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“Playing the game”: performativity, power and panopticism in the context of school inspection in Wales

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ABSTRACT

School inspection is recognised across the world as an important accountability mechanism designed to evaluate performance and maintain standards. In the United Kingdom, research related to school inspection has tended to focus on England’s inspectorate, Ofsted, and its influence on teachers and leaders there. This small-scale study is distinct in that it considers for the first time the Welsh inspectorate, Estyn, and its perception amongst school leaders in Wales. Drawing heavily on the work of Foucault, it explores how performativity, power and panopticism are manifested in the inspection process, from the perspective of school leaders. A series of semi-structured interviews were undertaken and used to explore how those responsible for the day-to-day running of schools interpret and respond to Estyn judgements. The study provides new empirical evidence that the behaviour and practice of some school leaders is driven almost entirely by the inspection process, which calls into question the efficacy of inspection as a robust and reliable accountability mechanism.

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Introduction

School inspection is employed in most European countries as ‘an important instrument of educational evaluation and accountability’ (Gustafsson et al. 2015, 47). A process through which the quality and performance of institutions can be assessed (Kemethofer, Gustafsson, and Altrichter 2017), inspection typically 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, 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. Nevertheless, a heavy reliance on inspectors’ professional judgement and their resulting subjectivities has raised concerns about inspection validity (Baxter 2014; Richards 2020).

School inspection is often looked upon in one of two, largely dichotomous ways. Those in support of inspection as a mechanism of accountability consider it an important lever in raising educational standards and maintaining quality

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control, whereas those less effusive speak of the negative consequences of inspection on schools and their staff (Bokhove, Jerrim, and Sims 2024; Penninckx et al. 2016). It is often those who have experienced inspection first-hand that are more critical, associating external scrutiny of this sort with feelings of stress, anxiety and dread (McClurg, Cantley, and Donnelly 2024; Steins, Behravan, and Behnke 2020). These emotional responses are to some extent fuelled by the inspectorate's ability to 'play God' and either legitimise the work of schools or single them out for failure; it is inspectors' authoritative power and the threat of repercussion that gives credence to their collective voice.

The power to determine who wins or loses at the inspection game is closely associated with what scholars describe as performativity, a mode of social control that employs judgements and comparisons to drive efficiency (Perryman 2006; Robinson, Headworth, and Karp 2024). In this case, performativity is exemplified by the way in which teachers and leaders feel compelled to evidence performance using predefined measures of success (Perryman et al. 2024). However, engagement in what might be considered *performative practice* is not without consequence and can lead to teachers prioritising activities for compliance purposes (Scheerens and Ehren 2015), rather than focussing their attention solely on the needs of pupils. It is this response to inspection that calls into question the authenticity of the whole school effort and invites speculation about what is real and what is not.

In the United Kingdom (UK), much has been written about England's inspection regime and its demoralising effect on teachers and leaders (Bradbury et al. 2025; Tian and Diamond 2024). These concerns have been amplified in recent years following the high-profile case of Ruth Perry, a school leader in Berkshire, who took her own life after receiving a negative inspection report. Ms Perry's tragic death and the events leading up to it have triggered widespread condemnation of Ofsted, England's schools inspectorate, which is under increasing pressure to reform (Fazackerley 2024; Whiteman 2025). By contrast, Wales' school inspection service, Estyn, has received far less attention, both in the media and from within the educational research community. It is not immediately clear why this is, though there is a perception that a more progressive approach to education (Evans 2022; Power 2016) has created a climate in which teachers are seen as more active partners in the policy space.

This paper seeks to address this gap in understanding by exploring Welsh school leaders' views of the inspection process. More specifically, it examines the prevalence of performativity in the Welsh context, and how performative practice is manifested in school leader behaviour and action. A series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted and underpinned by a Foucauldian theoretical framework that recognises power as a producer of 'objects and rituals of truth' (Foucault 1977, 194) that in turn determine how inspection is perceived and experienced. Although small in scale and based on research carried out before recent changes to Estyn's inspection framework, the study's findings provide new insight into the lived reality of school inspection through the eyes of those subject to it and help build on our conceptual understanding of inspection as a popular mechanism of accountability.

Literature review

School inspection in Wales

In Wales, school inspection is the domain of Estyn (from the Welsh language verb *estyn*, meaning ‘to reach out, stretch or extend’), 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 led by His Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education and Training (HMCI). It has three strategic objectives: to provide public accountability 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).

Under the most recent, complete inspection framework (2016–2022), upon which this research is based, schools in Wales were inspected at least once every 7 years and received a phone call giving notice 3 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 (see Table 1), which reflected their current performance and areas for improvement, and if necessary, resulted in the award of tiered support and monitoring. 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 outcomes of inspection are consequential and can have a lasting impact on the day-to-day running of a school. In the most extreme cases, ongoing concerns about school standards could lead to the imposition of ‘special measures’, the highest level of intervention that indicates a school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education (Welsh Government 2017). Schools in need of ‘significant improvement’ are required to work closely with their local authority to respond to recommendations made by the inspectorate, which returns 12–18 months after the publication of a school’s report to monitor progress (Estyn 2021a). Such interventions are relatively rare, however, and while inspection outcomes can prove problematic for some (e.g. those considered to be underachieving), they also give cause for celebration with schools receiving favourable media attention and commendation from their local communities.

