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Exploring the multifaceted nature of school inspectors' power dynamics: A comparative analysis of four quality assurance systems

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Abstract

This research critically explores the role of school inspectors in driving improvements across diverse educational settings, focusing on the nuanced dynamics of their influence on school leaders' attitudes towards feedback. The study employs French and Raven's 'The Bases of Social Powers' framework to investigate the various forms of power wielded by school inspectors. The examination encompasses inspection regimes with varied approaches, ranging from high-stakes to low-stakes, each conferring different degrees of authority on school inspectors. Conducted in four jurisdictions—Dubai, Ireland, New Zealand and Pakistan—each characterised by distinct school quality assurance systems, the research aims to provide readers, including academicians, policy makers, quality assurance personnel and school leaders, with examples of current practices and models. Through interviews with school leaders and inspectors, the findings reveal that leaders' perceptions of inspectors' powers influence both their attitudes towards inspectors and their responses to feedback. The six bases of power—reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, expert and informational—as postulated in French and Raven's framework—are identified in the school leaders' responses and highlighted in the structural dynamics of the inspection systems

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under study, though at varying degrees. Notably, all forms of power hold value in influencing school leaders and driving changes in their practices. While the first three focus on regulating and evaluating school operations, the latter three foster change by inspiring and guiding school leaders. The findings underscore the need for a balanced integration of these power bases in school inspection systems, tailored to the unique contexts of every country. By shedding light on the interplay between power dynamics and school leaders' responsiveness to feedback, this research contributes valuable insights to inform the development and refinement of school inspection systems. The ultimate goal is to maximise the impact of inspections and enhance the efficacy of quality assurance systems in promoting positive change and improvement within diverse educational environments.

KEYWORDS

monitoring, school evaluation, school inspectors' influence, school inspectors' power

Context and implications

Rationale for the study:

Previous studies have not explored the influence of school inspectors in fostering school improvement through various bases of social power. In this study, we analyse four school inspection and quality assurance systems to identify the bases of social power held by the quality assurance personnel and their manifestation within these systems.

Why the new findings matter:

Our findings suggest the necessity of integrating the six bases of social power in school inspection systems, customised to every country's distinct contextual factors. This ensures the effective utilisation of inspection feedback for school improvement while concurrently fulfilling the accountability function inherent to inspection processes.

Implications for policy makers:

Policy makers can optimise the effectiveness of school inspection and quality assurance systems by strategically integrating both sets of social power bases, what one might call soft power—expert, informational and referent—and perhaps strong power—reward, coercive and legitimate. Understanding that an over-reliance on one set of power bases can limit the influence associated with the other set is crucial for policy makers aiming to refine these systems.

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INTRODUCTION

It is increasingly widely recognised in many countries and states that overseeing the standard of education in schools is necessary (OECD, 2013). Typically, a regulatory body, commonly known as an Inspectorate, is established to conduct routine evaluations of schools (Bokhove et al., 2023; Gustafsson et al., 2015; Hofer et al., 2020; Penninckx et al., 2016). Gardezi, McNamara, Brown, and O' Hara (2023a) mention several factors that have contributed to the growth of school inspection systems worldwide over the last 20 years. These include the economic recession of the early 2000s, the shift in management policies towards neoliberal ideology in the 1990s, results-based demands of transnational funding agencies (e.g., the World Bank), international comparisons of education quality through the OECD's evaluations (e.g., PISA—the Programme for International Student Assessment) and, most significantly, the socio-political context of each jurisdiction. Numerous other studies also attribute the growth of inspection systems, especially in Europe and British Commonwealth countries, to prevailing neoliberal trends (see, for example, Baxter, 2017; Baxter & Hult, 2017; Brown et al., 2016, 2018; Clarke, 2017), which introduced the concept of the 'citizen consumer' with the right to choose from a range of public services based on the data and information provided by regulatory services, including school inspectorates.

School inspection, at its best, serves multiple purposes beyond merely providing information to parents, viewed as 'citizen-consumers', about the quality of education. It is also designed not only to enhance educational standards, whether academic or more broadly conceived but also the entire range of the activities of schools (Baxter, 2017). School inspection has, however, evolved very differently in different countries depending on an array of factors, including whether the concept dates back centuries or is a quite recent development. In addition, school inspection tends to be very heavily influenced by current political thinking and the views of those in power. For example, the evolution of school inspection philosophies and approaches in New Zealand and Ireland has been influenced by neoliberal trends, but recently New Zealand has moved in a very different direction and taken a new approach, largely because of the left-of-centre philosophy of the government. In contrast, Ireland introduced whole-school evaluation in 1998 (Brown et al., 2016), has emphasised school self-evaluation since 2012 (Brown et al., 2017, 2018; McNamara et al., 2022) and initiated various short, focused forms of inspections (Department of Education, 2022a, 2022b) in response to OECD comparative evaluations and neoliberal trends.

Dubai's education system exemplifies market accountability, where schools cater to the demands and preferences of parents, acting as primary consumers on behalf of their children (Ben Jaafar et al., 2022). This dynamic is reinforced by school inspection reports and rankings, which foster competition and drive schools to align their services with parental expectations, while performance in international assessments such as PISA, Progress in the International Reading Literacy, and Trends in the International Mathematics and Science Study, further informs and shapes the national inspection agenda.

In Pakistan, school inspection is heavily influenced by funding agencies, particularly the World Bank, which funded the Education Sector Reform Programme across all four provinces[1] and promoted, as well as required, a results-based approach. This approach provided schools with resources and support while prioritising the enhancement of teacher quality as a critical factor influencing school quality and student learning outcomes (Governement of Balochistan, Education Department, 2015; Governement of Punjab, 2018; Governement of Sindh, 2014; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Education Monitoring Authority, 2014). Concurrently, it placed a strong emphasis on rigorous monitoring and accountability measures to ensure the desired results (Chaudhry & Tajwar, 2021; Malik & Rose, 2015).

So, as we can see from the foregoing, despite variations in the drivers of growth and development of inspection, it is evident that all inspection regimes serve two fundamental

purposes: the 'monitoring and accountability function' and 'guiding school improvement' (Hofer et al., 2020, p. 1). In pursuit of these objectives, inspection systems employ various strategies in their processes to impact school operations. The techniques employed and the areas highlighted during inspections exhibit significant similarities, not only in these four jurisdictions, but across education systems worldwide (Simeonova et al., 2020). Equally, however, there are also clear and differing influences in philosophy and inspection implementation across these examples. The difficult question raised in this paper is whether we can move towards a common approach—an almost worldwide commonality—which might lead to the best outcomes achievable—or whether we are prisoners of history, politics and resources resulting in very differing approaches and outcomes in each case.

Comparative studies by Simeonova et al. (2020) and Perry (2013) refer to specific structural and implementation measures that categorise inspections as either high-stakes and sanctions-oriented or low-stakes and advisory. Altrichter (2017) and Penninckx and Vanhoof (2017) define school inspections as either low-stake or soft governance, or high-stake or hard governance. The latter places significant emphasis on accountability, measurement and consequences for schools that fail to meet specified standards, while the former is designed to support schools in improving their practices. In low-stakes school inspections, inspectors often collaborate with school leaders and teachers, taking a consultative and supportive approach to governance. The ongoing debate revolves around which approach is more effective and beneficial for schools. However, both low-stakes and high-stakes approaches empower school inspectors to influence school practices.

According to Brown (2013), there is a correlation between power and influence, where individuals in positions of power can exert influence, and the extent of their power can be measured by their ability to modify the actions of others. In another study, Brown et al. (2024) analysed inspectorates across the globe using French and Raven's extended framework—'the Bases of Social Powers' (Reward, Coercive, Legitimate, Referent, Expert, and Informational power)—to establish a link between these powers and their influence on school practices (Erchul & Raven, 1997). The present study delves further by utilising semi-structured interviews conducted with school leaders and inspectors to explore their perceptions and to compare the power and influence of school inspectors across four distinct school inspection systems: Dubai, Ireland, New Zealand and Pakistan. This study also employs French and Raven's framework 'the Bases of Social Powers' as a lens through which to examine the relationship between school inspectors' power and changes in school policies and practices.

Examining the power and influence of inspectors is crucial for both understanding how school inspection impacts school improvement and identifying specific areas of school inspection that require improvement to enhance its effectiveness. The objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the powers vested in school inspectors within the four distinct school inspection systems under study, facilitating their ability to exert influence over schools. The study seeks to delineate the various forms of social power wielded by these inspectors and the methods they use to exercise these powers. By exploring the interplay between the power and influence of school inspectors, the study aims to provide valuable insights for developing and refining school inspection practices. This endeavour seeks to enhance the efficacy of school inspectors and quality assurance systems, ultimately fostering a positive impact on the quality of education and contributing towards the continuous improvement of schools.

The following are the research questions addressed in this study:

- How do school leaders perceive the different forms of power wielded by school inspectors, as defined by French and Raven's framework, and their relative importance and influence within each particular inspection system?

