

EL DESARROLLO DE LA INSPECCIÓN DE EDUCACIÓN A TRAVÉS DE SUS COMPETENCIAS PROFESIONALES

INSPECTION OF EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES

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Resumen

En un momento en el que las atribuciones a la escuela aumentan y se complejizan y el tiempo con el que cuentan para la reflexión disminuye, la función de la inspección de educación emerge con una mayor relevancia. Además de supervisar, son también fundamentales el apoyo y la promoción de la mejora en los centros educativos. La colaboración con los equipos directivos, la comunidad educativa y el contexto cercano a la escuela constituye ahora, más que nunca, una función imprescindible. En este artículo exploraremos la importancia de la inspección de educación como herramienta indispensable para impulsar la excelencia y la equidad del sistema educativo. Se hará con un especial énfasis en la definición de los desempeños o competencias profesionales de los inspectores y

las inspectoras de educación. Ubicaremos, por tanto, la inspección de educación como una profesión y, además, analizaremos las oportunidades y los desafíos que los marcos de competencias pueden aportar a la definición de una carrera profesional progresiva. Todo ello con el objetivo de aportar una serie de recomendaciones que contribuyan a la mejora de la profesión de la inspección de educación.

Palabras clave: *Inspección de educación, competencias profesionales, código deontológico, desarrollo profesional, profesión democrática.*

Abstract

In a time when school responsibilities increase and become more complex, and the time available for reflection diminishes, the role of inspection of education emerges with greater relevance. Besides the traditional task of supervision, additional responsibilities such as support and promotion of improvement in educational institutions are added. Collaboration with school head teams, the educational community and the immediate school environment now constitutes an essential function more than ever. In this paper we will explore the importance of inspection of education as an indispensable tool for promoting excellence and equity in the education system. This will be done with a special emphasis on defining the professional competences of inspectors of education. Therefore, we position inspection of education as a profession and furthermore, analyze the opportunities and challenges that competency frameworks can bring to defining a progressive professional career. All of this with the aim of providing a series of recommendations that contribute to the improvement of the inspection of education profession.

Keywords: *Inspection of education, professional skills, code of ethics, professional development, democratic profession.*

The functions performed by the education inspectorate are a fundamental pillar in the development and quality of the education system. Its role goes beyond mere supervision, encompassing evaluation, support and the promotion of continuous improvement in educational institutions. In a context where education is key to personal and social development, the work of the inspectorate becomes crucial to ensure that standards of quality, equity and efficiency in education are met.

Our perspective is based on a conception of inspection as an independent profession, but also within the framework of teaching and a vision of professional development that is very much centred on the concept of professional competence as a key element. In this sense, it is appropriate to point out from the outset that we understand the profession of education inspection, as an alternative to the concepts of liberal profession and bureaucratic profession, as a "democratic profession" in the sense defined by Professor Fernández Enguita (2001). Liberal professions, such as law, architecture or medicine, are characterised by independent or autonomous practice in a free market context. On the other hand, bureaucratic professions, such as judges, diplomats or the military, do not develop in an autonomous exercise or in the market. They are based on the fact that they belong to an organisation that is part of the state.

As a rule, education inspection would be placed among the bureaucratic professions, however, we consider the aforementioned concept of "democratic profession" to be more accurate. This underlines that the defining feature of professionalism would be the commitment to the aims of education, to education as a public service, to education as a right, not as a commodity. Education inspection is a fundamental element not only for the education system but, through the education system, for society as a whole.

In this article we aim to offer a view of the education inspection profession from within the education system as a whole. It is not a look from the (internal) inspectorate, but rather, without the authors being inspectors, it is about providing a diagnosis, an analysis and a reflection on the education inspection profession from the outside, with the healthy pretension of being able to complement internal studies previously carried out both nationally and internationally. The basic approach we propose for this article can be summarised in the following thread of argument:

- education inspection is a profession.
- professions develop in length (longitudinal or time dimension linked to career), breadth (breadth dimension linked to professional performances) and depth (depth dimension linked to identity and social prestige).
- professional competences bring breadth (width) to the professional development of education inspectorates.