Since spring 2022, summative judgements have been phased out in Wales and replaced by more detailed evaluation, written in narrative form (Dauncey 2023), as part of a major overhaul of Estyn’s inspection framework. Changes were precipitated

Table 1. Estyn inspection judgements, 2016–2022 (Estyn 2020b).

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

by an independent review of school inspection, which found that the reduction of inspection reports to a single judgement over-simplified the complexity of schools and led to significant, unintended consequences (Donaldson 2018). Subsequent modifications have included shorter notice periods, an increased focus on professional dialogue and more detailed feedback on schools' strengths and areas for improvement. This research pre-dates transition to these new working arrangements, which form the bedrock of Estyn's 2024–2030 inspection framework and are designed to complement a wider reform agenda involving the introduction of a new, purpose-led national curriculum (Donaldson 2015).

International comparisons

Given their geographical proximity and long history of shared governance (significantly ruptured by the devolution of some legislative powers to Wales in 1999), Wales has for many years been closely associated with England and its delivery of public services. School inspection is no different and prior to the 1992 Education Act, the Welsh inspectorate was still closely wedded to its English equivalent (Norris 2023). A gradual decoupling has seen Estyn break from Ofsted in structure and operation, albeit one could argue that some of the more punitive English inspection modalities, characterised by graded outcomes and the relentless pursuit of 'progress' in specific areas (Proudfoot 2025), have until recently remained key features of both organisations. There is, however, appetite for change in England and Wales, where influential reports on the future of inspection have triggered widespread consultation and debate (Beyond Ofsted 2023; Donaldson 2018).

Ongoing adjustment to Estyn's inspection framework implies a softening of accountability arrangements, an assumption corroborated by its HMCI Owen Evans who has spoken about the inspectorate offering more support to schools and promoted the removal of one-word judgements as taking the 'sting out' of inspection visits (Seith 2024, par. 16). Meanwhile, an independent inquiry on the future of school inspection in England, commissioned by the National Education Union (NEU) and chaired by England's former schools minister Lord Jim Knight, found that Ofsted was no longer trusted by the teaching profession and its regulation of accountability had created a culture in which schools operated according to 'what Ofsted wants' (Beyond Ofsted 2023, 23). The inquiry recommended that a new system based on self-evaluation and group-level governance be introduced to help rebuild teachers' trust. This process was ongoing at the time of writing.

In other countries, like the Netherlands, risk-based inspections are used to allow the inspectorate to focus more of its resources on schools at greater risk of failing (Ehren and Shackleton 2016). Inspections are customised to the specific areas of weakness in a school and informed by conversations with school governors. In Ireland, inspection takes many forms – from shorter, incidental inspection to more thorough whole-school evaluation – and is often targeted at specific areas of interest. There is a strong commitment to self-evaluation, albeit that poor performance in international PISA tests has resulted in a perceived strengthening of accountability arrangements (Proudfoot 2025). While both of these examples have resonance with the Welsh context, countries like Finland can be considered antithetical in their approach. Having abolished individual school

inspections in the early 1990s, Finland now employs a programme of national evaluation designed to monitor standards across the education system more broadly (Kauko, Varjo, and Pitkänen 2021).

School inspection remains a predominant method of assessing educational effectiveness in Europe, the Pacific regions and in parts of Asia, where it is used as a mechanism for quality assurance (Gardezi et al. 2023). Despite variation in how they are conducted, who owns the process and the areas that are scrutinised (OECD 2023), inspections tend to operate in systems that are characterised by high-stakes or low-stakes accountability. High-stakes systems are often associated with the publication of inspection results that can lead to financial, material or personal consequences, whereas inspection judgements in low-stakes environments have much less consequences for schools (Hofer, Holzberger, and Reiss 2020). It is broadly accepted that inspection processes in Wales have historically been on the punitory end of the accountability spectrum (Keane 2023).

