

Evaluation of a Muslim Pre-School in the United States Using Elements of the Ofsted Model

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Abstract

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This article reviewed the Ofsted inspection model in England and reported on its implementation in a Muslim pre-school located in an American southeastern state. The inspection methods included classroom observations, interviews with staff, parent survey, and scrutiny of artifacts. After the pre-school was inspected and the feedback was given to the administration orally and in a detailed written report, an improvement plan was developed by the author to address the inspection recommendations. The results of the inspection showed that implementing elements of the Ofsted inspection model in the pre-school contributed to overall educational improvement. A follow-up communication with the administration showed that curriculum changes were made, teachers were provided with more professional development opportunities, and their teaching practices had improved. Considering these findings, this study demonstrated that there was an alignment between the mission of the pre-school and the parents' aspirations; and that an educational accountability system such as the Ofsted inspection model have had a positive impact on the educational provision even though not all elements of the inspection model were implemented, many of which require a team of inspectors and a quality assurance mechanism.

Keywords:

Ofsted, Muslim schools, school inspection, staff supervision, school evaluation

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Introduction:

School inspections are used in many national educational systems in Africa, Asia, Europe, South America, and Oceania to ensure that teachers comply with the prescribed curriculum and classroom procedures (Mbiti, 2016; van Bruggen, 2010; Alkutich, 2012; Ehren et al., 2015; Santiago et al., 2012; Hofer, Holzberger, & Reiss, 2020). However, more systematic approaches to inspection that combine accountability and school improvement have been implemented in some European countries, Australia, and New Zealand. School inspection was defined by Hofer et al. (2020, p. 1) as “a systematic, goal-oriented, and criteria-based process conducted by an external authority consisting of data collection (most often including site visits) and data feedback on school quality that serves accountability/control purposes, enforcement of policy, and/or school improvement.” This systematic approach is also referred to as “high-stake” external evaluation. According to Altrichter and Kemethofer (2015), as cited in Ólafsdóttir et al. (2022, p. 10), “this high-stake approach uses differentiated evaluation models, outcome-oriented evaluation, sanctions for failing schools, and reports on individual schools to inform the public.” The authors also described the ‘low-stake’ approach to external school evaluations as one that does not impose sanctions for failing schools and does not inform the public with reports on individual schools.

An example of high-stake inspection approaches is found in a survey of approximately 2,300 principals in seven European countries, in which they felt more “accountability pressure” by becoming more attentive to the quality of expectations communicated by inspections; by being more sensitive to the stakeholders’ reactions to inspection results; and by being more active with respect to improvement activities (Altrichter & Kemethofer, 2015). In a study of six European countries’ school inspection systems in which 2,239 principals in primary and secondary schools participated, the findings showed that the most effective inspectorates of education used a differentiated model that included site visits and the sharing of inspection reports with parents and the general public. The study also pointed to some drawbacks of this differentiated inspection approach such as narrowing the curriculum and discouraging teachers from experimenting with new teaching methods (Ehren, et al, 2015). In a synthesis study of international research on school inspections in the last three decades, Hofer, Holzberger, & Reiss (2020) found that the most consistent positive inspection effects resulted from standardized

achievement tests in Mathematics and in the mother language. They also reported that perceived accountability pressure and the perceived quality of the inspection were two of several factors that influenced inspection success.

Among the high-stake inspection approaches, the English model Ofsted, acronym for Office for Standards in Education, is regarded as one of the most comprehensive inspectorate systems in Europe (van Bruggen, 2010). Variations of Ofsted model have been implemented in some Asian, Middle Eastern, and South American countries to assess and improve their public and private educational systems (Rothman, 2018). Ofsted is a non-ministerial department of the United Kingdom government responsible for inspecting and regulating educational and career services for students and learners of all ages. Ofsted reports directly to the Parliament, parents, educators, and commissioners (Ofsted, 2022). Ofsted inspectors carry out regular inspections of all educational institutions throughout England and publish their results online (Ofsted, 2017). The purpose of Ofsted inspections is to ensure accountability and quality while maintaining school leaders' autonomy in making staffing and curricular decisions.

A typical inspection follows a regimented process of approximately twenty steps, from pre-inspection data analysis to the publication of the online report (Jerald, 2012, Ofsted, 2022; van Bruggen, 2010). Inspections are conducted by Ofsted inspectors who are practicing or retired educators with expertise in areas of teaching, curriculum development, and school administration. Some Ofsted inspectors also work as independent consultants or contracted inspectors for inspectorates and governmental educational agencies across the world. The author was an inspector with the Dubai School Inspection Bureau whose inspection system was heavily influenced by the British models, especially Ofsted in England and Education Scotland (formerly known as Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education).