We now proceed to the detailed development of this approach in order to go more deeply into the arguments on which it is based, and which will allow us, at the end of this article, to also offer a series of recommendations which aim to make a modest contribution to the strengthening of the education inspection profession.

1. The profession of education inspector and its dimensions in the context of professional development

1. On professions and their characteristics

In general, every profession has a series of characteristics, the degree of attainment of which also serves to assess the degree of development of the profession. For this purpose, we consider it pertinent to review the elements that a

profession must have. Based on the proposal of Professor López Rupérez (2014), we indicate that the profession of education inspector has the following characteristics:

- Important social function.
- Extensive training.
- Systematic body of knowledge.
- High level of competencies.
- Explicit code of ethics.
- Focus on the interest of the "user".
- Autonomy and independence.
- Collective organised against the public authorities.

Obviously, not all of these (theoretical characteristics of the profession) are fulfilled to the same extent or in the same way in practice. However, the recognition of all of them as defining elements of education inspection is, in our view, the basis for the fact that education inspection is a profession. We are interested in justifying this statement because it leads to others: more specifically, in this article, what will be developed will be the need for and contributions made by the generation and definition of a framework of professional competences of education inspection. But before doing so, let us first delve into the importance of their professional development.

2. On professional development and its dimensions

"Professional development" is a broader concept than "professional career" because, while professional career refers to what is linked to the strict exercise of

the functions of the inspectorate, professional development provides a more holistic, overall view, framed in the broader context of the profession, including conditions, access, incentives, recognition, etc. While the concept of "career" is one-dimensional because it refers exclusively to the longitudinal (or temporal) dimension of the profession, "professional development" is a multidimensional concept.

From our point of view, at least three defining dimensions of "professional development" (also applied to education inspection) can be identified in this concept:

- Length: this would be the longitudinal (or temporal) dimension linked, as we have already seen, to the concept of professional career. All the temporal moments that occur sequentially over the course of the profession are represented here. This would include at least the following synthesis:
 - Initial training and access to inspection (entry requirements): While initial training is largely regulated and established in the teaching profession, this is not the case in the inspection function.
 - Professional induction: we refer to the creation of an explicit and systematic proposal of care at the beginning of the first years in the practice of inspection, which implies, at least, the accompaniment by an expert inspector and specific training in this first professional phase.
 - Lifelong learning: the new challenges facing all professions require the implementation, in ways other than traditional courses and seminars, of continuous and regular training processes focused on the main needs identified.
 - Working conditions: essentially defined by aspects such as dedication in hours, assigned tasks, salary, etc. Adequate and appropriately

incentivised conditions. Performance evaluation would also be included here.

- Breadth: we associate breadth with all the elements that are deployed in professional practice. In other words, the competencies (performances) that are put into play in the day-to-day work of the inspection profession. We do not develop this aspect further here, as it is on this dimension that we will focus mainly in the following section of the article.
- Depth: this dimension includes all those elements related to the recognition of the profession that deepen its importance. We would therefore be talking, on the one hand, about internal recognition linked to "professional identity", as well as, on the other hand, external recognition linked to the profession's "social prestige". It is in this aspect that agents, such as professional associations, trade unions, associations, etc., play a fundamental role. The role of these agents is essential in this third dimension of the profession, since the work of the education inspectorate must be subject to professional ethics: it is not only a matter of fulfilling its functions, but also of developing and exercising attitudes and values that mark and distinguish its work as a public service.

The exercise of inspecting is closely related to that of judging. Although we can use other verbs, such as assess, analyse, appreciate, etc., the essence of the inspection task involves making judgements on which subsequent decisions are taken. Thus, professional ethics emerge as the essence for the construction of a solid professional identity and its social prestige, and, for this reason, we also consider it important to offer a more in-depth study of this aspect.