Performativity and regulation

The public availability of inspection reports in high-stakes systems has been likened to a process of ‘naming and shaming’, particularly for those schools considered to be struggling (Bevan and Wilson 2013, 245). Previous studies have shown how negative inspection outcomes damage staff and pupil morale, which can result in falling pupil rolls and a failure to recruit high-quality staff (Ehren, Hutchinson, and Muñoz-Chereau 2023; Honingh, Ruiter, and van Thiel 2020). That does not mean the impact of inspection on schools is wholly negative, however, and there is evidence that the publication of inspection outcomes can have a positive effect on school performance and provide an impetus for progress (Allen and Burgess 2012; Hopkins et al. 2016; McCrone et al. 2009). Indeed, in their regression discontinuity analysis of school inspections in England, Allen and Burgess (2012, 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 the case of the latter, the release of schools’ supposed shortcomings for public consumption can result in teachers and pupils having to cope with being blamed for their alleged underperformance (Carlbaum 2014). This is also true in Wales, where the publication of inspection reports (on Estyn’s open access website, if not individual school websites) allows parents and other key stakeholders to gauge schools’ performance relative to others. It is this exposure to external forces that fuels ‘accountability pressure’ (Reezigt and Creemers 2005, 410) and an eagerness to comply that risks compromising the ethical basis on which the teaching profession is founded (Segerholm and Hult 2016). In some cases, compliance overrides professional judgement and, such is their determination to gain rewards or evade sanctions (Thiel 2021), teachers engage in practice they would not have otherwise; thus, practice is performative, rather than productive.

A mode of regulation, performativity is seen as pervading teachers’ work and a catalyst for schools’ adoption of ‘self-disciplinary measures’ designed to satisfy public accountability frameworks (Jeffrey 2002, 1). The net result, according to Frostenson and Englund (2020, 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, or ‘teachers who want to be (perceived as) high performers’ (Frostenson and Englund 2017, 900). This has resonance

with Ball's (2003, 224) seminal work on performativity in which he describes how teachers 'are expected to be passionate about excellence' and judged on their capacity to meet centrally approved targets.

Inspection's ability to drive behaviours is perhaps best evidenced by the need for schools to be 'inspection ready' (Colman 2021), knowing that inspectors are allowed to visit often at very short notice (the current notice period for schools in Wales is 10 days, which is significantly longer than the 1 day's notice given in England). Inspection readiness can be manifested in a number of ways, from changing wall displays to adjusting timetables so that teachers focus attention on more strategically important aspects of the curriculum. This narrowing of educational practice, described by Ehren, Jones and Perryman (2016, 87) as 'window dressing', results in the school presenting an alternative version of itself and plays into wider debates related to inspection authenticity. For example, scholars have suggested that window dressing can in some cases extend beyond innocent 'misinterpretation' to more deliberate 'fraud' and 'deception', involving the cynical exclusion of pupils from important assessment or falsification of documents (de Wolf and Janssens 2007; Zheng and Thomas 2022).

It is these calculated actions, or 'acts of fabrication' (Ball 2001, 217), that elucidate our understanding of performativity as the school's proclivity to *perform* in a way that appeases those responsible for making quality judgements. Albeit doing so creates a 'crisis in values' for teachers whose idealised notions of who and what they should be are challenged by a regulatory model that disincentivises agentic responses to everyday problems and sits in contrast to teachers' altruistic tendencies (Gray and Seiki 2020, 3). Hennessy and Mannix McNamara (2013, 12) make a similar case, suggesting that 'teacher acquiescence to neo-liberal agendas' runs contrary to what might be considered meaningful for pupils and their development. It is a tension of particular interest to this study, given its interest in the manifestation of performative practice in school leader behaviour and action.

Theoretical framework

The study was conducted through a post-structuralist lens and drew heavily on Foucauldian constructs of power to unpack manifestations of performativity and panopticism in the context of inspection. Defined as 'the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate' (Foucault 1976, 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, 27). Power is thus 'exercised rather than possessed' and, in the context of this study, intrinsic to the dynamic between school leader and inspector (Foucault, in Sawicki 1991, 52).

One consequence of the inspectorate's disciplinary power over schools is that teachers feel under constant surveillance; there is no respite from surveilling forces, and schools have no option than to prepare – 'in a state of perpetual readiness' – for the inevitable visit of inspectors (Perryman et al. 2017, 148). Page (2017, 4) argues that watching the profession in this way derives from the high-stakes nature of

inspection and is now commonplace, noting that whereas surveillance was once temporal and focused, ‘teachers now work within an environment of normalised visibility’. Perryman (2006) uses the term ‘panoptic performativity’ to describe how teachers, threatened by a sense of interminable surveillance, engage in particular activities that align with the discourse of inspection so as to escape the inspection regime.

This conceptualisation of how teachers respond to external influencers takes inspiration from Jeremy Bentham’s (1791) ‘panopticon’, a circular-shaped prison that emerged in the eighteenth century and allowed watchmen to observe occupants without them ever knowing they were being watched. This, said Bentham (1843, 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 ensured inmates operated as if they were being watched, even if they were not.

