.

This diversity of 'individuals' professionalities' calls into question the very essence of a common inspection framework that requires all school leaders to respond in the same way. As Keddie (2013) makes clear, the potential for lower performing schools to radically alter their beliefs to fit with performative demands may even result in the adoption of unhelpful or damaging practices designed solely to satisfy the needs of the audit culture. The idea that teachers as professionals need to 're-story themselves' (Stronach *et al*. 2002, p.130) so as to conform to what is expected of them is particularly relevant here, as it highlights the extent to which school leaders are driven into making decisions that align with certain criteria, rather than making decisions based on their own professional judgement.

With this top-down and hierarchical form of professionalism in mind, the second prominent manifestation of professionalism evident in our discussions was a feeling that school leaders were being doubted, distrusted and their capacity to fulfil their roles called into question. In other words, school leaders described a scenario in which their professionalism was under attack; in the act of disregarding their professional voice and insight, inspectors had in effect subverted participants' professional opinion and shut down opportunity for constructive dialogue. This was most prevalent when things went wrong and inspection outcomes were weaker by comparison. In one such example, involving a school leader whose school was awarded poor inspection judgements, the inspection process was described as being 'done to us, not with us' and inspectors criticised for not playing a more supportive role. The same school leader spoke of his school's inspection experience as 'the lowest point in my career' and confessed to having nearly given up teaching to take a role as a delivery driver. So despondent was another school leader that he too considered leaving the profession. Scarred by his inspection experience, and the school's subsequent downgrading in the *National School Categorisation System*, the headteacher questioned whether he had the energy or 'fight' left in him to battle back and help rebuild the school from its perceptively low position.

In his paper on the de-professionalisation of teaching, Frostenson (2015, p.21) connects the notion of de-professionalism to a loss of professional autonomy and 'the mandate of the profession to decide on and influence the overarching frames of work'. This research implies a quiet erosion of school leaders' mandate, with even the more successful and high-performing schools (in Estyn's view) susceptible to subordination and limits on their scope for innovation. My mind is drawn to the case of one school leader, in particular, who felt

hamstrung by the inspectorate's list of interests and unable 'to set an agenda that shows everything that your school is about'. She later reflected on her frustration that specific aspects of provision she wanted to celebrate had been overlooked because the inspectors 'were not interested'. In what could be considered a slight on her professionalism, inspectors chose to ignore what she had championed as practice to be lauded, choosing instead to follow to the letter the quality criteria outlined in the inspection framework. That inspectors were so wedded to the framework serves to reinforce the sheer weight of pre-determined measures of success in shaping overall inspection judgements.

Returning again to inspectors' conduct during the inspection process, one of the participants described a power imbalance between school staff and the visiting inspectorate that contributed to a feeling of helplessness, resulting from a loss of professional autonomy and, to some extent, respect. Reflecting on a process that presents inspectors as figures of authority and school leaders passive recipients – 'it's the way that they're framing the questions – the body language, the facial looks coming back' – the interviewee described her interactions with the inspection team as 'not having a conversation with an equal professional', concluding that 'they make you feel that "what I say can affect your career"'. It is clear from these comments that the participant feels strongly that the inspectorate is operating on a different level to teachers. This resonates with Perryman's (2006, p.158) depiction of *disempowerment*, whereby the entire effort of a school 'is directed towards meeting the demands of an externally imposed agenda', often at the school's detriment. The net effect, according to Ball (2003, p.225), is 'betrayal' and 'an investment in plasticity' at the expense of authenticity, an idea I explore in greater detail in the following section.

6.2 Contribution to new knowledge

A number of the themes explored in the previous section have been observed before in earlier studies (e.g. Brunsden *et al*. 2006; Perryman, 2006; Courtney, 2013; Penninckx *et al*. 2016; Hopkins *et al*. 2016; Colman, 2022), and my research therefore reaffirms much of that which was known already. However, as noted in *Chapter 1*, studies relating to inspection and accountability in education have tended to involve subjects in England, primarily, and whilst there are examples pertaining to other systems in western Europe, there is currently no

known research that looks specifically at school inspection and its impact on school leaders in the *Welsh* context. This research, therefore, acts as an important contribution to new knowledge in this field. Its focus on Estyn, and the inspection process as it is undertaken in Wales, sheds new light on the way inspectors interact with those they inspect; how judgements are arrived at; and how school leaders interpret and respond to inspection outcomes.