3. On deontology and its implications for education inspection

The law sets out the principles of action of the education inspectorate. Specifically, Article 153 bis of the Organic Law amending the Organic Law on Education (LOMLOE, 2020) establishes the following:

- a) Respect for fundamental rights and public freedoms, defence of the common interest and democratic values and avoidance of any conduct that could lead to discrimination on grounds of origin, gender, sexual orientation, religion, opinion or any other personal or social circumstance.
- b) Professionalism and independence of technical judgement.
- c) Impartiality and efficiency in achieving the objectives set.
- d) Transparency as to the purposes of its actions, the instruments and techniques used.

Within the framework of these statutory principles, we must also be aware that the education inspectorate is a body of civil servants and therefore has a well-defined structure. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that the inspectorate has a certain degree of autonomy in its work and actions. However, this freedom of action should not make us lose sight of what we already mentioned in the introduction: it is not a liberal profession, focused on making a profit in the market. It is a profession whose *raison d'être* is public service, the commitment to certain goals, in this case, fundamentally the right to education.

For this reason, it is particularly convenient to develop a professional code of ethics, to have a broader set of principles and ethical rules that guide inspectors by setting out the duties required of them in the performance of their activity. It seems obvious that it would be convenient to have a code of ethics, which, among other aspects, would address a value such as equity, essential when we talk about education, but, at the same time, very complex to guarantee in the multiple

relationships that occur in the educational context. For example, equity between different types of educational centres (public, subsidised, private), between pupils with different economic capacities, between pupils with different learning abilities, between teachers and managers, between teachers and parents, etc. However, it is impossible to comply with all this through a mechanical application of the rules. The expert judgement of the inspectorate is necessary to adapt to the multiplicity of cases that occur. A code of ethics would reinforce this role of the education inspectorate. In this regard, it should be noted that there are proposals that are moving in this direction. We refer, for example, to the proposal by Torres Vizcaya (2021), which combines thoroughness and rigour when analysing the daily practice of inspection work with an acute theoretical vision of the principles and values at stake.

Having addressed the deontological aspect of the inspection profession associated with its dimension of depth (and, therefore, also with the professional identity and social prestige of the profession), we now move on to the second major aspect to be addressed in this article, which is none other than the reflection on the performance of education inspection or, in other words, that dimension that gives breadth (width) to the profession based on the definition of a framework of competences.

2. Towards the definition of a professional competence framework for education inspection.

The concept of competence and professional competence has a long history in the field of education. Moreover, as stated in his doctoral thesis Sánchez-Tarazaga (2017), the terminological diversity, its criticisms and its benefits are very diverse and have been widely studied. In the framework of our work, we understand "competence" as that observable behaviour produced as the result of the combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes, placed at the service of the

resolution of a "problem" in a given context (Sánchez-Tarazaga and Manso, 2022). Competence is deployed to solve different situations ("problems") that require us to do something within the framework of our functions, in this case, as education inspectors. What triggers the deployment of a competence is a professional situation that requires our intervention. If we develop this definition of competences further, we can define the following characteristics (Valle, Manso and Sánchez-Tarazaga, 2023):

- Observable performances...: competence is not just knowing something, it is not just knowing how to do something, it is not just the ability to do something... a competence involves doing/solving.
- ... integrating knowledge, skills and attitudes: these three elements constitute the dimensions of each competence. These three elements are what we will call "dimensions of competences", and although it is not possible to observe them directly, we know that all behaviour (competence) requires these three elements. We cannot deploy a competence without knowledge, we cannot deploy a competence without skills, we cannot deploy a competence without attitudes. Moreover, the more and better knowledge, skills and attitudes a professional has, the more and better their competences will be activated.
- ... contextualised and located in time and place: the performances are applied in a unique way each time they are put into practice and the diversity of contexts is an important variable that favours the broadening and improvement of professional competences.
- ... and that are gradable: unlike declarative knowledge which can be acquired completely, competences are always perfectible, and this can become an important feature to encourage the professional development of inspectors.