Panoptic performativity, argues Courtney (2016), relies on everyone knowing the ‘rules of the game’ before they can play it. In other words, teachers must know what it is inspectors are looking for so as ‘to give them what they want’. However, this appreciation of the rules extends both ways and those who exercise power (i.e. the inspector or watchman) are also subject to it; or rather, ‘the jailers, like the prisoners, are in certain senses also entrapped in the prison’ (Sadan 1997, 63). This suggests inspectors have an active role in the performative process; they know what they do and say has implications and as arbiters of pre-defined school standards, are compelled to execute their responsibilities in an appropriate manner. As such, they are themselves bound by the ‘rules of formation’ that determine the objects, statements, concepts and thematic choices within the wider discourse of inspection (Foucault 2002, 42).

The idea that inspectors are integral to and an inescapable part of the panoptic experience is predicated on school leaders being seduced by the potential benefits of inspection, to the extent that they ‘become willingly complicit in their own surveillance’ (Page 2017, 1004). It is this characterisation of teachers – and, by implication, inspectors – as being cognisant of their own performative tendencies that propels panopticism into a new *post-panoptic* era (Courtney 2014; Gore, Rickards, and Fray 2022; Page 2017), in which the vulnerability of not knowing who was watching and when has been replaced by an absolute awareness that observation is inevitable, and part of the very fabric of education.

Research design

The study was designed to better understand how school leaders in Wales, as those ultimately responsible for school standards (Wallace 2001), interpret and respond to Estyn judgements. In particular, it was interested in exploring the extent to which performativity is visible in the Welsh context, and subsequently, how it is manifested in school leader behaviour and action. It used semi-structured interviews (Bryman 2008) with four school leaders and a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) to respond to the following research questions:

- How do school leaders describe inspection and on what are these descriptions based?
- Where are school leaders positioned in relation to the discourse around inspection, and how does this effect what they can and cannot do?
- To what extent is performativity prevalent in the Welsh context, and how is it manifested in school leader behaviour and action?

Whilst interview questions were predominantly pre-planned for consistency, there was some nuance on the basis of schools' performance in inspection and school leaders were given opportunity to elaborate or provide additional information as the interviews progressed (Bailey 2014). Interviews took place online during the summer 2022 (before the introduction of new inspection arrangements) and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes.

Participants

School leaders were purposively sampled (Schutt 2006) and chosen on the basis that they had been in post at the time of their last inspection (during the 2016–2022 inspection cycle) and held a senior position within the school's staffing structure (three were headteachers, one was an assistant headteacher). Participants were drawn from primary and secondary schools of different sizes and geographic locations and included school leaders from schools that had performed relatively well and relatively poorly (see Table 2). No school leader declined the invitation to participate and did so with agreement their anonymity would be assured. Contextual detail that could have led to their identification (e.g. school name, exact location, number of pupils etc.) was omitted and no direct quotes were drawn from Estyn reports themselves.

Sample size ($n = 4$) is an obvious limitation and means subsequent findings are not in any way representative of the wider school population. However, involving a smaller number of participants was useful in this case, as it allowed for a more thorough investigation of school leaders' responses than might otherwise have been achievable (Vasileiou et al. 2018). Indeed, whilst it is practically impossible to know how many participants should be interviewed before theoretical saturation has been reached (Bekele and Ago 2022), the data presented are seen as offering a snapshot of some school leaders' perceptions of inspection, and should not be considered symptomatic of all those in similar positions.

Recognising that there were many more school leaders who met the selection criteria than was necessary to include, focus was narrowed to those I knew professionally and at a distance (I had not worked with or for any of them directly) as I felt they would be more willing to talk to me about their experiences. Building

Table 2. Participating school leaders and school characteristics.

School leader	School context	School inspection outcomes
Karen	Primary; fewer than 500 pupils; relatively high deprivation	Mix of 'Excellent' and 'Good'
John	Secondary; fewer than 1000 pupils; relatively low deprivation	Mainly 'Adequate and needs improvement'
Mary	Primary; more than 500 pupils; relatively high deprivation	Mix of 'Excellent' and 'Good'
David	Secondary; fewer than 1000 pupils; relatively high deprivation	Mainly 'Adequate and needs improvement'

rapport with one's subjects is considered an important aspect of the semi-structured interview process (DeJonckheere and Vaughn 2019; Spradley 2016) and our prior acquaintance was helpful in encouraging school leaders to speak openly and honestly about sensitive issues. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that the participants may have been more forthcoming during interview than with stranger researchers, and that it is possible they tailored their responses to fit with my research aims (Brewis 2014). As researcher, I accept that I operate in a position of power over my participants and that these power relations have, consciously or otherwise, impacted on the resulting research outputs (Browne 2015). Similarly, I recognise the role of participants in co-producing knowledge and meaning, and that interviews are 'not neutral or value free' (Clandinin, Estefan, and Caine 2025, 5). If anything that I knew participants in advance of this research served to reinforce the need to honour these 'relational loyalties' (Ellis 2007, 10) by relaying truthfully and accurately their stories.