My most compelling finding is that inspection is to all intents and purposes a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which inspectors' expectations regarding how a school and its staff should function typically results in schools and their staff acting in ways that *affirm* those expectations. In other words, the behaviours of teachers and leaders are driven almost entirely by the inspection process; practice is manipulated to at least *give the impression* that a school is conforming to the 'rules of formation' (Foucault, 2002, p.42) that govern what they should and should not do. Giving the impression that they are conforming is crucial in this regard, as it is by no means a prerequisite that schools need to be behaving in a particular way *all of the time*; more that they need to be able to demonstrate particular behaviours at certain points during the process of inspection itself. In short, school leaders and their staff do not *have* to comply with Estyn's inspection framework when the inspectorate is not looking. That does not mean that those with responsibility for running a school are in any way reckless or not operating in the best interests of their pupils, rather they believe fundamentally that things could – and should – be done in another way, based on their own professional judgement of what is most appropriate.

There were a number of references in my analysis to what Ball (2003, p.222) describes as 'enacted fantasy', a process by which school leaders and their staff paint an illusion of what happens in their schools on a day-to-day basis. One of the most obvious examples was that related to 'playing the game', cited by one of the participants as her demonstration of putting forward 'what they (inspectors) want to see'. The school leader made clear during interview that she had adjusted teaching timetables, and removed some lessons altogether, in a bid to leave the most positive impression on those visiting the school and to 'give them enough to be able to write a strong report'. Her admission that in *playing the game*, 'you make sure that your teachers are in and teaching and incorporating everything that you want to be written about', speaks clearly to the suggestion that inspection, and its accepted version of quality

criteria, drives performative practices with the sole intention of winning favour with visiting inspectors. It is these sorts of behaviours that, to use Ball's (2003) phraseology, shift practice from *authentic* to *plastic*.

Perryman (2009, p.612) considers this practice akin to 'preparing the school as one would prepare a stage for a performance', a metaphor further established by evidence from another school leader that some inspectors see themselves as wearing different hats; with their 'Estyn hat on', inspectors assume the role of inspector, but with their 'Estyn hat off', they return to the level of the teacher and can talk to school staff more freely. This to me shows that the act of illusion extends beyond those being inspected to the inspectors themselves, who appear cognisant of their own role in the performative process, and the behaviours and characteristics they must espouse as a consequence. There is an understanding, which derives from the formalities of the inspection event, that inspectors must act and present in a certain way that may not be reflective of their normal, everyday conduct (thus engaging in an act of fabrication, in much the same way as school leaders do). All of this has resonance with Goffman's (1959, p.70) dramaturgical model of social interaction, and the propensity of actors to 'step out of character' as they transition from he calls *frontstage*, where they are visible and on show, to *backstage*, where they are not.

The notion of school leaders getting 'ducks lined up' in readiness for inspection was another indicator of this performative-led practice. An acknowledgement by one of the interviewees 'that you're not going to have a lot of time to show, you know, the lived experience' implies that the 'lived experience' is not necessarily visible through the lens of Estyn's inspection framework. Park (2013, p.24) makes a similar point in his review of accountability in England's education system, noting the propensity of inspection to require school leaders 'to focus their attention on fulfilling the metrics around which accountability is organised, rather than on designing and pursuing strategies that will shape the best possible educational experience for all the young people in their charge'. Duffy (1999, p.131) concurs, noting that 'some of the documents generated by a school for an inspection may have the aim of giving the best possible impression to the inspectors' and 'without the imminent inspection, the school might not be so prolific in its production of policy statements and schemes of work'.

At a more basic level, the notion that inspectors are welcomed into school with geniality and grace is itself a form of enacted fantasy, given the apparent contempt in which they are held

by school leaders (see section *5.4.2*), and further demonstrates the self-fulfilling nature of the inspection process. Take for example the courtroom analogy explored in section *5.4.4*; the idea that school leaders would rise to their feet as inspectors walked into a room is at odds with their descriptions of inspectors as 'power mad… to the point it was unpleasant' and accusations that the inspection process 'wasn't ultra friendly' and 'wasn't supportive'. Their reverence towards inspectors when they are in school does not appear to marry with their retrospective perception of inspectors' conduct during the inspection event. In this context, Foucault's definition of the exercise of power as 'a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others' but instead 'acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions' (Foucault, 2000, p.340) seems entirely relevant. For while power is not exerted directly *upon* someone, it *does* have the ability to shape how someone reacts and responds to a certain action.