Despite the long history of inspections in England and their impact on the quality of education (Jerald, 2012; Hussain, 2012), not everybody agreed with the current inspection processes and outcomes. Some critics believed that the current inspection system leads to normalization of inspection processes whereby schools operate within the accepted norms of an 'effective school' model that sets the agenda by which successful practice is measured (Perryman et. Al, 2018). In a study conducted by Stumm et. Al (2021), Ofsted-rated school quality was found to be a weak predictor of secondary school outcomes at age sixteen. Others found that the judgements of

inspectors prevail against the perspectives of school leaders, staff, students, and parents. They also believed that the inspection system is not fully equitable to schools with large student populations from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds (Hutchinson, 2016; Park, 2013). The Ofsted inspection framework of 2019 saw some of the biggest changes to education inspection since 2015. While the framework itself looks very different from the 2015 one, the actual inspection process has not been radically changed (Butler, 2019). Some of the changes include an emphasis on reducing the amount of documentation that schools are expected to produce; inspectors will not evaluate lesson plans; and will not use the institution's own performance data to make judgements. There were also more recent additions to the inspection framework such as safety protocols to ensure that inspections are completed in a COVID-secure way (Ofsted, 2022).

In the American educational landscape of late 19th and early 20th centuries, school inspection was the main approach used to evaluate the performance of principals and teachers and to assess the curriculum and building facilities. That approach was compatible with the dominant bureaucratic model in which school inspectors assumed great power over teachers and headmasters. Change came in early 20th Century with the gradual decrease of the subjective element inherent in inspections and the introduction of impersonal methods of school management. Supervision in the second half of the 20th Century replaced the strict methods of school management and ushered in a new era of clinical supervision, which is characterized by developmental supervision, transformational leadership, teacher empowerment, and supervision as a formal process of collaboration between teachers and supervisors.

Since the Congress enacted the No Child Left Behind in 2001 and reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2015, states have created mandates and standardized assessments to raise achievement scores and increase graduation rates. In the case where schools are deemed chronically underperforming or unable to meet state's requirements, they are usually placed on probation and closely monitored by the school district. However, if the whole district is frequently failing to meet the expectations, it is sometimes placed under the direct control of the city or state, which closely monitors its performance through visits by district officials, external consultants, or inspectors from the department of education.

Even though the European systems of inspection, especially Ofsted in England, have been in existence for decades, very few school districts in the United States have ventured to implement

the inspection model to assess the performance of schools as recommended by reports published by educational think tanks (Jerald, 2012; Gross, 2012). There are many differences between English and American educational systems that could explain the limited practice of school inspections in US schools. Some of the major differences are summarized in the following five points:

1. The English national educational system is organized hierarchically while the American educational system is comprised of fifty different state educational departments. Each state has its unique way to regulate and provide funds to the school districts within its borders.
2. Schools in England follow a national curriculum, but the United States has only common standards for language arts and mathematics that are adopted by most states. However, each state adapts these standards to its varied needs.
3. Local educational authorities in England have uniform structures and report directly to the Department of Education. School districts in the US have complete control over their educational affairs. They neither ascribe to one unified system of governance nor report directly to the federal government.
4. The government provides full funding to English public schools while most financial aid for American school districts is provided by local property taxes and state funds.
5. Public schools in England must undergo regular inspections that require the implementation of inspectors' prior recommendations. In the US, most states use their own accountability systems that may include external accreditation by regional accrediting associations such as NEASC, Advance Ed, SACS, MSA, and WASC (Bernasconi, 2004).

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate the significant importance of educational accountability and its role in enhancing student learning and teacher effectiveness. In their review of the effects of educational accountability worldwide, Leith wood and Earl (2000) argued that "greater accountability is assumed to have two consequences: (a) better alignment between public aspirations and the purposes schools strive to achieve and (b) improved performance on the part of schools, typically defined by traditional achievement criteria" (p. 1). This paper sought to examine the alignment between the mission of a private Muslim pre-school in an American southeastern state and the parents' aspirations; and to explore the impact of an accountability system such as the Ofsted model on its instructional programs. Based on the literature and the author's expertise in school inspections, this paper proposed that the implementation of the Ofsted

model would bring forth an improvement in the pre-school's provision as a whole despite the use of fewer inspection elements. In the next sections, the paper presents the methodology followed, the results of the study, discussion of the results, conclusion, recommendations, and limitations.