A key consideration when interviewing acquaintances is the potential for their anonymity to be compromised by the fact they are already known to the researcher, who in turn operates in specific professional networks (Roiha and Iikkanen 2022). The chances of identification are strengthened by these prior connections, which is why only surface-level contextual information is provided and participants were made fully aware of how their data would be used prior to interview. Ensuring participant welfare was a primary concern (Buchanan and Warwick 2021) and mindful that revisiting past events might impact negatively on their mental health, a list of relevant support and professional helplines was compiled for school leaders to access as appropriate.

Data analysis

FDA was used to analyse data and provide greater depth of understanding of participants' views (Khan and MacEachen 2021). Building on the study's post-structuralist stance, FDA offered a framework for the genealogical exploration of 'rules, divisions and systems of a particular body of knowledge' and a means through which dominant discourses of inspection as authoritative and controlling could be more carefully examined (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine 2017, 114). The interest of FDA in describing the discursive worlds of its subjects (Willig 2008), that is, how societal norms have shaped school leaders' subjectivity and experience in relation to inspection, was particularly pertinent in this case as it invited scrutiny of the way in which legitimation and power is constructed.

Themes were deduced a posteriori using Willig's (2008) six-stage model of FDA, which allowed for a richer analysis of the way in which both individuals and institutions were framed in relation to the inspection process. Interview transcripts were coded to help organise data at a more granular level (Kiger and Varpio 2020), with resulting themes attached to each stage. For example, my interpretation of what school leaders do based on their understanding of inspection ('action orientation') was most obviously highlighted by the notion of 'playing the game', described by one school leader as the preparatory process she went through ahead of inspectors' visit. Willig's model was adapted to align with the study's aims and questions and is set out with emergent themes in Table 3.

Table 3. Adaptation of Willig's (2008) six-stage FDA, with emergent themes.

Stages	Description	Adaption to research questions	Emergent themes
(1) Discursive constructions	How is the discursive object constructed?	How do the school leaders describe inspection? On what are these descriptions based?	Accountability, intrusive, something to be feared, necessary
(2) Discourses	Similarities and differences in constructions – location in wider discourses	What are the similarities and differences in these descriptions and the wider discourses in which they are located?	Performativity, professionalism
(3) Action orientation	Context – what constructions achieve. The functions and gains generated through constructing the object in a certain way	What do the school leaders do, based on their understanding of the inspection (action), and why do they do it (orientation)?	'Playing the game', liberating effect, shackled by recommendations, length between visits, layers of accountability
(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?	Subordinate, powerless, incapacitated, social outcasts
(5) Practice	How subject positions open or close opportunities – what people can say and do	How do school leaders' subject positions open up or close down opportunities for action?	Restricted access to professional opportunities, knowing your place, manifestations of resistance, re-storying themselves and their schools
(6) Subjectivity	Feelings, thoughts and experiences – social and psychological effects	What can be felt, thought and experienced by school leaders? How does this impact on their behaviour and interactions?	A feeling of failure/sense of rejection, suicidal thoughts

Findings

In this section, a brief overview of some emergent themes is presented. These themes correspond with a particular stage of FDA and are presented in response to specific research questions, using excerpts from individual school leaders for illustration. School leaders have been given pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity.

How do school leaders describe inspection and on what are these descriptions based?

The most obvious description, shared by all participants regardless of inspection outcome, was the role of inspection as a form of accountability and the obligation of schools to account for their performance in some way. Participants described the inspection process as an 'audit' and a mechanism by which the inspectorate could 'inform' the public about how schools were faring. Karen, whose school performed well in its inspection, offered the following perspective:

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. (Karen)

She described a bureaucratic approach to the inspection process, arguing that 'the way they've been conducted is very much auditing paperwork and auditing a very small

section of what's going on'. Mary considered it important that schools demonstrate 'value for money' and, connecting public services to delivery, spoke of the right of inspectors to hold schools accountable 'to all stakeholders', including parents and pupils.

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. (Mary)

Another prominent description included the perception of inspection as being an unwanted distraction, intrusive and something that impacted negatively on the day-to-day running of a school. This was a feeling summed up by Karen:

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. (Karen)

John likened 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'. He said Estyn judgements, whilst an important 'measure for schools to . . . make sure that they reach the required standards', could have 'wide and deep implications for people's careers and jobs'. This was particularly true in his case, with his school's relatively weak inspection outcomes precipitating what he called 'fallout' for staff and the institution itself. Like his colleagues, David acknowledged the want of staff to prepare for and do well in inspection, but was more explicit about where ultimate responsibility for inspection outcomes lay.

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. (David)

David said school leaders shoulder a particularly heavy burden for inspection outcomes, and staff outside of the senior leadership team are more protected from the sharp edge of accountability. In demonstration of his own exercising of power, he reflected on how he 'squeezed the pips' from his school in the year following its disappointing inspection 'to get where we needed to get to'.