Logically, the process of defining the professional competences of education inspectorates, as in the rest of the professions, tends to be based on the functions and attributions established (in this case, even by law). However, the concept of competence cannot be confused with that of function. It is true that there is a relationship, but they are not the same thing. For example, working in a team is not a function of inspection per se, but it is a competence that is very necessary insofar as it is necessary to coordinate in order to fulfil the functions entrusted to it. Article 151 of the LOMLOE (2020) establishes eight functions of the education inspectorate which revolve around four main areas: supervision, monitoring, evaluation and assessment. Let us recall:

- a) Supervise, evaluate and control, from a pedagogical and organisational point of view, the functioning of educational centres, as well as the projects and programmes they develop, with respect for the framework of autonomy protected by this Law.
- b) Supervise teaching practice, the management function and collaborate in its continuous improvement.
- c) Participate in the evaluation of the education system and its components.
- d) Ensure compliance, in educational centres, with the laws, regulations and other provisions in force that affect the education system.
- e) Ensure compliance with and application of the principles and values contained in this Law, including those aimed at promoting real equality between men and women.
- f) Advise, guide and inform the different sectors of the educational community in the exercise of their rights and in the fulfilment of their obligations.

g) Issue the reports requested by the respective education administrations or which are derived from the knowledge of the reality of the education inspectorate itself, through the regulatory channels.

h) Guide management teams in the adoption and monitoring of measures that favour coexistence, the participation of the educational community and the resolution of conflicts, promoting and participating, when necessary, in mediation processes.

From the starting point established by the law, important work has been carried out at national level which has led to very significant advances in defining the professional competences of the education inspectorate.

Marrodán (2012) already pointed out that the functions determined by the organic law fall "short" of what happens in everyday professional practice and indicated other relevant functions that should be taken into account to determine the appropriate professional competences such as human resources management, intervention in disciplinary proceedings, training of teachers and management teams or mediation within the educational community. Furthermore, in line with the concept of a democratic profession alluded to in the introduction, the president of USIE pointed out that professional competences should not only be determined by what the law establishes as the functions of the inspectorate but should also be based on an (ethical) commitment to the aims of the education system and to society as a whole. The main professional competences he pointed out at that time, as can be seen, still very much in line with the functions established by law, were the following:

1. Educational monitoring and evaluation of the education system.
2. Legislative update and regulatory interpretation.

3. Organisation and management of the centres.
4. Training in the field of administrative procedures
5. Updating pedagogical and didactic training.
6. Counselling, training and educational innovation.
7. Digital competence and mastery of new technologies.
8. Human resources management and mediation in the educational field.
9. Social and relational skills/ Group management and leadership.

Further on, we come across Soler Fierrez's (2015) proposal which defines what knowledge, skills and attitudes are necessary for an inspector to be effective in the performance of their work. In terms of knowledge, he distinguishes between scientific, pedagogical and legal knowledge. In terms of skills, he analyses three elements: teaching experience, digital competence and competence in inspection and supervision techniques. In terms of attitudes, he identifies professional leadership, a spirit of observation, willingness to engage in dialogue and professional ethics (striving for fairness). In total, ten elements that he calls "specific competences" which he considers to be unique to the inspectorate. This is certainly a step forward. However, it is important to clarify that a competence is the integration of these elements of knowledge, skills or abilities and attitudes in terms of observable performances. However, it is also very interesting to reflect on and identify the elements that would define the dimensions (cognitive, instrumental and attitudinal) of each of the competences to be defined for education inspection.

Another contribution that should be taken into account is that of Piñel Vallejo (2019), who elaborates on the decalogue proposed by Soler Fierrez and, from there, points out what the training needs of the profession would be. This is a clear example of how the competence-based approach is closely linked to the lifelong learning approach.

Among the most recent contributions, we also find the "Marco para el buen desempeño de la Inspección Educativa" [Framework for the good performance of the Education Inspectorate] proposed by USIE (Rodríguez Bravo, Alcalá Ibáñez, Miguel Pérez, Montero Alcaide, Camacho Prats, Galicia Mangas and Tébar Cuesta, 2021). Of the eight chapters that make up this joint work, we highlight here chapters III and VII. Chapter III, entitled "Development of the professional skills of education inspectorate staff", uses the Eurydice network to examine the professional competences of education inspectors in the countries of the European Union and, following this comparison of education inspection in Spain with the countries in the European Union, makes the following proposals:

- In the regulatory field:
 - To influence the mastery and control of the regulations, as well as the development of the administrative procedure in accordance with these regulations.
 - Professional effectiveness in resolving cases, degree of compliance, detection of strengths and weaknesses and their redirection.
- At the organisational level and in relation to control, monitoring, advisory and evaluation functions:
 - To know the level of satisfaction and organisation of the education inspector's visits.