Method:

Taking into consideration the literature review about inspections, the differences between the American accountability system and Ofsted, and the challenges facing any attempt to implement the English inspection model in an American private pre-school, it becomes evident that there is a knowledge gap regarding school inspections in the American K-12 educational system. To help fill this gap, the author set to inspect a private pre-school in the Southeast of the United States using the Ofsted model with modifications to fit the pre-school context and the limited scope of this inspection process.

This study used an ethnographical method for collecting data through observations and interviews, which are then used to draw conclusions about how the inspection process functions. Ethnography is defined by LeCompte and Schensul (2010, p. 1) as "a systematic approach to learning about the social and cultural life of communities, institutions, and other settings." The authors described this approach as scientific and investigative. The researcher in ethnographical studies is the primary tool of data collection. They use rigorous research methods and data collection techniques to avoid bias and ensure accuracy of data; they emphasize and build on the perspectives of the people in the research setting; and use both inductive and deductive approaches in order to build more effective and socially and culturally valid local theories for testing and adapting them for use both locally and elsewhere (p. 1).

To supplement the ethnographic method, the author followed a participatory action research approach, which involves the researcher and participants working together to understand a problematic situation and change it for the better. There are many definitions of this approach, which share some common elements. Chevalier and Buckles (2019, p.3) defined Participatory Action Research (PAR) as an artistic way to discover the world and making it better at the same time. In its community-based model, PAR requires the active involvement of community members in all phases of the action inquiry process.

The author applied the Ofsted inspection approach in a private pre-school located in an urban area of a Southeastern state from an ethnographical and PAR perspectives. The site was serving 25 children of ages 4 and 5 and offered a regular academic program in addition to lessons in Arabic

and religious subjects. The inspection approach followed the Ofsted inspection framework of 2019, which requires:

1. Maintaining a positive working relationship based on courteous and professional behavior.
2. Using a 4-point grading scale to make the principal judgements: Outstanding, good, requires improvement, and inadequate.
3. Using all the available evidence to evaluate what it is like to be a learner in the school.
4. Making graded judgements on the following areas using the 4-point scale: Quality of education, behavior and attitudes, personal development, and leadership and management (Ofsted, 2022).

Prior to the inspection, the author discussed the inspection process with the pre-school administrators by phone and gathered detailed information about the program, staff, and children demographics to prepare for the visit. On the day of inspection, the author conducted lesson observations; interviewed administrators and teachers; observed children during playtime and lunch; surveyed parents; evaluated the facilities; and examined the pre-school documents. During the full-day inspection, the author recorded aspects of teaching and learning that were considered effective and identified ways in which they can be improved. The author spent most of the inspection time gathering first-hand evidence by observing the quality of the daily routines and activities of students and staff. These observations enabled the author to judge the contribution that teachers make to children's learning, progress, safety, and well-being. A 4-point grading scale (Outstanding, good, requires improvement, and inadequate) was used to make the principal judgements on quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development, and leadership and management. In addition, terms (all, most, majority, minority, and few) were used to denote the proportions of children attaining the learning outcomes.

The time spent on lesson observations included watching students at play and circle time; talking to the children and teachers about the activities provided; observing the interactions between teachers and students; assessing students' level of understanding and their engagement in learning; talking to teachers about their assessment of students' knowledge and skills; observing daily routines and how they are used to support students' personal development; and evaluating teachers' knowledge of the curriculum.

The author conducted joint observations with the pre-school principal in order to see first-hand how the evaluation process was performed in the classroom. After each joint observation, the

author and the administrator compared their notes and discussed their findings, especially in the areas of teaching, learning, and care. Participating in joint observations was a good opportunity for the administrator to examine the activities, daily routines, and students' progress in an extensive and systematic manner.

In addition to classroom observations and discussions with teachers and administrators, the author examined curriculum materials, samples of planning and assessment documents; staff qualifications; training and professional development; and records of communications with parents. These activities covered all the aspects of the inspection in a 360-degree evaluative process in order to ensure reliability of the findings and accuracy of judgements and feedback.

The author recorded the collected evidence by making handwritten notes about the observed aspects; then he transferred the notes to the computer immediately after the inspection was completed. The author ensured that the evidence is confidential and reflected accurately classroom observations, discussions with teachers and administrators, and document scrutiny. The evidence was used to create judgements, develop the main points for feedback, and to write the report, which consisted of specific recommendations about improvements needed in the areas of teaching, learning, curriculum, school environment, resources, and communication with parents.