Despite the broadly negative descriptions of inspection, there was a collective feeling that inspection is a necessary process, closely connected to the need to build and maintain public confidence. This was an idea neatly encapsulated by David, who spoke of the need of politicians to reassure the electorate that 'inspections are happening [and] we know what is going on in our schools'. He said that while there were aspects of the inspection process he did not enjoy or condone, 'there's always something you learn from an inspection'.

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

The positioning of school leaders varied and was largely dependent on their school's inspection performance. For example, Mary described feeling liberated by her school's

inspection report, and affirmation that it was performing well against Estyn's inspection framework had given her confidence to 'experiment'; her earned autonomy having created 'space whereby a certain freedom was afforded' (Colman 2021, 279).

We knew that Estyn weren't gonna be back for seven years, so it gave us a whole new lease of life . . . We had seen the back of them and knew that we could move forward without having to have to answer that scrutiny. (Mary)

In contrast, those who had received more negative inspection outcomes described feeling shackled by their recommendations. John described his school's inspection outcomes as being 'a major distraction' and something that dominated its work for many months after publication. He said subsequent challenges recruiting staff and managing budgets were an impediment to progress and it had 'taken four or five years to actually turn things around again'. Both David and John described their Estyn judgements as being like a 'Sword of Damocles' that lasted for the duration of their school's time in monitoring.

You know, I think Estyn needs need to look at when they've left the school and after their report, what will be put in place in terms of support? Um, because, you know, really we were left on our own for a lot of it. It's a very, very strange period of change, and it wasn't the best way to do it. (John)

As well as being headteacher of a school inspected by Estyn, Mary had also fulfilled the voluntary role of peer inspector, a position typically bestowed on those with demonstrable teaching and management experience. Reflecting on her experience as a peer inspector, which allowed her to play a full and active part on a school inspection team (Estyn 2022), Mary recalled how one of her colleagues (also a peer inspector) had been open about her inclination to behave in a particular way during inspection:

She did all the things that you're not supposed to do. So she would say, when she's talking to staff, '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. (Mary)

Mary described her colleague's conduct as displaying 'a lack of professionalism', presumably owing to her public verbalisation of the two contrasting perspectives (i.e. teacher and inspector) from which she sat. In separating out so clearly the role of the inspector from that of the teacher, it could be argued that Mary's colleague had created an 'us versus them' mentality, which apportioned more power and greater authority to the version of herself with her 'Estyn hat on'. With her 'Estyn hat off', she positions herself at the level of the teacher and becomes 'one of them', resulting in a conversation that is more open and collegiate.

Despite achieving commendatory inspection outcomes, Karen considered her school's report a 'kick in the teeth' and not a fair reflection of how the school and its staff were performing. In what might be considered an act of defiance against the inspectorate, she said the judgements were 'not something I wanted to give value and credence to' and that the school deserved better. We can draw from this that Karen and her inspectors had adopted different versions of reality; by disregarding Estyn's view of what excellence looks like (Karen appearing convinced that her school was deserving of mainly 'Excellent' grades, rather than the mix of grades she was awarded), she has attempted to wrestle back control of the quality narrative. And that itself is an important distinction, as while Karen

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.

Unlike Karen, David felt he had no option ‘but to go along with’ his inspection outcomes, as any representation to the contrary ‘wouldn’t have fit in with the narrative that was being drawn up at that point’. John was of a similar mind and, given the weight the inspectorate placed on pupil achievement in examinations and feedback from parent/carer and pupil questionnaires (which were both less favourable in his case), insisted his school was ‘always up against it’. Both school leaders reflected on a deep sense of rejection following publication of their inspection results; David compared the public humiliation he experienced to being ‘on the naughty step’, while John said his school was unable to continue supporting other schools in the delivery of teacher education and professional learning – aspects of provision the school had been considered proficient in previously – because of its poor inspection outcomes.

For Karen, her inability to shape the inspection visit and ‘set an agenda that shows everything that your school is about’ was a major disappointment and reflected a general lack of control over the inspection process. Her concern that ‘you’re not going to have a lot of time to show, you know, the lived experience’ can be considered a good demonstration of performativity in action; Karen prioritising what she felt Estyn wanted to see over practice in its more natural state. Mary reflected on the professionalism of her staff more broadly, noting how hard teachers worked to support the children in their care:

Nobody comes to work wanting to do a shoddy job unless there’s capability and you need to be looking at something . . . 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. (Mary)

David confessed to having contemplated his future in education following his school’s inspection results. He spoke of needing to ‘get the ball to roll the other way’, imagery that links to the high-stakes nature of inspection and its association with card games and casinos that create winners and losers (Barzano 2009). In this case, David appeared sensitive to his ‘loser’ status (his school having performed relatively poorly in its inspection) and was eager for his luck to change in order to ‘win’ at the inspection game.

To what extent is performativity prevalent in the Welsh context, and how is it manifested in school leader behaviour and action?