In other words, school leaders (as those being inspected) *do have* the freedom to choose how they wish to prepare for and present during inspection, yet they conform in line with Estyn expectation (and what they consider inspectors *want* to see) anyway, such are the possible consequences of poor inspection outcomes (the risk of unemployment and so on). Thus school leaders are to some extent institutionalised, and a product of the performative system in which they operate; they continue 'playing the game', not necessarily because they want to, but because they *have* to if they want to be seen as 'successful' and effective at what they as school leaders do. It is this perpetual game playing that gives inspection currency, and ensures its enduring place within the education system (and so school leaders are themselves interwoven and deeply embedded in the performative culture).

The idea that school leaders have become institutionalised evokes notions of panoptic performativity, which according to Perryman (2006, p.148), 'describes a regime in which frequency of inspection and the sense of being perpetually under surveillance leads to teachers performing in ways dictated by the discourse of inspection in order to escape the regime'. The net result, she argues, is that 'the whole school effort is directed away from education and towards passing inspection' (ibid). Ball (2001, p.217) frames the same argument in a slightly different way, noting that 'crucially and invariably acts of fabrication and the fabrication themselves reflect back upon the practices they stand for'. At its most extreme, such acts of fabrication could lead to what Page (2017, p.2) considers 'teaching as a

simulation', whereby simulated teaching replaces 'real' teaching, such is teachers' 'preoccupation with risk'. It is clear from this research that the inspection process influences acutely what some school leaders do before, during and after the inspection event.

All of this begs the question, if Estyn inspectors assume a particular authoritative role during inspection (as evidenced in their wearing of 'hats'), and in response, those being inspected 'play the game' and simulate everyday practice for the benefit of those inspecting, what is the value or benefit of inspection in the context of the wider education system? If two of the central protagonists (i.e. inspectors and school leaders) are, in effect, putting on a front and playing atypical roles, then surely the validity of the inspection process itself is called into question? Or to put it another way, if the inspection process is so easily manipulated, by both the 'watchers' and the 'watched' (Fiske, 1999, p.218), the inspection event could be rendered futile; a process that exists only to justify its own 'rules of formation' (Foucault, 2002, p.42).

Foucault (1977, p.194) talks of power as a producer of reality and 'rituals of truth' to which people and knowledge belong. In this case, the discourse of performativity, and what it means to be a professional (i.e. one's capacity to conform to performative expectation), is a ritual of truth to which school leaders are both complicit in and a slave to. Naz (2021, p.12) develops this thinking further in the context of inspection, describing how the current system of governance 'that creates the truth' supporting inspection judgements 'is based on the techniques of disciplinary power and it gains its intellectual legitimacy from dominant political discourses of our time'. He offers neoliberalism as the prevailing discourse in relation to contemporary education governance, although given its close association with 'governance, discipline and regulation' (Giroux, 2013, p.459), there is strong resonance here with notions of performativity and Bentham's panoptic 'structure of domination' (Poster, 1990, p.214). Jeffrey & Woods (1996, p.326) resolve that during the process of inspection, 'the teacher's self is brought under intensive and critical gaze'.

What is apparent from this research, however, is that not only are school leaders aware of the gaze, they actually begin to *anticipate* it; they know they are being surveilled, they are mindful of the consequences of non-conformance, and perhaps most tellingly, they take steps to ensure their adherence to Estyn's inspection framework is in plain sight and clearly visible. Bentham (quoted in Miller, 1988, p.17) likens this pre-empting of inspection to a form of self-regulation, so that 'even if the inspector no longer keeps a list of future transgressions, even

if he never again intervenes, even if he no longer surveys, the prisoners will now begin to do this by themselves'. Perryman *et al.* (2018, p.148) consider the performative culture in education systems so ingrained that 'there is now a game of permanent artifice, where schools hold themselves in a state of perpetual readiness to live up to their claims, [and thus personify] the model prisoner'. For teachers and leaders, it is the need to be 'perpetually ready' for inspection, so as to evidence effectiveness against Estyn's success criteria, that gives rise to plasticity, as they work to 'exclude other things which do not "fit" into what is intended to be represented or conveyed' (Ball, 2003, p.225).

Empirical studies on the effects of accountability mechanisms in education are known to be scarce (de Wolf & Janssens, 2007). This thesis represents one such study and offers valuable new insight into how school leaders in Wales interpret and respond to school inspection outcomes. Its headline finding, that inspection is a self-fulfilling prophecy involving fabrication and imitation across *all* levels, and involving *all* key stakeholders in the inspection process, reaffirms what others have found (e.g. Ball, 2003; Perryman, 2009; Courtney, 2016; Page, 2017), albeit related specifically to the Welsh context which is, to my knowledge, as yet entirely unexplored.