Results:

Overall, the pre-school inspection covered the four areas of Ofsted Inspection Framework of 2019 adequately. The inspector maintained a positive working relationship with the pre-school administrators and teachers, and displayed courteous and professional behaviour during the inspection process. The inspector used all the available evidence to evaluate learning and teaching, including children's work, lesson plans, classroom environment, parent survey, and other artefacts. The quality of education at the pre-school was judged good overall based on the evidence garnered from class and playground observations, parent survey, and interviews with administrators and teachers. Effective teaching in the subjects of English, math, Arabic, and Islamic studies resulted in most students achieving the learning objectives as demonstrated by their engaged participation in classwork. Almost all children displayed a respectful attitude towards the teaching staff and classmates during lesson observations. There were no unusual behaviour issues observed during the inspection. In terms of personal development, most children showed cognitive, physical, and social development levels that were appropriate to their age and expected stage. The author judged these two aspects as good across the pre-school based on class and playground observations.

The inspector's evaluation of leadership and management skills of the pre-school leadership team was judged good overall. The pre-school leaders displayed professional and courteous relationships with teachers and their assistants and were visibly present in classrooms to check on children's wellbeing. In conversations with the administrators, the inspector found that they had the knowledge and expertise in early childhood education that were necessary to lead the institution effectively. Furthermore, they had a good management skill set as demonstrated by the favourable reputation that the pre-school has among parents and the long waiting list of families applying for admission. The author judged this aspect as good based on site observations, interviews, and parent survey results.

Towards the end of the inspection, the author shared the main findings with the administrators using oral feedback and emailed them a written report containing final judgments, a synopsis of the evidence base, and a list of recommendations for improvement. Below are samples from the evidence base:

English skills are well-developed among non-native speakers. Most teachers know how to teach their subjects to students and consider their developmental stages appropriately in the planning and delivery of instruction...However, in few lessons, most activities focus on tracing and coloring, and, at times, students lack real opportunities to do hands-on activities that would develop their artistic skills and creativity.

The Quran curriculum is organized around memorization of short Surahs and basic explanations of their meanings. Each month teachers focus on a new Surah and work with students on pronunciation, meaning, and recitation.

In English and Arabic, students are given weekly and monthly assessments to measure their literacy skills, but formative and continuous assessments are conducted irregularly and informally.

The center room has sufficient equipment for a healthy learning environment. New easels have become the students' favorites and safety is closely monitored all the time. During recess, staff members escort students to the multipurpose room in orderly lines. Students play in a safe environment and are well supervised. In the absence of quality gym materials and equipment, play is limited to ball bouncing and kicking most of the time. Outdoor recess is offered during warm weather, but the playground is insufficiently equipped.

In survey results, parents demonstrated an overall satisfaction with the quality of the

program, especially the efforts of the staff in promoting the emotional, social, and physical well-being of their students.

As mentioned earlier, the main findings and recommendations were included in a written form in the inspection report that was shared with the pre-school administration after the completion of the inspection. Below are three examples from the recommendation list that was published in the final report:

1. Adopt a curriculum that better meets the emotional, social, physical, and cognitive needs of students.
2. Limit the use of worksheets and provide more opportunities for students to do hands-on activities in order to demonstrate their creativity and artistic skills.
3. Arrange for regular parent-teacher conferences and timely reports that provide details of their students' development (emotional, social, and physical), in addition to their abilities and skills in Quran, Arabic, English, religion, and math.

It is important to note that the inspection process at the Muslim pre-school implemented only seven tasks out of eighteen that are regularly performed by Ofsted inspectors. The reasons for this low number of tasks could be explained by the limited scope of the inspection, the small size of the pre-school, its inexperience with inspections, and the absence of quality assurance. In addition, many tasks require the presence of additional inspectors and the availability of documents from previous inspections to provide a foundation to benchmark judgements.

As a follow-up to the inspection, the author developed an improvement plan at the request of the pre-school administration to address the seven recommendations. The plan included specific tasks, responsibilities, an implementation timeline, resources, and evaluation methods. Further guidance was provided throughout the implementation process to support the administration's efforts and ensure that teachers and parents participated in the improvement plan. Empirical (judgment ratings) and anecdotal evidence showed that the oral feedback during the inspection, the written report, and the support after the inspection had contributed to the adoption of a new and comprehensive curriculum, review of Arabic and Islamic curricula, more professional development opportunities for teachers, and improved teaching practices.