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- How do these forms of power influence the work of schools?
- What methods do inspectors use to wield these tools available to them?

School inspection: variety yet commonality across the world

The four inspection systems under study have been deliberately chosen because they vary widely in history, organisation and approach (Gardezi, McNamara, Brown, & O' Hara, 2023a). They all occupy different positions on the continuum of approaches to school inspection, as defined by Simeonova et al. (2020) and Perry's (2013) indicators of low and high-stakes inspections. For instance, these inspection systems differ based on the frequency of inspection visits, extent of notification before inspection visits, availability of a quality framework to guide inspection, presence/absence of legislative footing, reporting of outcomes, and governance structure. However, the inspection procedures during the onsite phase of the inspection are largely similar.

The systems vary based on the factors that have contributed to their coming into existence and subsequent development. The school inspection system in New Zealand is as old as its national education system and originated in 1877 (Rae, 1991 cited in Gardezi, McNamara, Brown, & O' Hara, 2023a). With the Education Act 1989, the Education Review Office (ERO) replaced the old inspectorate and embraced neoliberal and left-wing policy trends, granting schools significant autonomy to drive and manage their school improvement efforts (French, 2000). Gradually, it has now moved into an evaluation for improvement approach[2] where external evaluators have become 'evaluation partners' whose main task is to contribute towards building school leaders' evaluation capacity (Goodrick, 2022). In fact, external evaluation appears to be minimal, with the predominant reports available on the ERO website being Profile reports. These reports meticulously outline the school's contextual features, strengths and overarching objectives for the forthcoming 3-year evaluation cycle. Consequently, the prevailing governance approach of the ERO appears to lean towards soft governance, suggesting relatively low stakes for the schools involved. A high level of trust in the schools' capacity to achieve equitable learning outcomes, as well as the effectiveness of evaluation partners' evaluative messages, is perceived as the primary motivating factor that encourages schools to participate in the evaluation process (Gardezi, McNamara, Brown, & O' Hara, 2023a).

The school inspection system in Ireland dates to the British time in the early nineteenth century but having fallen into abeyance after independence has once again become a force in recent years. It has been influenced by the EU and the OECD and is perceived as key to economic growth (McNamara et al., 2022). In consequence, what has emerged, in line with much of Europe, is a 'neoliberal' trend which allows a degree of autonomy to schools. Yet this is very circumscribed as pressure to maintain PISA performance retains a significant degree of control with the Department of Education both through inspection and semi-prescriptive self-evaluation (Brown et al., 2016). The conjoined inspection and school self-evaluation system might be described as low stakes since there are no direct consequences for schools for poor performance (McNamara et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2019). However, 'soft power' in the form of the influence of the inspectorate, publicly available reports on schools, and school professional pride combine to encourage schools and teachers to engage with inspection advice.

In Dubai, the substantial expatriate population prompted the proliferation of private schools offering diverse curricula, claiming to deliver high-quality, world-class education. In 2007, the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) was established to oversee this burgeoning sector. All private schools are subject to annual inspections by the KHDA, with the resulting inspection reports and grades made publicly available on the KHDA website. The

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consequences of poor performance on these inspections are significant: without access to public funding and the inability to increase fees to match inflation rates, schools with low grades struggle to attract students and qualified teachers, often leading to closure (Gardezi, McNamara, Brown, & O' Hara, 2023a). This stringent market accountability effectively positions KHDA inspections as a form of hard governance, imposing considerable stakes on schools. Consequently, schools closely adhere to the quality criteria set by inspectors, recognising the limited room for deviation afforded by this regulatory system.

The inception of school inspection in Pakistan dates back to the early nineteenth century during British colonial rule, coinciding with the East India Company's initiation of funding for schools. However, the current system of school supervision was established during the Education Sector Reforms of 2001–2004. These reforms decentralised education up to the higher secondary level by establishing district education authorities. Subsequently, the monitoring and evaluation system was implemented nationwide through the Education Sector Reforms Programme across all four provinces, with financial support from the World Bank, Department of International Development, the Canadian International Development Agency, and other entities. Regular visits by supervisory, and monitoring and evaluation staff[3] occur monthly, with the former focusing on teaching quality and facilities, while the latter collects quantitative data on service provision, including teacher attendance. Strict monitoring of teacher attendance is enforced, with unauthorised absences potentially resulting in salary deductions and disciplinary action. The education system operates within a hierarchical structure, with school leaders directly accountable to district education authorities (Gardezi, McNamara, Brown, & O' Hara, 2023a). Compliance with directives from these authorities is mandatory. This system carries significant consequences for the individuals involved.

In the next part of the paper, we elaborate on what previous research says about the powers of school inspectors and their impact on school improvement, as well as how French and Raven's framework 'the Bases of Social Powers' applies to school inspectors. The 'Methodology' section of this paper describes the methodology used, while the 'Analysis and Findings' section provides a description of the findings. The 'Discussion and Conclusion' section contains a discussion of the key emerging points and summarises the most important conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Powers of school inspectors in low-stakes and high-stakes inspections

In the academic literature, school inspections are often categorised as low-stakes or 'soft governance' or high-stakes or 'hard governance' (Altrichter, 2017; Gustafsson et al., 2015; Penninckx & Vanhoof, 2017). A low-stakes or soft governance type of school inspection involves a less formal and more supportive approach to evaluating schools and promoting school improvement. It results in facilitative measures if non-compliance is observed or if a school fails to meet expectations. Such inspections offer valuable information to schools, providing school leaders with fresh perspectives that they can use to enhance the quality of the school and classroom (Altrichter, 2017, p. 212). In low-stakes systems, according to Gustafsson et al. (2015), schools are inspected regularly without any rewards or sanctions. Ireland serves as an example in this research. New Zealand represents, in recent years, a perhaps even less punitive and intrusive system than Ireland. The recent 'Evaluation for Improvement Approach' in New Zealand marks a significant shift towards a 'soft governance' school inspection system. Evaluation partners now collaborate with schools in the evaluation process instead of imposing it upon them, with a 3-year evaluation

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cycle for every school (Goodrick, 2022). In contrast, high-stakes and hard governance-type inspections imply a more formal and rigorous approach with stricter rules and serious consequences for schools that do not meet expectations or where non-compliance is observed. According to Altrichter (2017), ‘inspections are ‘hard governance’ models if they operate through target-setting, indicators, benchmarks, and evaluations’ (p. 212). The consequences of non-compliance can include funding cuts, school closure or the dismissal of staff. The results of the inspection may be used to determine the school's rating, which can have potentially far-reaching consequences for the school's image, pupil intake and financing (Hult & Segerholm, 2017; Penninckx & Vanhoof, 2017, p. 254). Both Pakistan and Dubai in this research represent quite similar approaches along this hard governance line. However, interestingly, there is research evidence that indicates that schools and teachers feel pressured by the existence of inspections almost regardless of the level of low or high-stakes powers wielded by the inspectorate (Altrichter, 2017).

School inspectors, it appears, wield significant power over schools, irrespective of whether the school inspection is deemed high-stakes or low-stakes, as they establish the criteria by which effective school practices are evaluated (Brown, 2013; Perryman et al., 2018). Perryman et al. (2018) argue that school inspectors' power has undergone transformation through the implementation of the ‘panoptic performativity’ strategy in school inspections. Instead of being a single, intimidating presence, inspectors now exert pervasive and continuous influence on schools, making them feel constantly monitored and pressured to conform to inspection standards to avoid negative consequences. Clapham (2015) concurs with this notion of ‘panoptic performativity’ and argues that the implementation of short or no notice periods for inspections has given rise to a phenomenon known as ‘post-fabrication’. This implies that schools are consistently maintained in a state of ‘inspection readiness’, where preparedness for inspections becomes an ever-present reality rather than a fabricated representation of events.

Of course, to an extent, the higher the stakes of school inspection, the more likely schools are to engage in ‘window-dressing’ activities created with the sole purpose of receiving more favourable evaluations from inspectors (Ehren et al., 2016; Penninckx, 2017; Perryman, 2009).

> This change in behaviour can be seen in terms of the fabrication of documentation, staging, and game-playing before and during inspections, and a sense of cynicism about the entire process.
>
> (Perryman, 2009, p. 620)

Penninckx and Vanhoof (2017) attribute the behaviours exhibited by schools as reactions to inspectors' power ‘to make high-stakes decisions about the schools’ (p. 254). These high-stakes inspections generate significant ‘accountability pressure’ for school leaders, motivating them to become more proactive in improvement endeavours. However, these inspections also unintentionally amplify the negative consequences of school inspection (Altrichter & Kemethofer, 2018). According to the outcomes of Altrichter and Kemethofer's (2018) cross-European online survey of school leaders, a significant majority of participants in a range of inspection systems reported a sense of performance pressure in relation to inspection expectations. This perceived pressure was significantly linked to the accountability rating. The authors identify administrative consequences, pressure from stakeholders and the potential competitive advantage or disadvantage associated with receiving a positive or negative report as sources of pressure on schools. As a result, school leaders often revert to familiar practices, adopting strategies such as ‘discouraging new teaching methods, narrowing the curriculum, and utilising traditional instructional approaches’ (p. 44). Brown et al. (2017) further highlight that stakeholders, particularly parents, place significant weight on external

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inspection reports, considering them more credible compared to self-evaluation processes. Consequently, school leaders tend to avoid risk-taking, concentrating on 'performing for inspection' when inspectors are present, adhering to student teaching methods outlined in the inspection framework and conforming to 'accepted modes of successful practice' (Perryman, 2009, p. 614).