6.3 Implications for practice

As outlined in section *1.4*, Estyn began phasing out its summative judgements in spring 2022 and no longer includes them in its published inspection reports (Estyn, 2022a). Instead, Estyn's reports provide narrative evaluations 'to help encourage professional dialogue about the underlying factors contributing to the quality of the school's work' (ibid, par.1). This significant change, part of a new inspection framework informed by Donaldson (2018) in his independent review of Estyn, is to be welcomed in the context of this research. My findings suggest that publishing headline descriptors can have a demoralising effect on school staff; lead to an overemphasis on inspection preparation at the possible detriment of teaching and learning; and, somewhat perversely, restrict a school's capacity to develop and collaborate. Fundamentally, participants were of the view that summative inspection judgements do not necessarily portray a true reflection of a school's performance.

However, those interviewed as part of this study appeared more interested in, and concerned by, the actual *conduct* of inspectors than the judgements they awarded. School leaders were in broad agreement that inspectors did not communicate appropriately with school staff, were too authoritarian, and were at times disrespectful. Together, all of this contributed to an 'us versus them' mentality and instilled in school leaders feelings of rejection, failure, anxiety and fear. As such, this research suggests that Estyn should review its approach to inspector conduct and the behaviours expected of inspectors during the inspection process. Consideration should be given to the *way in which* inspections are carried out, and the potential for more structured interaction between inspectors and school staff. At the very least, the effectiveness of Estyn's (2021a) most recent 'Guidance for inspectors' should be properly evaluated.

A fresh consultation on Estyn's new approach to inspection was held in summer 2023, and those piloting new arrangements during the subsequent autumn term have been encouraged to provide feedback to the inspectorate ahead of the next framework's launch in September 2024 (Estyn, 2023b). The findings from this small-scale study serve as a useful contribution to that work, albeit that they raise concerns about the validity of the inspection process as it is currently done and its efficacy as a robust mechanism for maintaining school standards and quality. This in turn implies that transition to new working arrangements, and a more collegiate approach to inspection based on self-evaluation (as explored in section *1.4*), will take time and the building of a new inspection culture, over the life of the new framework (from 2024-2030), will require due thought and attention.

6.4 Limitations of the research

The main limitation of this research is its small scale, involving a sample of four school leaders. As such, I am mindful that my findings are not generalisable, nor representative of the wider school population. A larger sample would have given greater weight to these observations, albeit the study is still valuable in that it gives fresh insight into how school leaders might perceive and respond to inspection. That each of the school leaders involved had different inspection histories, and represented schools of different types, sizes, geography and area of deprivation, provides a useful cross-section of Wales' school population.

As explained in section *4.3.2*, another possible limitation is that all participating school leaders were known to me, and I already had a working, professional relationship with each of them prior to the research being conducted. However, I am firmly of the view that our prior acquaintance was a positive thing in that allowed the school leaders to speak more freely and candidly about a sensitive topic that brings with it an element of professional risk (participants' right to anonymity was particularly important in this case, as outlined in section *4.5*). That I was considered an honest and trustworthy interviewer resulted, I believe, in richer and more complete data generation. It is important to acknowledge, however, the subjectivity of this research, which is born out of my interpretivist approach and post-structuralist stance (as described in section *2.1*) and thus unavoidable.

6.5 Recommendations for future research

This research was focussed on school leaders' interpretation of and response to inspections conducted within the last complete inspection cycle (2016-2022). All interviews with participants took place in June-July 2022, and none of those interviewed had experience of new inspection arrangements, which were introduced in early 2022. As such, I would recommend that Estyn commissions its own independent research to explore what difference the new approach to inspection has made, in particular, to those subject to the inspection process itself. It would be interesting to establish whether there are synergies with the experiences of school leaders documented here, or whether recent changes (including, e.g. the removal of summative judgements) have improved the perception of inspection and eased the pressure on schools to perform in line with expectation. A follow-up study involving a different set of school leaders would be useful in comparing the new approach, with that of the 2016-2022 inspection cycle.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Exemplar data transcription, cleaned and printed (Step 2 of data preparation)

Interview transcript: Participant 2

Mary, School B

July 2022

Gareth Evans

Right. First question then Mary is fairly straightforward, and what I'm trying to do here is to get an idea of how you as a headteacher understand the process of inspection. So the question is, what does school inspection mean to you? What is it all about?