A clear thread running through all interviews was the eagerness of school leaders to ready their schools ahead of inspectors’ visit. At a basic level, this equated to school leaders prioritising certain aspects of their provision over others, and preparing assiduously the areas they considered to be of most interest to the inspectorate. These decisions were based predominantly on the contents of Estyn’s (2021b) common inspection framework and their own prior experience of the inspection process. In some cases, school leaders spoke of stopping certain activities to placate visiting inspectors, regardless of their

perceived efficacy or status within the school. Mary explained her justification for doing so:

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 . . . you want to plan that, when you've got your visitors in, for them to go 'this is amazing'. (Mary)

Mary admitted in a subsequent response that she had adjusted teaching timetables and removed some lessons altogether in an attempt to make a more positive impression. She was asked to elaborate on her interpretation of 'playing the game':

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 . . . 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? (Mary)

Exemplifying performative tendencies, Mary described how what could be considered 'normal' practice is manipulated with the sole intention of impressing inspectors and achieving more favourable inspection outcomes. Interestingly, Mary did not seem in any way perturbed by this routine and instead her professional instinct to 'play the game' appeared reflective of a commitment, in her role as school leader, to do the best by her staff. While it might be considered unethical to engage in such practice, Mary's positive inspection result would appear to vindicate her chicanery. Karen outlined a similar preparatory process:

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. (Karen)

Like Mary, Karen described a performative practice (i.e. of getting ducks lined up and paperwork where it needs to be) that stemmed, at least in part, from earlier descriptions of inspection as a form of accountability and something involving intense scrutiny. Karen is fastidious in her preparation and will not rest (i.e. 'I wouldn't relax') until everything is in place. She does so in the knowledge that failure to perform in inspection will likely result in some form of retribution. That she is both 'experienced' and 'confident' does not appear to matter in this case – her worry about inspection prevails, regardless.

David explained how the school's recommendations were his primary focus in the immediate aftermath of inspection, having been advised by his challenge adviser (a designated regional consortium employee with responsibility for supporting the school's development) to demonstrate compliance. A good example of this was his desire to keep 'exclusions low' – born out of the inspectorate's concerns about the school's high rate of pupil exclusion – by not excluding pupils who perhaps should have been.

For the first six months after the inspection we were trying to fix everything in the world, and she (challenge adviser) just said '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'. It was a bit of a light going off in my head . . . [and] meant I could ditch everything else. (David)

Conscious of being able to prove to inspectors that his school was moving in the right direction, David's 'ditching' of aspects of provision considered less important in the context of his report speaks to a highly performative orientation of school leadership that puts conformity ahead of authenticity. There was also a time imperative, as David explained:

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. (David)

In keeping with the discourse of performativity, Mary 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' when pushing staff too hard, but that holding them accountable was an essential part of being a school leader. John spoke of the added pressure on schools in monitoring 'to produce' and 'show improvements within a certain amount of time'. In his case, this meant restructuring staff, the introduction of a 'new teaching and learning philosophy' and improving pupils' 'attitudes to learning'.

Discussion

It is reasonable to conclude from these findings that performativity is prevalent in the Welsh context, and manifested in a number of ways. 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 and Rhodes 2011, 22), can be considered as contributing to performative discourse given the pressure felt by school leaders to perform. The notion that schools are 'audited' is a fairly blunt representation of the inspection process that conjures images of overburdened business owners working to balance the books. It presents inspection as transactional, an exercise founded on spreadsheets and calculations designed to evidence a school's compliance with standards. School leaders' compulsion to demonstrate 'value for money' further develops the monetary metaphor, albeit they have only to persuade those doing the auditing that their school's offer is fit for purpose. In other words, it is not so much of the *actual development* of a school that is of most significance here, as the school's capacity to prove its fidelity to the regulatory authority.

Mary's propensity to 'play the game' and give inspectors 'enough to be able to write a strong report' reflects a highly performative engagement with inspection, given that her disregard for normative practices will come at a likely cost to learners (in so far as teachers are required to stop doing what they would have done in normal circumstances, had inspectors not been present in school). Indeed, the notion that school leaders prioritise their school's recommendations and 'ditch everything else' is reflective of what some consider a 'managerialist discourse' that reduces the educational process to metrics and measurements (Case, Case, and Catling 2000, 606). The idea that school leaders get 'ducks lined up' in readiness for inspection is another indication of this performative-led practice. However, 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) makes a similar point in his review of accountability in England's education system, noting school leaders' tendency to focus on the things they know inspectors to be interested in, at the expense of strategies promising the best possible educational experience. Interesting in this case is that school context does not appear to have impacted school leaders' inclination to engage in performative activity; they lay the ground for inspection whether their school is big or small, or in an area that is more or less deprived. The same is also true of those with experience of peer inspecting, with Mary committed to 'putting in what you know needs to be shown' despite seeing inspection through different lenses; her active involvement in another school's inspection has not dissuaded her from partaking in what might be deemed 'enacted fantasy' (Ball 2003, 222).