Perryman (2009) draws a connection between Foucault's concepts of power-knowledge and school inspectors, because inspectors collect knowledge about schools through inspections, thereby possessing power. School inspectors also possess knowledge of the inspection criteria and standards, which empowers them to assess schools and inform them how they should function. A vital aspect of the exercise of school inspectors' power and influence is feedback, and the way in which feedback is communicated is crucial. According to previous studies (e.g., Behnke & Steins, 2017; Dobbelaer et al., 2017; Perryman et al., 2023; Quintelier et al., 2020), the acceptance of critical feedback depends on several factors, such as the credibility of the feedback provider and the perceived quality and value of the feedback for learning within the immediate school context. Nevertheless, receiving critical or negative inspection feedback often leads to resistance or rejection, especially when it is delivered in an authoritarian manner. However, a more positive and constructive approach to criticism increases the likelihood that school leaders will incorporate the inspection recommendations into their school improvement plans. The attitudinal change largely depends on school leaders' overall attitudes towards school inspection.

The social aspect of inspection

Of course, it is one thing to have the coercive power of hard inspection, including sanctions, or merely the more limited power of soft inspection and encouragement. It is quite another to wield these powers in a way that brings schools and teachers on board and does not do more harm than good to the school system, for as we have seen above even soft inspection can engender fear, and lead to the covering up of the reality of the school. It is therefore of interest, particularly in the training of inspectors, to identify the kinds of social powers inspectors possess and how their use may enhance or inhibit school and teacher improvement.

In exploring the dynamics of power and influence within the context of school inspections, the authors considered three prominent frameworks: Social Exchange Theory (SET),[4] Theory of Social Dominance (SDT),[5] and French and Raven's Bases of Social Power. While each framework offers valuable insights, French and Raven's model is particularly suited for analysing the specific power dynamics in school inspections.

SET posits that social interactions are governed by reciprocal exchanges where individuals aim to maximise rewards and minimise costs. In the context of school inspection, one could interpret the relationship between inspectors and school leaders as an exchange of resources—inspectors offer feedback and evaluations, while school leaders provide compliance and improvements. However, this perspective simplifies the complex nature of school inspections. The power imbalance between inspectors and school leaders is not easily explained by reciprocity alone. Inspectors are not merely participants in an equal exchange but are vested with authority that transcends mutual benefit, limiting the explanatory power of SET in this context.

Similarly, SDT highlights hierarchical structures and the role of dominance in maintaining social hierarchies. While this theory can help explain power differentials between inspectors and school leaders, its primary focus is on broader, group-based dominance—large-scale systemic power structures that exist between social groups, such as those based on race, class or gender. As a result, SDT does not adequately address the

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more localised, role-specific power dynamics that arise in specific contexts, such as the nuanced, situational power relations between inspectors and school leaders during the inspection process.

In contrast, French and Raven's framework offers a structured classification of power bases—described as reward, coercive, legitimate, expert, informational and referent power—that allows for a more precise analysis of the multifaceted nature of power in school inspections. This framework is particularly useful in educational settings, where power dynamics are often complex and context specific. Inspectors may exert influence through legitimate authority, coercion via accountability measures, or expert power through specialised knowledge. This granularity makes French and Raven's model ideal for capturing the various ways inspectors can shape the decisions and behaviours of school leaders.

Therefore, French and Raven's framework was chosen as the most appropriate lens for examining the power dynamics in school inspections, as it provides a systematic yet flexible approach to understanding how power operates within these specific interactions.

Mapping French and Raven's framework of bases of social powers on school inspectors' work

Reward, coercion, legitimate, expert, informational and referent powers

French and Raven (1959) describe power as closely linked to influence, which they define as causing a psychological change in a person. Social change, as they explain it, involves modifying an individual's beliefs, attitudes or conduct through the actions of another individual, who is the influencing agent. Social power, on the other hand, refers to the capacity of the influencing agent to bring about such modifications by utilising the available resources at their disposal (Raven & Bertram, 2004). In the present study, inspectors serve as the influencing agents, while school leaders are the targets of influence. School inspectors' work can be associated with various bases of social power. In the academic literature, school inspectors are often referred to as ‘policy implementers’ (Baxter, 2017; Hofer et al., 2020), and they may employ coercive power to enforce compliance with regulations and policies. Schools that fail to meet standards may risk losing their licences to operate, face funding cuts, or experience disciplinary actions against school leaders or teachers who fall short of guidelines. Even in the case of a low-stakes inspection system, a negative school inspection report on the public record can permanently tarnish a school leader's reputation (Moreton et al., 2017).

Inspectors may also wield reward power to incentivise good performance. They can provide favourable grades or rankings to schools, resulting in a longer return cycle (fewer visits by the inspection team) or offering recognition to teachers and school leaders who excel in their roles. School inspection reports, especially grading, imply not only inspectors' coercive power, as discussed earlier, but also their reward power. In the case of Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills)[6] inspections, Moreton et al. (2017) assert that when a school receives an ‘inadequate’ grade or fails to demonstrate sufficient improvement after receiving a ‘requires improvement’ grade, the headteacher and governing body may face replacement. Conversely, schools receiving an ‘outstanding’ rating are strategically positioned within the educational landscape. This includes opportunities to sponsor other schools with lower performance, engage in teacher training initiatives, and access resources for leading professional development efforts (p. 141).

Due to their statutory status, school inspectors possess legitimate power. Their position grants them the authority to enter schools and request any necessary information or documents to fulfil their duties. For instance, in Ireland, the Education Act 1998, Section 13 outlines the basis of the legitimate power of school inspectors:

> An Inspector shall have all such powers as are necessary or expedient for the purpose of performing his or her functions and shall be accorded every reasonable facility and cooperation by the board and the staff of a school or centre for education.
>
> (Education Act 1998, Section 13)

In the new Education and Training Act 2020 currently in effect in New Zealand, there are 'powers of review officers' but the language has been made 'less prescriptive' compared to the previous Act (Ministry of Education, 2023). Nevertheless, they still retain 'statutory powers' to fulfil their mandated role (Education Review Office, 2021). Invariably, school inspectors in Dubai as well as monitoring and supervision staff in all provinces of Pakistan possess the power to enter, investigate and report on the strengths and weaknesses of schools (Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau (DSIB), 2012; Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Independent Monitoring Unit: System User Guide, 2014). Clarke (2017) and Baxter (2017) emphasise the legitimate powers of inspectors, referring to them as a 'vital cog in the machinery of governing schooling' (p. v) and 'street-level bureaucrats' (p. 6) responsible for overseeing policy implementation processes and practices in schools.

On one hand, inspectors possess legitimate power derived from their position of authority and designation; on the other hand, they may also wield expert power. School inspectors can exercise expert power if they possess extensive knowledge and experience in their field. This expertise can make them valuable resources sought after by school leaders and teachers for guidance and support in their school improvement efforts. The work of school inspectors is guided by inspection criteria that establish quality expectations. These criteria can play a pivotal role in enhancing a school's internal management capacity, as school leaders can use them to envision and integrate academic excellence into their school development plans (Elwick & McAleavy, 2015). Perryman (2009) suggests that school inspectors generally undergo extensive training and acquire knowledge in the standards and practices outlined in the inspection criteria. This knowledge empowers them in the inspection process and, consequently, school leaders place trust in their abilities. School leaders may adjust their practices based on the feedback provided by inspectors, who leverage their expertise to bring about positive changes in the school's operation.

Additionally, school inspectors may exercise informational power, largely depending on their expertise and interpersonal skills, to explain to school leaders 'how the job should be done differently, providing persuasive reasons for why this would result in a better and more effective procedure' (Raven & Betram, 2004, Raven, 2008, p. 2). When school leaders understand and accept the reasons presented to them, it leads to lasting changes in their thought processes and school practices. Even if the change in school practices occurs due to the inspector's feedback or guidance, it may continue without the school leader actively remembering or referring to the inspector's advice.

The final type of power, referent power, heavily relies on whether school inspectors are respected and admired by the school staff. In such cases, school leaders may be inclined to follow their advice and suggestions due to the high esteem in which they hold the inspectors. When inspectors possess referent power, school leaders not only seek to emulate them but also find satisfaction in adhering to the inspectors' instructions on how tasks should be carried out.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a qualitative research design, combining a literature review with semi-structured interviews.