Mary

So, school inspection is really one of the accountability measures; to all stakeholders – to parents, pupils, school, etc. They have an obligation to be, you know, doing it, making sure that it's rigorous and have access to everything so that they can come to an informed, first-hand decision. That is what I see that inspection should be about.

Gareth Evans

OK, so allied to that, Mary, what would you say inspection is for? You've mentioned accountability. You've mentioned the need to ensure that parents and pupils and other stakeholders understand what inspection is about. But what would you say it's for? What is its purpose?

Mary

Um.

Gareth Evans

Is it just that? Is it just a means of accountability?

Mary

It is a means of accountability. Do I think that Estyn can move us forward? Um. Through their targets, and through their recommendations... I mean, I don't know how many schools have recommendations that are a surprise to them. I think if you've got some recommendations that are a real surprise then your in-house self-evaluation isn't right then, is it?

You should know what is coming unless you've dropped a ball. Um, yeah, so it's to rubber-stamp, almost, your self-evaluation process. It is showing what you are saying is your strengths, your areas of development and how you're moving forward. Do I think that that they have the capacity to improve the schools now? I don't.

No, they haven't. They have never shown to know how to move schools forward.

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Gareth Evans

Um, OK.

Mary

So yeah, I don't think they do improve. Do they improve schools? No, I don't think so.

Gareth Evans

OK, so with that in mind, do you think inspection is a good or a bad thing?

Mary

I think the system is still not right. Do I think it's a bad thing? I do think there has to be some sort of accountability, absolutely. There has to be transparency and accountability and you would expect that, um, because the money that is coming to the school is a lot of money – it's public money. They have to get value for money.

We have to be... Nothing can be done behind closed doors and hope for the best. So there does need to be accountability, but the high-stakes accountability is divisive. It is really divisive, and there is inconsistency.

That's my main concern I would say, to do with Estyn, is the inconsistency.

Gareth Evans

Aha.

Mary

Because I mean as well as being inspected, I've been a peer inspector; um so I've been on their training and I've been out to other inspections in other schools.

TEXT REDACTED FOR FEAR OF IDENTIFICATION

Mary

And I think it's the different personalities within Estyn that make this an inconsistent body. There are some people who are exceptionally professional, would, um, follow everything, and then there are others that really aren't, that have got different personalities, that love the control, the judgement.

Yeah. And that's not what it should be about. So it's that inconsistency across the whole system that makes me sceptical about it, and in particular, one of the inspections I went on. I had happened to notice on the table when I had got there, that the registered inspector had already written the PowerPoint of his findings, which I believed were the findings from the school development plan etcetera, and that I thought would be the sort of starting point. But when he had his first team meeting, he said to us, he said: 'I never,

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in any inspection, I never put anything as "Excellent" because I don't believe anything could be "Excellent". So we won't have anything that's "Excellent". And I was like, oh, OK, this is different.

Gareth Evans

And that was *before* Mary, *before* anything had even happened?

Mary

Before anything had happened, yes.

Gareth Evans

Wow.

Mary

He told he told us as a team that: 'I had never put anything as "Excellent" because I don't believe in it.'

TEXT REDACTED FOR FEAR OF IDENTIFICATION

Gareth Evans

I'm sure we'll come onto that, Mary but whilst we're on the subject of grading and excellents – I just wanna dig a little deeper into that if I can. It's a straightforward question, but I'm curious as to what your understanding of what something like "Excellent" or "Good" actually means or looks like. So when we're talking about "Excellent", "Good", "Adequate" and "Unsatisfactory", I wanna get to know what your view of those terms actually is...

Mary

Yeah, again, it's, you know, it's up for interpretation, isn't it?

So we were, I believe, previously led to believe that if there was something innovative and excellent, they could report it; say that they had seen it in a school in February and they say 'oh, that's really excellent, that is excellent, you know, and innovative'... well in March, and at the school down the road, if they were also seeing that, well, it's good now isn't it 'cause we've seen that excellent and how is that further innovative and excellent?

Gareth Evans

Mm.

Mary

Yeah, it is incredibly hard to be able to put into context what is "Excellent" and what is not.

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Stage (3)

Mary: It's a bit like playing the game; say you've got a series of work that you want to do with the children that's been planned, and if you come into the lessons *here*, this is where everything is all singing [and] all dancing, new information [and] suddenly this spurt of growth, and it's all going to be 'wow' today, and you want to plan that, when you've got your visitors in, for them to go 'this is amazing'.'