- Supervision and control of the organisation and functioning of the centres and the services and programmes that affect them.
- Resource planning by the inspector.
- Supervision of teaching practice and leadership; guidance counsellors.

Chapter VII, entitled "Competence development of education inspectors", points out the convenience of incorporating the so-called soft skills such as effective communication, empathy, digital competence, teamwork, resilience and professional ethics into the set of professional competences of the education inspectorate. This represents a new line of work that cannot be ignored in a profession in which human relations carry so much weight and in which visits to schools are a fundamental task.

Natal Delgado and González Fernández (2022) have included the following two proposals: (i) to agree on a framework of professional competences and (ii) to use the framework of professional competences as a reference in lifelong learning. It is also considered necessary to adapt the system of access to the corps, taking the framework of professional competences of the education inspectorate as a reference.

We conclude this review of recent national studies in the field of the competences of education inspection with the research sponsored by the Atlántida Project, in which the Union of Education Inspectors (USIE) also participated, entitled "Capacidad Profesional de la Inspección Educativa" [Professional Capacity of Education Inspection] (CPIE). In this study, four dimensions of education inspection were defined, the first of which was the "Personal Dimension", defined as the specific competences that each inspector deploys individually in their specific professional practice. This was materialised in the wording of the following 12

indicators which also constitute professional competences of the education inspectorate:

1. Identifies the educational practices that are developed in an educational centre and the teaching models that serve as a reference to define their own signs of identity.
2. Assesses the adaptation of teaching and organisational practices to the regulations governing the education system and their contribution to the effective exercise of the right to education.
3. Creates sufficiently fluid communication channels and relationships to exchange information and knowledge with individual schools and members of the educational communities.
4. Generates confidence and security in its actions both in the educational communities and in the public administrations so that they can carry out their functions and tasks as collaboratively as possible.
5. Plans its actions in relation to each centre so that its interventions can become systematic and adapted to the characteristics of the centres and/or services.
6. Takes into account the evolution of educational centres and/or services to promote their improvement processes in order to achieve educational success for all pupils.
7. Encourages management and teaching teams to analyse the school's results, both in the academic and coexistence areas, to promote the preparation and development of improvement plans that contribute to the development of a quality education system.

8. Facilitates informed knowledge and calm reflection on the possibilities and limitations, as well as their consequences for the school, of different educational innovations.

9. Promotes the implementation of those educational programmes, projects and innovations (both institutional and non-institutional) that best meet the needs and characteristics of the centres and that contribute to improving their professional capacity, providing them with new perspectives for improvement.

10. Shares with schools their concerns and worries and encourage them to record them in their annual reports and make them a driving force for improvement.

11. Contributes to the transformation of schools into genuine communities that share an educational project and a well-defined set of plans and projects.

12. Builds a picture of each educational situation, as well as of the cases it must solve, that integrates the different levels of the educational system, as well as the vision of the educational agents and their relationship with the context.

The CPIE project and, more specifically, these indicators of individual inspectorate competences formed the basis for the most recent, extensive and rigorous research currently available, in our modest opinion, which is none other than the doctoral thesis of Inspector Lozano (2023) entitled "Competencias profesionales para el ejercicio de la inspección de educación en la Comunidad de Madrid" [Professional competences for the exercise of the education inspectorate in the Community of Madrid]. No further aspects of this research are developed here,

but it is a must-read for a deeper understanding of the professional competences of the education inspectorate.

All of the above studies, on the one hand, demonstrate how much progress has been made so far in defining the performance of the inspection profession and, at the same time, provide an opportunity to reflect on the steps that need to be taken further. One of the main steps forward in this respect would be to provide a joint, coherent and cohesive vision of education inspection expressed in a framework of professional competences.