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Sample

The research utilised qualitative methods and involved conducting semi-structured interviews with 28 school leaders and 14 inspectors, evaluation partners, monitors and school supervisory staff. Recognising the inherent limitations of a modest sample size, it was understood that such a collection of participants could not be considered fully representative of the broader population. Therefore, school leaders and quality assurance personnel were purposefully selected to obtain 'information-rich' cases that aligned with the research objectives (Patton, 2014). The individuals chosen were expected to have a deep understanding of the phenomenon being researched. To achieve this, specific criteria were used, including having undergone multiple school inspections, possessing leadership experience of 5 years or more, representing both primary and secondary education sectors, having completed relevant Higher Education Institution (HEI) courses, and demonstrating a keen interest and expertise in the field. The criteria for participant selection and the identification of suitable respondents were guided by collaborative discussions with colleagues in each country and in the city-state of Dubai. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with an even representation of rural and urban school leaders from the four inspection regimes. In the case of inspectors, identification was facilitated through connections in education ministries, HEIs or direct outreach to inspection agencies. The key criterion for the selection of inspectors was a minimum of 3 years of professional experience in their role.

In total, 28 school leaders participated in the study, with 15 from primary schools and 13 from secondary schools. Each participant was interviewed individually. The gender distribution among these leaders was 12 women and 16 men, with their leadership experience ranging from 5 to 30 years. The broad range of experience, which encompasses varying lengths of tenure among school leaders in the study, enriches the study by capturing a comprehensive spectrum of perspectives, enhancing the depth and breadth of its findings regarding the dynamics of school inspection practices. Table 1 shows the distribution of sampled school leaders by jurisdiction, work experience, professional titles and gender.

Additionally, 14 quality assurance personnel were interviewed, including 7 women and 7 men. These personnel included inspectors, evaluation partners, monitors and supervisors, all of whom had varying levels of experience in their respective fields, ranging from 3 to 35 years.

Exclusively school leaders were selected as interview subjects among all school personnel, as they occupy pivotal roles in orchestrating school readiness for inspection, providing on-site support and coordination to inspection teams, assuming accountability for the outcomes of inspections, encompassing both favourable and adverse evaluations, and spearheading the execution of modifications in reaction to the findings of school inspections (Altrichter, 2017).

The interviews were conducted by the same interviewer, audio-recorded and then transcribed. To protect the anonymity of the participants, a system of alphanumerical classification was used instead of their real names. The following abbreviations are used in the 'Analysis and Findings' section to represent the participants: school leaders (SL), inspectors (SI), evaluation partners (EP), monitoring and evaluation assistants (MS—monitoring staff), assistant education officers and deputy district education officer (SS—supervision staff).

To distinguish between the school leaders from Dubai, Ireland, New Zealand and Pakistan, their respective identifying codes are added to the abbreviation. For example, DBSL is used for school leaders from Dubai, IESL for school leaders from Ireland, NZSL for school leaders from New Zealand and PKSL for school leaders from Pakistan. Since quality assurance personnel in both Dubai and Ireland are referred to as 'inspectors', codes (IE for Ireland and

TABLE 1 Distribution of sampled school leader participants.

Country	Professional title	Gender	Work experience in years
Dubai	Principal	Female	12
	Principal	Male	6
	Vice Principal	Female	10
	Vice Principal	Female	5
	Headmistress	Female	9
	Headmaster	Male	7
Ireland	Principal	Male	24
	Principal	Male	17
	Principal	Female	16
	Principal	Male	5
	Assistant Principal	Female	22
	Assistant Principal	Female	23
New Zealand	Principal	Female	21
	Principal	Female	16
	Principal	Male	14
	Principal	Male	8
	Principal	Male	5.5
	Principal	Female	5
Pakistan[a]	Principal	Male	30
	Principal	Female	13
	Principal	Male	9
	Principal	Female	5
	Vice Principal	Female	19
	Headmistress	Female	25
	Headmistress	Female	30
	Headmistress	Female	9
	Headmaster	Male	5
	Headmaster	Male	5

[a]Additional school leaders from Pakistan were interviewed to ensure representation from all four provinces.

DB for Dubai) are added to differentiate between them. Thus, DBSI is used for inspectors from Dubai and IESI for inspectors from Ireland.

Data collection and analysis

French and Raven's framework, ‘the Bases of Social Powers’, along with the literature review, guided the development of interview questions. To ensure the validity and reliability of the questions, they were shared with two experts in school inspection who reviewed them for relevance, comprehensiveness and alignment with the research objectives. Following their feedback, the questions were revised and approved by the same experts. Subsequently, the interview questions underwent pilot testing with two respondents to finalise the tool. This pilot testing provided valuable insights into aspects such as length, format and participant responsiveness (Ahlin, 2019), resulting in further adjustments. Consistency in wording

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and question format was maintained across all interviews, as they were conducted by the same researcher, thereby minimising variations in responses due to differences in question phrasing.

Particular attention was given to the formulation of interview questions to ensure the omission of terms such as power, authority and influence. This precautionary measure was taken to prevent the posing of leading questions and to maintain the neutrality of the conversation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to ensure a comprehensive understanding of responses and to provide context.

The interviews were digitally recorded, fully transcribed and analysed both manually and using NVivo software for thematic analysis. The six bases of social power—Reward, Coercive, Legitimate, Expert, and Informational Power—served as the deductive themes, while inductive codes were also identified based on the participants' verbal responses using the open coding technique. The interview transcripts were meticulously reviewed to identify codes. Some of the identified codes included grading and ranking, inspection reports, window dressing, monetary gains/losses, statutory status and experience. The codes were organised according to deductive themes, which were then further examined and linked to relevant text excerpts in order to develop an analytical narrative, following the process of thematic analysis as explained by Braun and Clarke (2022).

Within the framework outlined by French and Raven (1959), expert and informational powers are elucidated in conjunction, while reward, coercion, legitimate and referent powers are explained separately. In our analysis, we chose to amalgamate expert and informational powers, maintaining fidelity to the framework, and likewise unified reward and coercion powers due to their shared mechanisms of influence when wielded by inspectors. However, the remaining two bases of social power, legitimate and referent powers, are presented individually.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

In this section, we turn to the analysis of the interview data in light of the theoretical framework outlined by French and Raven. The responses in each case are considered in a cross-case analysis of the four inspection systems. The importance and influence attached to each factor by those interviewed in each jurisdiction are compared and contrasted. Finally, in the 'Discussion and Conclusion' section, we present the key emerging points regarding how inspections operate in varied circumstances and attempt to elucidate how context impacts the evaluation of schools.

Reward and coercive powers

The interviews with school leaders and inspectors in all four regions consistently referred to the importance of the inspection report as a key influential outcome resulting from the inspection process. Invariably, these reports are published on the Internet and accessible to the general public. Particularly, in Dubai, Ireland and New Zealand, the school inspectors' reward and coercive powers are closely linked to the school inspection report. For example, within KHDA school inspections in Dubai, the exercise of reward and coercive powers is often manifested through the ranking assigned to schools in inspection reports, along with the ensuing positive or negative consequences.

Schools in Dubai are ranked as 'outstanding', 'very good', 'good', 'acceptable', 'weak' or 'very weak' by the inspection team and this ranking is clearly indicated in the school inspection report. Schools adjudged as outstanding, very good, or good are eligible to raise school

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fees by a certain percentage and add more class levels if they desire. Conversely, schools receiving a low ranking and unfavourable report face serious damage to their reputation due to the competitive education market in Dubai. Such schools may lose credibility among parents, resulting in immediate and detrimental effects on enrolment and financial viability. Restrictions on fee increases for low-performing schools create financial challenges as they struggle to provide necessary resources, facilities and competitive staff salaries. In some cases, these financial burdens may lead to the eventual closure of such schools, particularly in the face of rising inflation rates in the city-state. The school inspectors referred to the rewards and coercive powers of the inspection reports as follows: 'We have implemented a linkage between school fees and the overall quality of school performance.' Schools that do not achieve a rating of good, very good or outstanding in terms of overall quality are not allowed to raise their fees. Additionally, this prevents the admission of new students to schools that are rated as 'weak' (DBSI1). Moreover, 'the ability to expand the range of grades offered is linked to the school's inspection rating' (DBSI2).

So, consistent underperformance leading to recurrent poor grades may eventually result in closure or acquisition by larger educational institutions in the market. To avoid such a dire outcome stemming from inspection rankings, as one principal noted, schools often enlist the help of consultants to meet the inspectors' expectations and adhere to their recommendations. 'Lots of schools are appointing consultants, where they have been consistently rated as weak. No school in Dubai can afford to be on that rating for very long because there are big groups, ABC and XYZ [anonymised for confidentiality] ready to take the running of these schools' (DBSL2).