Mary: What I mean by 'playing the game' is, er, putting in what you know needs to be shown or what they (inspectors) want to see. Um, so you wouldn't just continue your humdrum way of doing something… so for example, you wouldn't do, um, phonics. You wouldn't do a phonics lesson when an inspector's coming in because you can only comment on the development of phonics. But if you do all the reading, writing, oracy, etcetera, they can report on a lot more. So you have to be thinking about 'what are you going to include?'. You know, you make sure that you get in appropriate use of ICT (Information and Communications Technology), Welsh, [and] everything else.

Mary: You're trying to give them enough to be able to write a strong report. Otherwise, if you don't give it to them, where are they going to get it from? You have to demonstrate it. So that's what I mean by playing the game – you make sure that your teachers are in and teaching and incorporating everything that you want to be written about.

Karen: I like to think that, you know, I'm an experienced, confident headteacher [and] I'm proud of the school that I run. And yet, you know, if I were told that Estyn would be turning up next week, I wouldn't relax until that point; until I knew that I had every duck lined up and every piece of paperwork exactly where it needed to be.

Mary: We knew that Estyn weren't gonna be back for seven years, so it gave us a whole new lease of life. We never looked back at anything that Estyn had validated. It gave us a lease of life that we could really focus on going forward in a way that *we* wanted to experiment with and trial, knowing that nobody would come and say 'you haven't done two DT (Design and Technology) projects a term' and that, you know, 'you're not following the old curriculum', [and] 'you haven't done this, you haven't done that'. So that's what it gave us, a new lease of life to, to really develop the school. We didn't look back at anything that they said.

David: When they were leaving after they gave us the feedback that it was 'Adequate and needs improvement', and my chair of governors is bristling next to me because he can't

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believe it, and I told him to 'shut up, it'll be fine, we'll get ourselves out of it', everybody was shaking my hand on the way out just saying 'good luck' like someone had died – do you know what I mean? I remember them thinking 'you've got a big job on your hands now, David'… and I thought 'that's not the tone that I was expecting', but that kind of followed on for a while after. You've gone from being the person lots of people talk to, to the person nobody talks to.

Karen: No, they didn't change anything. I mean, I think we published a few case studies and, you know, we had a lot of people come to the to the school to sort of look at the learning environment, which was flagged as something of particular interest. But they didn't dramatically change anything that we were doing. We were well on the way in terms of the other work we were doing, so they didn't change anything at all, no.

Karen: I like to think that, you know, I'm an experienced, confident headteacher [and] I'm proud of the school that I run. And yet, you know, if I were told that Estyn would be turning up next week, I wouldn't relax until that point; until I knew that I had every duck lined up and every piece of paperwork exactly where it needed to be.

Mary: I suppose it did give us a mandate for change, because, you know, they said things were good, or better than good. It did give us the confidence to take the school off in the direction that we wanted to go in. We didn't want to just carry on as we were – once we'd seen the back of them we could move forward without having to have to have answer that scrutiny.

Karen: I mean, you know, I haven't been in a situation where I've led a school into an inspection where I've had serious concerns. And if I was in that situation where I had serious concerns, then I would just want to be upfront and share those and have in readiness 'this is where we are, this is where I'm taking the school forward, and this is what's already in place'. And I would, you know, as a school leader then, I would expect to have that affirmed really.

Karen: What worries me is when people say 'oh, that will tick a box for Estyn'. And I think 'well, is that really school leadership, ticking boxes for Estyn?' Or, you know, should we be driven by a bit of moral purpose and responsibility for our children, first? It's almost as if the system and school leadership has become about pleasing Estyn, and ticking Estyn's boxes and that could never drive me. No, Estyn isn't what drives me, Estyn isn't what gets me out of bed in the morning; it's the children and the parents and the staff, that's what gets me out of bed.

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I think it would be a sad situation if, you know, it was Estyn that drove what I did and what I was about as a school leader.

David: When they were leaving after they gave us the feedback that it was 'Adequate and needs improvement', and my chair of governors is bristling next to me because he can't believe it, and I told him to 'shut up, it'll be fine, we'll get ourselves out of it', everybody was shaking my hand on the way out just saying 'good luck' like someone had died – do you know what I mean? I remember them thinking 'you've got a big job on your hands now, David'… and I thought 'that's not the tone that I was expecting', but that kind of followed on for a while after. You've gone from being the person lots of people talk to, to the person nobody talks to.