In some respects, the school leaders involved in this research have become 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'. While school leaders (as those being inspected) have the freedom to choose how they prepare for and present during inspection, 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). It is this perpetual game-playing, or what Kemethofer, Gustafsson and Altrichter (2017, 323) might consider the 'quest for legitimacy' that gives inspection currency and ensures its enduring place within Wales' education system; and so school leaders are themselves interwoven and deeply embedded in the performative culture. As Webb (2008, 139) notes, 'educators are not mere victims of an over-zealous policy environment but implicated, and often complicit, in its outcomes'.

This does not mean, however, that we should overlook the significance of the inspector's position in the regulatory process. Compelling in this regard was the revelation that some inspectors see themselves as wearing different 'hats'; with their *Estyn hat on*, inspectors assume the authoritative 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. On the one hand, this slipping in and out of character could be considered a welcome deviation from the norm and an inspector breaking boundaries in a positive way in order to provide advice and support, as well as judgement. Alternatively, it could be construed as evidence that the illusory act extends beyond those being inspected to the inspectors themselves (the inspector, in this case, appearing cognisant of her own role in the performative process).

Conclusion

This paper explores from a distinctly Welsh perspective the impact of inspection on school leaders' behaviours and actions. That there is no comparable study currently available makes it difficult to test the experiences of these participants with others in similar situations. But then this may be symptomatic of a broader issue; just as inspection elicits particular responses amongst school leaders, it could be the case that the power of the inspectorate over educators and education more generally has limited the interest of researchers from exploring such phenomena (one is mindful that the vast majority of universities in Wales are in some way associated with the delivery of teacher education,

which is also inspected by Estyn). Nevertheless, there are several key considerations to be taken from this work that will be of relevance to this and other international contexts, particularly those in which high-stakes accountability mechanisms play a pivotal part.

Most obviously, the study provides new empirical evidence that the behaviour and practice of some school leaders is driven almost entirely by the inspection process, with everyday activity manipulated to at least give the *impression* that a school is conforming to the rules, even if it is not. This gives rise to two main concerns: first, that the efficacy of inspection as a robust accountability mechanism is called into doubt if inspectors are unable to differentiate between what is genuine and what is fake. And second, if practice is manipulated with the sole intention of *passing an inspection*, the purity of schools' development post-inspection is open to question and it becomes much less likely that a school's inspection outcomes will drive credible amelioration that is both habitual and lasting.

For Ball (2001, 217), 'acts of fabrication and the fabrication themselves reflect back upon the practices they stand for', which at its most pronounced could lead to what Page (2017, 2) considers 'teaching as a simulation' and the replacement of 'real' teaching with counterfeit. There is certainly some danger of this in the Welsh context, albeit impossible to tell from this study alone how entrenched simulation is within the wider education system. Surprising in the context of this paper is that an intense focus on outputs and the apparent commodification of those responsible for delivery may have transcended established hierarchical boundaries. In other words, there is a suggestion that inspectors are themselves active participants in the imitation game (as evidenced in their wearing of different 'hats'). This begs an obvious question: if inspectors take on a specific role during inspection, and in response, those being inspected 'play the game' and simulate everyday practice for their benefit, what is the value of inspection itself?

With the inspection process so easily manipulated by both the 'watchers' and the 'watched' (Fiske 1999, 218), one might consider the inspection event rendered futile; a process that exists only to justify its own rules of engagement. This has implications for the way we view the inspection process more generally, and suggests that future studies of this type should remain sensitive to the dynamic relationship between teachers and inspectors, given their capacity to take up new subject positions based on their own perception of who they are and what they should do. At the very least, it should not be assumed that simulative acts are confined only to those on the receiving end of inspection judgements and that others, including those who adjudicate, are just as susceptible to *playing the game*.

As Wales transitions to new working arrangements, and a more collegiate approach to inspection based on self-evaluation, it would be interesting to establish if there are synergies with the experiences of school leaders in this paper, or whether recent changes (including, e.g. the removal of summative judgements) have altered school leaders' perception of inspection in any way. It is plausible that school leaders will feel less threatened by inspection and as a consequence more able to present a truer representation of their day-to-day work. In short, a softening of Estyn's outward-facing accountability could weaken a school's proclivity to engage in performative practice; the potential risk to schools being tempered by judgements that are more prone to interpretation.

On the other hand, migration to ambiguous judgement casts doubt on the inspector's ability to benchmark progress consistently from one inspection to the next.

Without a common grading scale by which to measure performance over time, Estyn's former HMCI Ann Keane (2023, 233) has herself warned that the inspectorate 'could become peripheral, unable to report with clarity on standards, their reports at risk of obfuscation'. To further develop our understanding of inspection in the Welsh context, a follow-up study involving a different set of school leaders would be useful as a way of comparing the new approach (active from 2024 to 2030) with that employed during the 2016–2022 inspection cycle.

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