School inspection reports in Ireland and New Zealand do not assign an explicit grading or ranking to schools but in New Zealand, the older model of school evaluation had a return cycle. The more positive the report, the longer before another inspection. School leaders agreed that a favourable ERO report was used as a 'marketing tool', a 'badge of honour' and 'a selling point' (NZSL1 and NZSL5). Additionally, an affirmative inspection report, both in Ireland and New Zealand, serves as a comprehensive validation for all stakeholders involved in the school, confirming commendable performance and providing external validation for its accomplishments. Consequently, this achievement leads to increased recognition among other schools, heightened parental attention and an improved ability to attract highly qualified teachers, as well as diligent and well-mannered students. A school principal in Ireland explained:

> I think there's a feeling of pride when a school receives a positive report, and it's shared with parents and published online. It's a great accomplishment for a school to be recognised with an external evaluation for good performance. It's like receiving a green light and a smiley face.
>
> (IESL4)

In contrast, an unfavourable inspection report bears its own set of drawbacks. According to school leaders, it is often perceived as a form of public naming and shaming, which could significantly impact the school's reputation and potentially lead to a decline in student enrolment.

As articulated by one school leader, 'The inspection report is publicly accessible, and its contents can be highly damaging to the school's reputation. For instance, if it highlights the poor quality of teaching and learning, which is a fundamental aspect of the school's functioning, or points out a lack of support for SEN [special education needs] students, it reflects negatively on the school' (IESL2).

In New Zealand, however, with the new evaluation for improvement approach, the old and more threatening approach has been abandoned and all schools have a 3-year-long

evaluation cycle. During this time the ERO's role is to support the schools in their evaluation for improvement cycle to improve outcomes for all learners. At the conclusion of 3 years, the ERO will support schools in reporting their progress to the community.

In the context of Pakistan, while supervisory staff report internally on the quality of education and facilities in a school after their visit, Monitoring and Evaluation Assistants (MEAs) during monitoring visits, assess the presence or absence of facilities within the school premises, closely monitor the attendance of both teachers and students, and digitally document and publicly report all observations on the departmental website. In the event that a teacher or school leader is found absent on the day of the monitoring visit without prior approval for leave, they are issued a 'show cause notice' and their salary for that day may be deducted. Additionally, if multiple teachers are found absent on the same day, the school leader is required to provide a written explanation.

Moreover, the MEAs cross-check the number of students present in any classroom against the number of students listed in the class attendance register. Discrepancies between these figures result in 'show cause notices' being issued to the school leaders. The MEAs also conduct the Literacy and Numeracy Drive (LND) test on a random sample of Grade 3 students and teachers, particularly in the Punjab region. Poor performance by students on the LND test carries significant consequences for the respective teachers.

Consequently, school leaders take proactive measures; as one principal shared: 'We start prepping the kids from Grade 1 in reading, writing, and math so that by the time they reach Grade 3, they perform well on the LND test conducted by the MEAs' (PKSL6). Furthermore, MEAs also generate reports evaluating the performance of the supervisory staff.

School leaders mentioned that the school monitoring database generates graphs based on the indicators, and areas of concern are marked in red. If multiple areas are marked in red, school leaders may face reprimands, be asked for explanations or have their salary withheld.

The school leaders and supervisory staff both mentioned following a similar sequence of sanctions to address inefficiency. These sanctions include verbal reprimands, written notes in the school logbook or visitor log, issuance of a letter of explanation or a show cause notice and calling the individuals to the office to provide an explanation. However, there is a lack of consistent practices at the system-wide level to recognise and appreciate school leaders or teachers for achieving their targets.

School leaders emphasised the potential for various rewards to be granted based on their students' performance in public examinations, the receipt of an outstanding report from the MEA, or the attainment of student enrolment targets for the year. These rewards may encompass verbal appreciation, written commendations, positive remarks in performance evaluations, or even cash incentives. However, it is crucial to recognise that such practices can vary significantly across different regions and districts within the country. One principal shared his experience, stating, 'I have been awarded a cash prize four times for achieving excellent results' (PKSL8), whereas another expressed, 'There is no reward for high-performing schools or principals, no appreciation in the system' (PKSL4). Additionally, an assistant education officer (AEO) mentioned, 'I issue appreciation letters to school heads and teachers' (SS6).

In all four jurisdictions, for most of the school leaders interviewed, the school inspection process is described as a stressful and emotionally challenging experience. According to one respondent, 'It is stressful for the school leaders. If teachers do not perform well, then there is always a risk of losing your inspection grade. So, the subject heads are always under pressure' (DBSL3). Another participant expressed, 'It puts added pressure on management' (IESL2). Similarly, a third interviewee noted, 'We are always on our toes because of the strict monitoring' (PKSL6). Reflecting on the extensive preparations, another leader described, 'I spent almost two or three weeks formulating a presentation and packaging of

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data and other things to present to ERO … it was a bit of a performance … to make sure that we presented the best face of the school' (NZSL5).

The quality assurance system in Pakistan appears to lean heavily towards coercion, with measures of coercive power being more prominently emphasised than rewards. KHDA inspectors in Dubai exercise rewards and coercion powers to ensure accountability, policy enforcement and school improvement, demonstrating equal strength in both approaches. In contrast, in Ireland, the exercise of reward and coercive powers by school inspectors is tied solely to the accessibility of inspection reports to the public. Meanwhile, New Zealand's approach to school improvement evaluation, as highlighted by Goodrick (2022), underscores collaboration between school leaders and evaluation partners. This approach actively discourages reliance on reward and coercion within the ERO evaluation process.

Legitimate power

Legitimate power is intricately linked to one's position in the social hierarchy and one's official designation (French & Raven, 1959). Across these jurisdictions, quality assurance personnel benefit from robust support from their respective agencies and their legislative footing. For instance, school inspectors in Ireland (Education Act 1998, Section 13) and Dubai (the Executive Council Resolution No (38) of 2007 about the establishment of Dubai School Inspection Bureau), as well as evaluation partners in New Zealand (Education and Training Act 2020), hold statutory status. In a similar manner, the monitoring and supervisory roles in Pakistan are instituted through official gazette notifications issued by the respective education departments across all four provinces. These notifications delineate the roles and responsibilities associated with these positions.

In Dubai, KHDA serves as the regulatory body for private schools, exercising unquestionable legitimate authority over these institutions, alongside the inspectors appointed by the KHDA. The legitimate power wielded by school inspectors is deeply felt by school leaders and according to these interviews leads to their unwavering acceptance of the feedback provided. For example, a school principal stated, 'The inspectors are from KHDA, and they consistently demonstrate competence by providing valuable insights. That's why we willingly accept their guidance. Their expertise carries significant weight, and they provide us with the parameters of the national agenda to work upon. Both the inspectors and the schools take these parameters seriously. I appreciate their approach to conducting inspections' (DBSL4).

School inspectors in Ireland possess statutory powers that authorise them to access educational institutions, and they are granted the right to expect reasonable cooperation and assistance from the school's board and staff. It is explicitly stated in the code of practice of the inspectorate that any individual who hinders or obstructs an inspector in the exercise of their conferred powers is committing an offence and may face legal consequences, including conviction and a fine (Department of Education, 2022a, 2022b). The designation of school inspectors bestows considerable authority upon them, as evident from the unconditional compliance expressed by all school leaders interviewed. They adhere without reservation to the recommendations provided by the inspectors. The statutory and legitimate power vested in inspectors' reports emerged as a recurring theme in the conversations, with school leaders expressing their concerns using strong phrases such as 'that will destroy us', 'school will hit rock bottom', 'we will lose our competitive edge in this town' and 'we will be regarded as the school of last resort' (IESL3, IESL1) or another, 'You would be inviting trouble if you choose not to address the recommendations. I am aware of a few schools that didn't implement them due to disputes with the inspectorate regarding the legitimacy of the recommendations. In such cases, the inspectorate would follow up with a further report expressing disappointment over the lack of action taken on those specific recommendations' (IESL1).

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Quite similar to school inspectors in Ireland, the ERO's evaluation partners have the power and authority to enter schools and work with school leaders according to their code of conduct and job specifications. With the new approach, as their role expectations have changed, so too has their legitimate power—the privileges that come with their role as evaluators in the ERO. The ERO in New Zealand, much like Ofsted in England, is an independent department. An evaluation partner expressed their legitimate powers as follows:

> We are an independent department in our own right. We don't sit within the Ministry of Education; we are independent from the Ministry of Education. We report to the ministry, the minister of the day, and the government of the day. Our mandate is to review and report. As part of that important role, we provide advice to the Minister of the day about what we observe in our school reviews, not only at the individual school level as required, but also at a system level.
>
> (EP3)

While providing independent and objective advice to the government of the day, the new legitimate power of the evaluation partner is ‘to assess the school's capacity for self-review’ (NZSL3) and ‘to conduct evaluations with schools, with schools driving the process so they take ownership of it’ (EP5).

In New Zealand, similar to the experiences observed in Dubai and Ireland, most school leaders demonstrated a willingness to embrace the feedback provided by the evaluation partners in the new landscape.

> The way we're working now, I believe, will have more impact because we're going into the schools to ensure they follow through on what they say they're doing. Evaluation won't be a discrete piece of work; instead, we'll be keeping a watchful eye.
>
> (EP5)

With robust reward and coercive powers, monitoring and evaluation, and supervision staff in Pakistan naturally hold legitimate power over school leaders, teachers and their practices. Initially met with resistance, MEAs encountered reluctance from school leaders to share data and documents upon the introduction of monitoring services in 2014–2015. However, ‘realising the potential negative impact on their school reports, leaders became more cooperative with MEAs’ (MS2).