David: It was a bit of a light going off in my head; my development plan was focussed only on the recommendations, and we just showed progress against them. It meant I could ditch everything else, [and] it created a momentum. But you pay a price for that, you know, because we properly squeezed the staff; we ramped up the accountability ridiculously during those years, [and] you know, we were keeping exclusions low, and so there were probably occasions where exclusions didn't happen that should have happened – and for the first time ever really, we had issues with trade unions and the threat of industrial action. I never resented the focus that we put in on it, I think I just realised that that was the game you gotta play.

David: Our challenge adviser was great, actually, because for the first six months after the inspection we were trying to fix everything in the world, and she just said, um, 'no don't do that David, just focus on those inspection outcomes and tie everything to those inspection targets and show you are making progress against those'.

John: It was a massive relief because it's almost like 'OK, great' and we can get on with what we wanted to get on with. We had new priorities we had in school; we had almost a new school improvement plan run by the side of the old one. But we couldn't get rid of the old one until we were taken out of monitoring. So it's a big relief, but it's also like 'right, next let's go forward'… there's no doubt it held us back and it wasted a bit of time.

John: Being in monitoring definitely held us back. And, you know, we even had an Estyn inspector come in and work with us on teaching and learning, but that was done through himself, and he came and he said 'you're good now, what I'm seeing doesn't resemble what

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Appendix 3: Code book – Stage 1

Code	Description	Example
Examination	School leader describes inspection as a form of examination of their school and its work	'I guess the purpose of it is to audit every aspect of school life' (Karen, School D)
Quality assurance	School leader describes inspection in terms of quality assurance (e.g. maintaining quality across school system)	'There has to be transparency and accountability and you would expect that, um, because the money that is coming to the school is a lot of money – it's public money. They (taxpayers) have to get value for money' (Mary, School B)
Self-assessment process	School leader refers to how inspection can be helpful for schools to better understand where they are and how they can improve	'I think that really should be the purpose of school inspection – that schools can see exactly where they are compared to where they think they are, and how they can improve and what they can celebrate' (Karen, School D)
Invasive	School leader talks about aspects of inspection that are intrusive, and cross pre-established professional boundaries	'You know, the thought of a team of inspectors coming knocking at the door to say, right, we're gonna come rifling through your drawers this morning and scrutinise everything and hold it there and show it in a completely, you know, public fashion' (Karen, School D)
Stressful	A literal reference to the inspection process being 'stressful'	'It's stressful and is always gonna be stressful' (Karen, School D)
Accountability	Reference to the inspection process being a form of 'accountability', or related	'School inspection is really one of the accountability measures;

	to the maintaining of 'standards'	to all stakeholders – to parents, pupils, school, etc' (Mary, School B)
Reliable	School leader talks about the importance of reliability of judgements that are evidence-based and informed by robust information	'They (inspectors) have an obligation to be, you know, doing it, [and] making sure that it's rigorous and have access to everything so that they can come to an informed, first-hand decision' (Mary, School B)
Power	School leader describes a particular power dynamic that positions the inspector as superior to the school leader/teacher being inspected	'When you hear some of them say 'oh, do you know that we can look in any cupboard, [and] any file?'. You know, I'm thinking, 'well, I'm sure you can, but if you feel it necessary to tell me that then you have a problem'. I mean, why would we not let you have a look in a cupboard? Why would we not let you have a look in a file that you wanted to? There are no secrets, but to say 'oh we can, we can' – we were like 'hmm, OK' (Mary, School B)
Public confidence	Reference to inspection outcomes/the publication of a school's inspection report as being reassuring to the wider public	'It allows politicians to be able to say to the public 'inspections are happening [and] we know what is going on in our schools, and if schools are failing we're gonna crack down on them' (David, School A)
Lasting impact	Reference to the fallout from inspection lasting longer than the inspection event/publication of inspection outcomes themselves	'And then the car crashed and you kind of think you're done, but then you realise, no it's not done because the car crash is going to last for ages' (David, School A)