A competency framework is certainly a set of competencies that is generated from the functions of the inspectorate. However, it cannot be just that or be reduced to that. It also requires, at the very least, the definition of:

- each of the competences in terms of performances.
- observable indicators within each of these competences.
- levels of attainment (e.g. in 6 levels which could range from A1 to C2 following the same logic as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) with their corresponding description.
- the knowledge, skills and attitudes associated with each competence.

It is also essential to link the framework to professional development or, in other words, to define how the competency framework affects, among other elements of professional development, (i) initial training, (ii) selection and initiation into the profession, (iii) in-service training, (iv) performance evaluation and (v) the definition of incentives and a professional career. In generating a global reflection on the exercise of education inspection throughout its professional development, the need to recognise the diversity of profiles within the inspectorate emerges, given

that it is not a homogeneous profession that can be standardised in a unique way, but rather, if necessary, it is a matter of harmonising common competencies whose levels of achievement and development may vary from inspector to inspector.

Finally, one could ask what the main contributions of could be defining a framework of professional competences for inspection. These would be its main benefits:

- Create a shared discourse on educational inspection.
- Promote a clear image of the role of inspection to society.
- Enhance the professionalism of the education inspectorate and its prestige.
- Serve as a tool for evaluation and reflection on the profession.
- Guide the design of teacher-related policies.
- Generate a professional development project.

To conclude the article, we now turn to the main conclusions and modest proposals and recommendations which, from our point of view, could favour the (re)shaping of the profession of education inspection.

3. By way of conclusions and proposals for improving the inspection profession

To conclude, we consider it pertinent to reflect on the professional development of the education inspectorate in terms of the three dimensions that have accompanied us throughout these pages. In the light of the above, an obvious

paradox emerges regarding the inspection profession in comparison with other similar professions: the depth dimension (identity and prestige) is more developed than the breadth dimension (competences) and this, in turn, is more developed than the longitudinal dimension (professional career). This issue, which is so characteristic of this profession, must become the main strength that will allow for further improvement in all other aspects of the profession that are, for the time being, less developed.

As we have just indicated, from an external view of the profession (which is the view we have taken throughout this article), it is striking that this is a profession in which the longitudinal (length) dimension, i.e. the professional career, has many elements that need to be incorporated, expanded or improved. Thus, we believe that it would be advisable to make progress in the following areas:

- The initial training of the inspectorate, where the existence of a qualifying master's degree could be of interest.
- Induction in the first years of practice constituting a "practical" phase after the competitive examination, designed in a formative sense.
- Lifelong learning goes beyond courses and seminars. Given the enormous professional potential, knowledge and experience that all inspectors have, it seems obvious that there are possibilities to "exploit" their possibilities for their own training much more and much better.
- The professional career of the inspectorate where it should be possible to stabilise higher levels (e.g. level 28) as professional performance improves and responsibilities increase, as well as to define a progressive salary linked to internal and external evaluation.

This last aspect of performance evaluation is linked to the need to define a competency framework for education inspection. A competency framework becomes a powerful tool for the evaluation of the inspectorate's own work, with clear guarantees and criteria for those being evaluated and, also, with objective elements for the definition of associated economic incentives and a progressive professional career with different stages or levels. In this sense, we believe that a well-defined competency framework is very useful for generating a professional development project that is not flat but incorporates all the dimensions that correspond to this profession. This can make a decisive contribution to building a shared discourse that is sufficiently cohesive to influence and guide the educational policies that affect their own profession.

In short, in the course of these pages we have been able to observe that the inspection profession has a very good foundation. It remains to complete the work and to finish weaving a framework of competences that will be the keystone of the design of a professional development worthy of its professionals. In our opinion, the education inspectorate has to take advantage of the depth to advance in the breadth of professional competences and, based on this breadth, also identify the most urgent aspects to be addressed throughout the professional career. Working together with the education administration is undoubtedly an imperative in this process of searching for and making progress in the improvement of education inspection.

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