Furthermore, MEAs document supervisory staff visits and note deficiencies in basic facilities, which can reflect poorly on the performance of district education officers if widespread. Consequently, both schools and district education authorities not only cooperate with MEAs but also adopt the reported indicators as quality criteria. Supervisory staff also exert legitimate power over school leaders and teachers by employing assertive language in their interactions, emphasising the necessity of giving orders and ensuring compliance—a practice uncommon in Dubai, Ireland and New Zealand. The vocabulary they used while talking about their relationship with teachers or school leaders often included phrases like ‘if I have to give an order’, ‘sometimes we have to be a little harsh’ and ‘we have to strictly ensure’ (SS3, SS4).

School leaders interviewed acknowledged improvements resulting from monitoring, including enhanced teaching practices, school cleanliness, safety measures, infrastructure, teachers' attendance, punctuality and student enrolment. For instance, one school leader expressed, ‘Due to regular monitoring, teachers come prepared to school. Syllabus is covered according to the monthly syllabus sheet. Previously, teachers used to cover the syllabus only partially, and that too towards the end of the school term’ (PKSL9).

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These instances underscore how the legitimate power of monitoring and supervisory staff is supported by their coercive power, influencing practices and driving changes within the education system.

Across all four regions, school inspectors in Dubai and Ireland, quality assurance staff in Pakistan, and evaluation partners in New Zealand wield significant legitimate power, bolstered by legislative support. In Dubai and Pakistan, particularly, the legitimate power base is reinforced by robust foundations of coercion and reward mechanisms, amplifying its impact.

Expert and informational powers

As elucidated within the framework proposed by French and Raven (1959), the efficacy of expert power possessed by school inspectors predominantly hinges upon school leaders' perception of their professional competence. In this process, school leaders engage in a comparative evaluation, juxtaposing the knowledge of school inspectors with their own and against established quality criteria. The stronger their conviction in the expertise of the school inspectors, the more inclined they are to embrace the information conveyed. Across all four regimes, school inspectors are appointed based on their prior experience in education, including teaching and learning, curriculum development and school leadership. Upon induction, they undergo comprehensive training in school evaluation, with numerous opportunities for ongoing professional development to enhance their expertise. This approach is designed to solidify their role as experts, empowering them to lead discussions on school improvement following inspections (Gardezi, McNamara, Brown & O'Hara, 2023b). There was a somewhat mixed response from school leaders under this heading. To some extent, leaders across all four jurisdictions acknowledged school inspectors' knowledge and expertise, though in Ireland, New Zealand and Pakistan, this acknowledgement was, on occasion, expressed with a degree of scepticism.

Only in Dubai did school leaders express complete confidence in KHDA inspectors' expertise and knowledge and widely admitted their credibility and reliability. As one of the school leaders stated, ‘Mostly, they are very experienced. The majority of the inspectors know what they are saying, they provide meaningful comments’ (DBSL3). School inspectors are also aware of the influence they wield on schools and assert that their feedback is always taken positively. School inspectors are also conscious of their expert power and the influence their feedback can have on schools. According to an inspector, ‘School leaders are well aware of the considerable benefits they derive from the feedback provided on each observed lesson. As school inspectors, we offer feedback on every lesson we attend, which proves beneficial for the teachers. The presence of an external perspective, with fresh eyes observing their classroom performance, guides them in making improvements’ (DBSI1).

Generally, in Ireland, school leaders conceded that inspectors are competent, experienced, professional and well-trained. They also praised the well-structured nature of the feedback provided by inspectors. One school leader noted, ‘I found their reports to be very well-balanced and thorough. Throughout my experience, I observed that they provide objective and carefully considered feedback. I have never encountered a report that made me question its accuracy or validity’ (IESL5). Another school leader explained the significance of inspectors' feedback in comparison with their own evaluation, ‘Self-evaluation, by its very nature, tends to be somewhat biased. It is essential to have an external perspective from someone outside the organisation to provide a balanced view. While you may not always agree with their assessments, engaging in such discussions can ultimately lead to improvements’ (IESL3).

However, some school leaders expressed concerns about the inflexible nature of the current school inspection system, which they feel limits the potential of inspectors to provide

tangible practical benefits to schools. One principal remarked, 'They are very much formalised in their approach. They have very little leeway in terms of how they can interact within the school. It's very much a box-ticking exercise, looking for certain things and at certain things … There's no room for real problem solving or talking outside of the box about the realities of the school' (IESL4). School leaders in Ireland recognised and acknowledged the influential role of inspectors' expert power in shaping efforts towards school improvement but dissatisfaction primarily stems from the rigidity of the inspection system rather than from any perceived lack of expert power on the part of the inspectors.

In New Zealand, both school leaders and evaluation partners not only underscored the necessity for evaluation partners to possess relevant experience and expertise in the field, but also highlighted the critical importance of cultivating trusting relationships to ensure the effectiveness of the evaluation model within schools.

One evaluation partner noted, 'The feedback that I'm receiving indicates that people really appreciate the relational model … if you've built up the emotional bank account or a relationship with the school, you can then have those difficult conversations' (EP5). School leaders' trust in the evaluation partners' proficiency is important, as it influences their acceptance of feedback and encourages adherence to their guidance.

School leaders generally acknowledged the expertise of evaluation partners in the field and appreciated their efforts in guiding them on their school improvement journey. A school leader stated, 'Many of the evaluation partners are highly expert in the field of evaluation, and this actually makes them a valuable resource for schools rather than mere inspectors coming to check up on us. They work alongside us as external critical friends' (NZSL3).

Equally, however, in Ireland and New Zealand some school leaders expressed scepticism concerning the competence and expertise of some school inspectors. They alluded to the fact that some school inspectors lack experience as school principals and therefore, may not have a first-hand understanding of the role's intricacies. They also expressed concerns about the outdated perspective of school inspectors and evaluation partners, whose experience of the realities within schools and stakeholders' expectations may be dated. Any uncertainty regarding an inspector's expertise can potentially undermine the influence of their expert power on school leaders.

School leaders in Pakistan also admitted the expert power of some of the supervisory staff while discrediting others for their limited professional efficacy. For instance, one school leader mentioned, 'Every supervisory staff member has their own strategy to monitor the school; there is no standardised format' (PKSL4). Some supervisory staff visit classes and engage students in questioning to assess their learning, while others make more general inquiries about the school and teachers. Some visits involve students reading or giving dictations, while in other cases, the supervisory staff merely goes around the school and leaves, making the school visit seem perfunctory.

On the other hand, the AEOs are trained to mentor and coach teachers (Punjab Education Sector Reforms Programme (PESRP), 2020). According to the self-report of the AEOs interviewed, they are positively regarded by teachers due to their provision of valuable support aimed at enhancing teaching practices.

> I visit schools to work with them. I guide them with regard to teaching and learning and administrative matters. I have very good relations with school staff. Both teachers and school leaders respect me and listen to me because I'm very senior and experienced.
>
> (SS1)

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However, the necessity for frequent, unannounced and monthly surveillance of schools by supervisory staff suggests that their capacity to influence school practices through expert power may be constrained.

The school leaders recognised the competence of MEAs in carrying out their assigned tasks, but they tended to feel that MEAs primarily focus on collecting 'quantitative data' and 'ticking boxes' (SS2). As a result, they are not actively involved in assessing the quality of teaching and learning, and hence, it is suggested, have limited expert power to influence the school leaders.

Moving forward, informational power extends beyond expert power as school leaders acknowledge the experience and knowledge of school inspectors and accept the information or feedback they receive. According to French and Raven (1959), this represents a primary form of influence. When shared information persuasively aligns with the school leaders' existing cognitive structure, it has a lasting impact. School leaders become fully convinced of the specific practice, independent of further influence from the school inspectors.

School leaders in Dubai, Ireland and New Zealand mentioned instances of school inspectors' informational power. For example, a principal shared, 'It was reassuring that evaluation partners were overseeing the same things we were seeing. They were able to acknowledge the things that we had already changed or improved, which was quite validating' (NZSL1).