Traumatic	A literal reference to the inspection process being 'traumatic'	'You know, it can be a very traumatic experience at times' (John, School C)
Pressure	School leader describes the pressure on schools to perform in line with expectation/to a required level	'The reasons I just said about having inspections – for school improvement – that's partly going to be offset by the, I suppose, the immense pressure on you as a school and the individuals within that school to perform well in that inspection' (John, School C)
Plays a role	School leader makes reference to the role inspection plays in supporting schools to improve	'At the end of the day, it (inspection) is for us to improve and I've been through that cycle myself a couple of times. So in principle, it's all for the best cause, um, but could be done in a more supportive way' (John, School C)
High-stakes	School leader describes the significant effects inspection can have on a school, including e.g. on people's mental health, wellbeing, reputation, and livelihoods (including e.g. their future employment)	'The knock-on effects it can have on your community, on the school, on the school budget, on the authority… and the reputation, not only of the staff in the school, but of the school as a whole' (John, School C)
Repercussions	Acknowledgement that there will likely be some sort of repercussion/fallout from inspection, particularly if the outcome is not favourable	'You're gonna have some fallout, obviously, from an inspection where it doesn't go as well as you wanted' (John, School C)
Inevitable	School leaders describe the inevitability of their inspection outcomes/the inspection process; they view the inspection experience as being predictable	'I've said a few times that in the run-up to that inspection it was like watching a slow motion car crash – I knew it was coming and there wasn't

		anything I could do about it' (David, School A)
Stimulating	School leader describes, in a more positive fashion, the way inspection can stimulate and drive through needed change	'Like I said, things needed to be changed. So there's a bit of it, actually; there's so much fallout that things need to be changed very quickly, which was helpful in a way because those things needed to be changed' (John, School C)
Clinical	A literal reference to the inspection process being 'clinical'	'It was very clinical, yeah' (John, School C)
Informative	School leader describes the learnings they take from the inspection process; they view them as helpful to their day-to-day work in school	'There's always something you learn from an inspection, right, so I've never felt that it's been a pointless thing. I've always felt that there was, um, bits of it that you learnt from' (David, School A)
Rigorous	School leader makes reference to the rigor with which inspections are carried out	'It (inspection) was very thorough and they looked at everything very carefully' (Mary, School B)

Understanding the impact of school inspection: An analysis of how school leaders in Wales interpret and respond to inspection outcomes

Participant Information Sheet

Overview

You have been invited to take part in a research study which forms part of my Professional Doctorate in Education. The study seeks to examine how school leaders interpret and respond to inspection outcomes, and the interventions/strategies that are used to support school improvement. Using a series of semi-structured interviews, it will explore how accountability mechanisms (in this case, the inspection event) can effect school behaviours and seeks to determine the effectiveness of these drivers as improvement tools. In essence, the study will consider three themes in the Welsh context: school leaders' perception of inspection as a concept and their vision of what inspection is for; how school leaders interpret inspection outcomes; and finally, how school leaders respond to those inspection outcomes.

Why you have been invited to take part?

You have been invited in your capacity as a respected school leader (e.g. headteacher/ deputy headteacher/ assistant headteacher/ another, similar role) with experience of the inspection process. Your anonymity will be assured throughout the course of this process, and no details will be published which may lead to your identification. Your name and school will not be recorded publicly anywhere, in any form. All participants will be given pseudonyms and their employer and place of employment will be anonymised.

How will the research be undertaken?

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted remotely and online, via Microsoft Teams, currently the only medium of this type available to UWTSD researchers. You will be able to participate in the interview at a time and location of your choosing. This could be at home, at school or at another secure site with computer access/phone connectivity, and necessary privacy. Interviews will be recorded using the built-in recording tool accessible to users, in order to have the interview data captured more effectively; this is to ensure key points are

not missed and all responses are properly transcribed. Recordings will not be shared with third parties (for use only by myself as lead researcher), be safely stored and disposed of one year after the completion of the study.

How will the research be used?

Once the research is completed, it will be submitted as part of my thesis for the aforementioned qualification. A summary of the study's findings will be shared with key policymakers at their request, with the intention of supporting future accountability/inspection developments in Wales. The study may feature in abbreviated form in a related education journal. As above, full anonymity for participants will be assured. You are reminded of your right to withdraw from this study at any time, as is your right according to BERA's (2018) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research.

Do I have to take part?

No, you do not have to participate. There will be no detriment to you or your professional relationships if you choose not to take part. In addition, you will retain the right to withdraw at any time ahead of submission.

Has this research project been approved?

Yes, the research project has been approved and permission granted by the ethics committee of UWTSD.

Data Protection and Confidentiality

As lead researcher, I will adhere to the Research Data Management Policy of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD), UWTSD's Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice and BERA's (2018) ethical guidelines.

Contacts for further information

If you have any concerns or complaints about this research or the conduct of myself as lead researcher, then please email: jane.waters-davies@uwtsd.ac.uk or susan.jones@uwtsd