Discussion

The inspection site was a private Muslim pre-school serving 25 children of ages 4 and 5 that offered a regular academic program in addition to lessons in Arabic and religious subjects. Prior

to the inspection, the author discussed the inspection process with the pre-school administrators by phone and gathered detailed information about the program, staff, and children demographics before the visit. The author inspected the pre-school for a full day; then he conducted lesson observations; interviewed administrators and teachers; surveyed parents; evaluated the facilities; and examined the school documents.

This study presented the administrators and teachers with the first opportunity to be evaluated using an inspection model and to receive a detailed feedback from an outside observer on their performance and students' learning. The results supported the hypothesis proposed in the Introduction that the Ofsted model would have a positive impact on the pre-school as a whole despite the limited scope of the inspection. The findings also demonstrated that, despite the partial use of the Ofsted model due to lack of an inspection team and quality assurance, the inspection process yielded a change in the learning culture of the pre-school as demonstrated by the adoption of a new curriculum, improved curricular approaches, professional development offerings for teachers, improved teaching practices, and a pre-school improvement plan. Some of these results corroborated what prior studies on the effectiveness of inspections had been reporting in the last decade (Altrichter & Kemethofer, (2015); Ehren, et al, (2015); Hofer, Holzberger, & Reiss (2020); Hussain, (2012); and Jerald, (2012)).

The replication of this study in other grade levels and different school contexts would be fraught with challenges considering that the inspection process at the Muslim pre-school implemented only seven tasks out of eighteen that are regularly performed by Ofsted inspectors, and which require a team of experienced inspectors, a quality assurance process to ascertain the fidelity of judgment ratings, a pre-inspection self-study by the pre-school administration, and a lengthy stay at the site to cover all eighteen tasks.

Conclusion:

Around the world, national educational systems are using inspections to evaluate student achievement, teachers, and programs. These inspections are either low-stake that do not impose sanctions for failing schools and do not inform the public via reports on individual schools, or high-stake, which use differentiated evaluation models, outcome-oriented evaluation, sanctions for failing schools, and advertise schools' reports to the public. American schools, on the other hand, do not use inspections, but rely on district and state student assessment requirements, and/or outside accreditation to ensure accountability before the public.

This article sought to examine the impact of the Ofsted model of inspection on a private Muslim pre-school in a southeastern state of the United States of America. Despite the mixed literature findings on the effectiveness of this model in England's schools, the author chose it because of its rigorous approach, comprehensive scope, and focus on teaching and learning. After the pre-school was inspected and the feedback was given to the administration orally and in a detailed written report, an improvement plan was developed by the author to address the inspection recommendations. A follow-up communication with the administration showed that curriculum changes were made, teachers were provided with more professional development opportunities, and their teaching practices had improved. Considering these findings, this study demonstrated that an inspection model such as Ofsted could have a positive impact on the educational provision even though not all inspection tasks were implemented, many of which require a team of inspectors and a quality assurance mechanism.

Recommendations:

To build on this study's findings, the author recommends the following:

1. Expanding the study to higher grades in order to examine the effects of inspection on teaching and learning in multiple subjects and grade levels.
2. Preparing teams of American inspectors who have the subject area knowledge and assessment expertise to inspect a wide range of grades and subjects, in addition to other areas such as student well-being, facilities, and transportation.
3. Adapting the inspection model to the American schooling context by incorporating state educational requirements and considering accreditation agencies' standards and benchmarks.
4. Conducting a meta-analysis of peer-reviewed studies of inspection systems in the world to compare and contrast their processes and effects on the quality of education in their countries.

Limitations:

The article provided evidence that it is possible to implement the Ofsted model in a Muslim private pre-school. However, this one-time inspection may not be considered a sufficiently reliable evidence that such a systematic, rigorous, and data-driven model could be applied to other American schools. Many constraints will certainly preempt the use of an inspection model in public schools. Some of these constraints include state accountability requirements, a strong unionized teaching corps, and a well-entrenched culture of staff evaluation and supervision. Furthermore, an Ofsted-type model requires teams of qualified full-time inspectors and a system

of quality assurance to oversee the inspection work. It is also important to note that the inspection process at the Muslim pre-school implemented only seven tasks out of eighteen that are regularly performed by Ofsted inspectors.

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