Most of the school leaders in Ireland recognised the constructive influence of school inspectors on the national educational framework, facilitating its alignment with evolving global trends and widely accepted best practices. This influence is manifested through the dissemination of contemporary information, often conveyed via quality criteria and feedback mechanisms. These are the two main conditions reflective of the inspectors' informational power. According to a principal, 'I firmly believe that the Irish inspectors have made a significant and positive impact on Irish schools. They have worked collaboratively with principals, teachers and volunteer parents, equally contributing to ensure that our schools evolve and remain relevant with the changing times' (IESL2). School inspectors asserted their informational power as follows:

> Inspection plays a crucial role in the educational ecosystem as it can serve multiple purposes. Firstly, it helps in setting standards for schools and educational settings. By providing an external perspective on the work of these institutions, it offers valuable insights to the leaders and staff, as well as to the public they serve. Moreover, inspections also play a pivotal role in identifying, praising, and encouraging good practices, which often offers essential reassurance and motivation to the educational community. Additionally, inspections help in pinpointing weaknesses within the system and aid in ensuring that necessary improvements are made to enhance overall performance.
>
> (IESI2)

Informational power, as French and Raven explain it, is contingent not only on the substantive content of communication, which undoubtedly constitutes valuable knowledge, but also on the interplay of interpersonal and persuasive skills employed by school inspectors. If they adeptly articulate alternative approaches to school practices and convincingly illustrate the superior merits of such approaches, changes in school practices—initially prompted by the inspector's feedback or guidance—become ingrained in the school leaders' schema, suggesting lasting change. For example, a KHDA school inspector related an instance of their informational power: 'If you visit any school and attend any lesson, you will see that teaching is no longer teacher-focused; it is student-focused. Assessment for learning is being used rather than the assessment of learning. Students now lead their own learning and are highly engaged' (DBSI1).

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Similar to the scenario with expert power, informational power appears to be underutilised within the supervisory system in Pakistan. The system, as reported by a principal, upholds a rigid hierarchical structure wherein individuals higher in the hierarchy wield greater legitimate power to dispense rewards or punishments.

> Imagine if there are no checks and balances; one becomes lazy. They [the supervisory and monitoring staff] check school leaders, and then we, as school leaders, check teachers.
>
> (PKSL6)

During the interviews, nevertheless, some school leaders spoke favourably about specific deputy district education officers (DDEOs) who demonstrated a genuine commitment to educational quality. During their school visits, these officers provided model lessons, conducted brief assessments to gauge learning levels within classes, and offered guidance to both school leaders and teachers. These actions demonstrated a certain degree of informational power.

In Dubai, school inspectors command robust expert and informational powers. School leaders not only accept but highly value the feedback provided by these inspectors, appreciating its relevance and utility. The inspectors are esteemed for their extensive experience and profound knowledge. Instances have been noted, albeit sporadically, where school leaders have referred to the expert and informational powers of monitoring and supervisory staff in Pakistan. In the context of New Zealand, as discussed, the ERO's new school evaluation approach inherently promotes the exercise of informational power. In Ireland, school leaders frequently acknowledge the informational power, and to a degree expert power, wielded by school inspectors. They invoke the inspectors' rich experience, affirming the pertinence and congruence of the feedback with their assessments of areas requiring improvement within the school.

Referent power

In the context of our study, referent power, as defined by French and Raven, implies that school leaders will seek to associate themselves with school inspectors if the latter possess referent power over the former, a form of power that relies on the charisma and personality characteristics of the school inspectors. Across all four jurisdictions, school leaders displayed varying degrees of influence from the referent power of school inspectors. In Dubai, every school leader interviewed expressed a strong aspiration to become a school inspector. This inclination can be understood within the framework of Dubai's private education system, where school inspectors are perceived as an attractive and highly esteemed group. The school leaders articulated their desire to emulate school inspectors, viewing this role as a means to improve the educational outcomes of the schools they would oversee. This admiration for school inspectors among school leaders signifies the internalisation of the inspectors' beliefs and principles, shaping their thinking, understanding and approach to their own responsibilities.

One principal expressed her keenness to be a school inspector as follows:

> I believe that becoming a school inspector aligns perfectly with my interests, as I have a genuine passion for coaching and mentoring individuals. I find great joy in this work. The way I see it, when we inspect someone, we are offering them an opportunity to develop and better themselves, especially when they approach it positively. This, in turn, becomes a rewarding experience for me too,

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> as I get to learn something new during each inspection. It's like seizing a fresh chance to enhance my own knowledge and skills. (DBSL4)

In contrast to the enthusiastic reception among school leaders in Dubai, those in Ireland exhibited a range of attitudes towards the prospect of transitioning to become school inspectors. While some expressed disinterest in the role, preferring to maintain their current positions as school leaders due to the immediate impact they can wield, others entertained unconventional reasons for considering the switch. For instance, one school leader highlighted the appeal of being able to take annual leave, which is possible as a school inspector but not available due to the demanding nature of their current responsibilities. Nevertheless, some expressed genuine interest in the role should the opportunity arise.

Conversely, those who articulated disinterest provided articulate explanations for their stance. A principal eloquently stated, 'Why anyone would desire to become a school inspector is beyond my understanding. Personally, I fail to perceive any personal value in such work. It entails visiting schools and being the person who is supposedly welcomed but often faces an unwelcoming atmosphere' (IESL4).

In New Zealand, school leaders generally expressed temporary interest in becoming evaluation partners due to the legitimate power it grants them to enter schools and observe practices. This experience offers valuable learning opportunities and insights they can later apply in their own schools. Many regarded it as a 'significant opportunity' and 'a wonderful learning experience'. However, not all principals embraced this idea, preferring the rewards of staying within their own school communities. One principal shared, 'I'm not sure how satisfying it would be moving from school to school. I like being in my school, working with my team. I love interacting with students and being part of my school community' (NZSL5).

In contrast, another principal saw it as a viable career move, stating, 'I would never have wanted to go into the review office with the previous model. But with this model, I see huge potential, and it does excite me as a possible career move beyond principalship. I feel I have a lot to offer in that role' (NZSL1).

School leaders acknowledged the exposure and prestige evaluation partners enjoy, making the role appealing, albeit temporarily, as they seek to gather insights and experiences from diverse school environments.

In Pakistan, unlike in Dubai, Ireland and New Zealand, the two quality assurance (QA) systems have different social statuses, thereby exerting varying degrees of influence. The MEAs possess powers of reward, coercion and legitimate influence, yet their compensation structures and benefits do not align with those of school leaders. Understandably, no school head expressed any inclination towards joining this group. In contrast, supervisory staff hold a superior position, evoking a sense of privilege among school leaders. During interviews, school leaders spoke of the respect and favourability associated with positions such as DDEO or DEO. Some officers earned admiration from school leaders through personal attributes and qualities; for instance, one school leader mentioned a DEO who would teach mathematics to classes during school visits (PKSL5).

Consequently, school leaders displayed an interest in these supervisory roles. However, the demanding nature of the positions, coupled with poor work-life balance and excessive political interference, disinclined them from pursuing such roles further. One principal explained, 'I have been offered the DDEO's position several times, but there's too much political interference. As a principal, I have more autonomy to do as I please' (PKSL7).

In Dubai, there is a pervasive desire among school leaders to transition into the role of a school inspector, highlighting the significant referent power these inspectors possess. Conversely, in Pakistan, while not all school leaders aspire to join the ranks, there exists a palpable sense of respect and admiration for certain supervisory officers. This sentiment underscores a clear exercise of referent power, as these officers are esteemed and trusted by

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school leaders. In Ireland, a subdued level of referent power is observed. Despite the varying attitudes, it is notable that school inspectors do not exert considerable referent power over school leaders. Conversely, in New Zealand, evaluation partners wield substantial referent power, evident in school leaders expressing keen interest in assuming such roles due to the abundant learning opportunities associated with them, albeit temporarily. It is noteworthy that, with the exception of MEAs, all QA personnel in the four regimes under study had prior experience as school leaders or teachers before joining the QA regimes. This suggests that perhaps influenced by the referent power of school inspectors, they chose to transition into these roles.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Across the investigated QA systems, a comprehensive examination of the roles of inspectors, evaluation partners, monitoring and supervisory personnel has revealed the presence of six essential bases of social power. These power bases manifest with varying degrees of influence on school leaders, as acknowledged both explicitly and implicitly throughout the interview process. Table 2 presents the levels of influence for each base of social power across the examined jurisdictions, as determined through the analysis of interview data, using Vagias's (2006) Likert scale response anchors. Notably, the reward and coercive powers wielded by the supervisory and monitoring staff appear most potent in the context of Pakistan, as these powers are tightly focused on individuals, influencing aspects such as teacher salaries and school leaders' reprimands or inquiries. This creates a high-stakes or hard governance inspection regime. Dubai's reward and coercion mechanisms primarily concern institutions, where a school's presence or exit from the market hinges on inspection reports and the rankings given therein. Nevertheless, poor rankings have severe consequences, ranging from parental distrust in educational quality to potential school closures, making Dubai's inspections nearly as high stakes as that of Pakistan. In Ireland, school inspectors' application of reward and coercive powers are channelled through inspection reports. The absence of school grading and lack of repercussions for poor performance render the inspection system low stakes (O'Brien et al., 2019). Nonetheless, there can still be considerable implications. As Hult and Segerholm (2017) contend, due to the recognition that inspection reports can be used to bolster school recruitment efforts, there has been a perceptible shift in school leaders' attitudes towards inspectors and the outcomes of inspection. Conversely, in New Zealand, the implementation of the new school evaluation for improvement approach has led to a reduction in the emphasis on rewards and coercion. This departure from traditional methods of power and influence in external inspection renders the presence of these influences largely nominal or symbolic rather than substantive, making it virtually devoid of any stakes. It remains to be seen how this departure from, as it were, the traditional tools of inspection impact upon inspection outcomes and effectiveness over time.

Reward and coercive powers demand continuous monitoring, legislative support, adherence to quality standards and authoritative positions to ensure compliance (Brown, 2013). In Pakistan and Dubai, frequent visits by quality assurance personnel are observed, and any laxity in this aspect can result in reduced compliance, as reward and coercion mechanisms may not significantly impact school leaders' internal beliefs or concerns. While this approach may not always be cost-effective or sustainable for achieving transformative quality improvements, according to previous studies, specific areas have shown progress: these include teachers' attendance and punctuality, student enrolment, availability of basic facilities, and the frequency of supervisory support visits (Gardezi, McNamara, Brown & O'Hara, 2023a; Nadeem & Saadi, 2019). Therefore, although the utility of reward and coercion powers in

TABLE 2 Level of influence of bases of social powers.

	Reward	Coercion	Legitimate	Expert	Informational	Referent
Dubai	Extremely influential	Extremely influential	Extremely influential	Extremely influential	Extremely influential	Extremely influential
Ireland	Somewhat influential	Somewhat influential	Very influential	Very influential	Very influential	Somewhat influential
New Zealand	Not at all influential	Not at all influential	Very influential	Very influential	Very influential	Very influential
Pakistan	Slightly influential	Extremely influential	Extremely influential	Somewhat influential	Somewhat influential	Somewhat influential

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promoting quality improvement is acknowledged, their ability to bring about a deeper transformation in school leaders' attitudes and belief systems may be limited, requiring a more nuanced approach and sustained efforts.

Brown (2013) groups reward, coercive and legitimate power together, arguing that these tools are inherently tied to the hierarchical position of the influencing agent. The operation of reward and coercive powers within the school inspection process greatly elevates its stakes in the perception of those on the receiving end. In Dubai and Ireland, discussions with school leaders revealed the presence of accountability pressure, occasionally leading to window-dressing strategies aimed at achieving favourable inspection reports. Pakistan's unique approach of unannounced visits by monitoring and supervisory staff prevents such strategies, keeping schools under a state of 'panoptic performativity' (Perryman et al., 2018). In contrast, New Zealand's new approach seems to lessen the stakes, yet it places a greater onus on school leaders to ensure internal or self-evaluation alignment, as they steer the evaluation process. For example, a school leader shared, 'I think it's a high trust model and inherently in a high trust model there's a higher chance of loss of rigour … there's a danger that rigour can be removed from parts of it, because the evaluation partner is not coming in to look at the whole school. The evaluation partners are coming to look at the pre-agreed dimension that the school would like to focus on' (NZSL3).

In each of the four regimes, whether attributed to inspectors, evaluation partners or monitoring and supervisory staff, legitimate power is consistently strong. Designation and job descriptions confer specific legitimate powers, affording these individuals the authority to enforce cooperation among school leaders and staff, thereby ensuring compliance with recommendations to avert potential sanctions. The authority of quality assurance personnel's legitimate power is augmented through the coupling of rewards and coercion, leading school leaders in Dubai and Pakistan to conform to inspection requirements. The ERO, operating uniquely as a national agency directly accountable to the parliament, also wields legitimate power, influencing the Ministry of Education to take corrective measures in response to evaluation findings, as reported by school leaders, 'ERO reviews have been used by the Ministry of Education to get rid of principals and boards and to bring in people from outside' (NZSL2). In Ireland, a distinctive amalgamation emerges, characterised by a prevalence of high legitimate power juxtaposed with a low-stakes inspection system.

Expert, informational and referent powers share a common thread of influencing internal beliefs, operating independently of the hierarchical position of the influencing agent (Brown, 2013). Expert and informational powers are intrinsically linked to school leaders' faith and trust in the inspectors' experience and expertise. Stronger belief engenders higher credibility and increases the potency of inspectors' recommendations and feedback in shaping school leaders' practices. School improvement sustainability, as suggested by Baxter (2017), is built upon trust and confidence between school leaders and inspectors. Elsewhere, Ehren and Baxter (2021) suggest that in a high-trust context where school leaders and inspectors share similar goals and are committed to meeting those goals, intensive monitoring is not required. In the case of New Zealand, phrases such as trust, building relationships and instilling confidence emerged as recurrent themes in conversations, but only time will tell if their evaluation for improvement approach will be successful. However, these phrases did not come up during interviews in other jurisdictions.

Referent power, a particularly intriguing aspect, emerges from the personal qualities and attributes of inspectors that resonate with school leaders, making them relatable and likable. When inspectors hold referent power, school leaders are more amenable to influence, more inclined to heed guidance, and more motivated to comply with requests or suggestions due to the positive feelings and admiration they generate. Notably, Dubai's school inspectors command substantial referent power, as expressed through school leaders' eagerness to join the inspectors' team. Some school leaders in Ireland and New Zealand also expressed

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interest in becoming inspectors or evaluation partners, viewing it as a privilege and a learning opportunity. Some did not entertain the idea at all depending largely on the interaction they might have had with the school inspectors. In Pakistan, although instances of individual respect for monitoring and supervisory staff do exist, the overall inclination towards joining their ranks is limited. Moreover, in Ireland, New Zealand and Pakistan, where the reception of referent power among school leaders towards school inspectors exhibits variance, a corresponding variability is observed in the recognition of expert power. This observation implies that when school leaders perceive school inspectors as possessing expertise and knowledge, there is a heightened probability of alignment in perspective and viewpoint between the two parties. This point strongly indicates that inspectors, in order to have and operationalise these powers, need a high level of experience, knowledge and training and, most intangibly of all, the personality type required to encourage and influence those they are evaluating and mentoring.

Gustafsson et al. (2015) propose that school inspection, as a catalyst for change, often operates indirectly, fostering developmental processes that set clear standards and expectations, and supporting schools in building evaluation and improvement capacities, rather than relying on direct coercive methods. This perspective aligns with the expert and informational powers of school inspectors, influencing school leaders' practices more sustainably while minimising the influence of coercive power. Brown (2013) concurs, emphasising that referent, expert and informational powers, by altering school leaders' internal belief systems, contribute to transformative quality more effectively than the other power bases, provided that school leaders have confidence and trust in inspectors' competence and credibility. Altrichter and Kemethofer (2018) posit that in high-stakes inspection systems school leaders pay more attention to inspection criteria before the inspection visit to avoid sanctions whereas in low-stakes systems, inspection criteria are regarded as long-term targets deemed of significance across an extended period of time. Therefore, in New Zealand school leaders are more likely to respond positively to the informational messages of evaluation partners than in the rest of the jurisdictions. However, as in any organisation, quality assurance personnel in these jurisdictions may have different levels of expertise despite large investments in their professional development (Gardezi, McNamara, Brown, & O'Hara, 2023b). Not all of them can exercise an equal degree of referent, expert and informational powers on school leaders and this is evident in the school leaders' responses.

In conclusion, while referent, expert and informational powers exert stronger influence over internal beliefs, the importance of reward, coercive and legitimate powers should not be overlooked. These forms of power, which are closely tied to policy compliance and adherence to quality standards, play a crucial role in driving improvement (Altrichter & Kemethofer, 2018). Furthermore, the methods used by QA personnel—such as grading, public reporting, effective communication, and personal charisma to wield the powers vested in them by their QA system—shape the extent to which school leaders adjust their practices. According to Brown et al. (2024), for inspections to be genuinely effective, they must not only regulate and evaluate but also inspire and facilitate sustained improvement in schools. The analysis of school inspectors' influence and efficacy across four quality assurance systems provides valuable insights into the diverse practices and perceptions of school leaders and QA personnel. These insights are essential for informing the development and refinement of school inspection systems, with the ultimate goal of maximising the impact of inspections and enhancing the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms. To achieve this, a balanced integration of different power bases should be tailored to the specific contexts of each country or state, fostering positive change and improvement across varied educational environments.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Sarah Gardezi: Conceptualization; methodology; investigation; software; formal analysis; data curation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; project administration. **Gerry McNamara:** Supervision; writing – review and editing; conceptualization. **Martin Brown:** Conceptualization; supervision. **Joe O'Hara:** Conceptualization; supervision.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethics approval was obtained from Dublin City University, Research Ethics Committee before conducting this research.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Four provinces in Pakistan—Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

[2] In the new school evaluation approach in New Zealand, each Evaluation Partner (previously known as the Education Review Officer) is assigned 40 schools that they must visit as per the schools' needs and assist in building their evaluation capacity. Evaluation Partners no longer conduct team visits to schools for a specified number of days to review their practices.

[3] These services have similar roles and designations in all four provinces, albeit with slightly different titles. To maintain clarity and avoid redundancy, the titles used in the largest province, Punjab, are utilised for all provinces.

[4] Social Exchange Theory was first introduced by George C. Homans in 1958.

[5] Theory of Social Dominance was initially proposed by Jim Sidanius, Erik Devereux and Felicia Pratto in 1992.

[6] The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspects education and skills services for learners of all ages in England and regulates services that care for children and young people.

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