



RESEARCH ARTICLE

PROFESSIONALIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL INSPECTORS IN CONGO: ANALYSIS OF GAPS BETWEEN PRESCRIBED KNOWLEDGE AND ACTUAL PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

In the Congo, education inspectors play a central role in implementing educational policies. However, a persistent gap between prescribed competency frameworks and actual practices hinders their effectiveness. This qualitative study, carried out in the department of Brazzaville, aims to analyze the factors at the root of these discrepancies, and to propose avenues for improvement. It uses a comprehensive approach based on interviews, observations and documentary analysis. The results reveal structural constraints, poorly adapted training and the prevalence of informal standards. Concrete recommendations are formulated to reinforce the professionalization of the inspectorate.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is universally recognized as a strategic lever for sustainable development, as it is both a fundamental right and a central vector for social, economic and cultural transformation (UNESCO, 2021; UNDP, 2023). It enables the formation of human capital, the reduction of inequalities and the promotion of active citizenship. In sub-Saharan African countries, and particularly in the Republic of Congo, improving the quality of education is at the heart of public policy, in response to persistent challenges linked to school massification, territorial inequalities and low student performance (Benoît & Tchamda, 2022; Avenard & Diouf, 2021). In this context, educational inspectors occupy a strategic position in the governance of the education system. As middle-management actors, their mission is not limited to administrative control, but extends to pedagogical evaluation, teacher coaching, support for the implementation of reforms, and monitoring of teaching quality (Barrère, 2020; De Ketele, 2019). Their role is all the more crucial in a context of change, marked by curricular transformations, pedagogical innovations and the injunction to professionalize teaching practices. However, a persistent gap has been observed between prescribed knowledge - defined by skills reference frameworks, regulatory texts and institutional expectations - and the actual practices implemented in the field by inspectors. This observation, noted in both northern and

southern countries, calls into question the ability of the education system to provide inspectors with the conditions and resources they need to carry out their work in accordance with established standards (Pastré, Mayen & Vergnaud, 2022; Mukamurera & Martineau, 2020). In the Republic of Congo, this discrepancy raises major issues of professionalization, professional legitimacy, the coherence of educational policies and the effectiveness of pedagogical supervision. While recent educational reforms aim to enhance the quality of teaching, notably through continuous training and results-based management (MEN-Congo, 2022), implementation conditions remain unevenly mastered and often disconnected from field realities (Mbounou & Ngakala, 2024).

The aim of this study is to analyze the professional dynamics of educational inspectors in the Congo, highlighting the structural, organizational and cultural constraints that limit their ability to carry out their mission in accordance with official prescriptions. The aim is to understand how inspectors construct their activity in a constrained environment, to question the effects of their initial and continuing training, and to identify the gaps between the prescribed and the actual, in order to formulate avenues of improvement for their professionalization. This work is part of a contextualized educational research perspective, crossing the contributions of work on the professionalization of teaching professions (Tardif,

2021; Wittorski, 2019), frameworks of professional acting in situation (Clot, 2022; Perrenoud, 2020) and the analysis of educational regulation devices in African contexts (Avenard & Sagna, 2021). In this sense, it aims to contribute to a better understanding of the issues linked to the quality of pedagogical supervision in developing education systems. In order to carry out this work properly, it will be structured into five (5) sections: section 1 is devoted to the introduction; section 2 is reserved for the research methodology; section 3 will focus on the presentation of the results; as for section 4, it will discuss the results and finally section 5 will illustrate the conclusion of this research work.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

From a comprehensive perspective (Weber, 1971; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), this research adopts a qualitative approach aimed at exploring the reality experienced by educational inspectors in their daily professional lives. The aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of the logics of action, tensions, representations and adjustments made between institutional prescriptions and actual practices. This choice is based on the idea that actors' activity cannot be fully grasped without access to their subjective experience, contextual constraints, room for manoeuvre and relationship to the norm (Van der Maren, 2021; Clot, 2022). The analysis is anchored in a interpretative posture, attentive to the meanings inspectors attribute to their professional gestures in a changing education system.

Data collection tools: Three main data collection instruments were mobilized to triangulate sources and strengthen data validity (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2020):

- **Semi-structured interviews:** conducted with 15 inspectors, 12 primary school teachers and 3 administrative officials from the Ministry of Education. These interviews explored perceptions, expected roles and lived realities in pedagogical supervision practices. The interview guides were built around themes related to professional skills, support, constraints in the field, and the impact of reforms.
- **Participatory observation:** conducted during 10 school visits and 5 inspection meetings in the Brazzaville department. This method enables us to gather in situ data on interactions between inspectors and teachers, pedagogical advisory modalities, tools used, and the collective dynamics at play (Woods, 2019).
- **Documentary analysis:** based on a corpus of institutional texts (competency frameworks, ministerial circulars, training programs, inspection reports, in-service training plans, reform texts). This analysis enabled us to identify the prescribed standards, the expectations of professionalization and the institutional logics guiding the actions of inspectors.

Field of study

The department of Brazzaville was chosen as the field of investigation because of its diversity of schools, the density of its primary establishments and its pilot function in the implementation of national educational reforms. It presents a relevant representativeness of the contrasting realities between central and peripheral urban areas, making it possible to observe

the variability of practices according to institutional and socio-educational contexts (Mbougou & Ngakala, 2024).

Specific research objectives: As an extension of the problem posed, this research pursues a set of specific objectives articulated around four complementary axes, aimed at shedding light on the complex reality of the work of primary education inspectors in the Republic of Congo. The approach adopted mobilizes analytical frameworks derived from the sociology of public action (Barbier & Galatzer, 2022), the analysis of professional activities (Clot, 2022) and contextualized educational policies (Lessard & Meirieu, 2020).

Identifying prescribed skills repositories

This involves identifying and analyzing the institutional repositories (ministerial texts, circulars, training plans) defining the skills expected of inspectors. This step aims to clarify the goals assigned to the inspector's role, the dimensions of professionalism expected (evaluation, support, pedagogical guidance) and the ethical principles associated with their mission. It also enables us to situate these prescriptions within the framework of recent educational reforms and requirements in terms of school quality (UNESCO, 2023).

Describing actual professional practices: This second objective consists in documenting the concrete practices implemented by inspectors in their day-to-day activities: school visits, supervision, pedagogical animation, report writing, teacher coaching, etc. Based on field observations and actor accounts, the aim is to grasp the logics of situated action, the constraints experienced, the adjustments made, as well as the diversity of professional postures depending on the context (Bourdoncle, 2021; Huberman, 2022).

Analyzing gaps between prescribed norms and actual practices: The aim of this section is to highlight the discrepancies between theoretical standards and actual practices observed in the field. The aim is to examine the systemic causes of these discrepancies, by identifying structural factors (lack of resources, lack of ongoing training, low staffing levels), organizational factors (centralization, lack of autonomy, low value placed on the inspector's role), and socio-cultural factors (resistance to change, fixed representations of the profession, power logics). This analysis will help us better understand the tensions between top-down injunctions and local realities (Maroy, 2017).

Proposing ways to strengthen professionalization: Based on the above findings, the research aims to formulate operational recommendations for reinforcing the professionalization of educational inspectors. These proposals will be structured around several levers: improving initial and ongoing training, redefining roles and responsibilities, developing support tools, strengthening collegiality, and statutory recognition of the profession. The ultimate aim is to contribute to the emergence of a more effective inspection system, contextualized and adapted to the contemporary challenges facing Congolese schools.

Research findings: Analysis of the empirical data collected through interviews, field observations and documentary study highlights a series of significant gaps between the skills

frameworks prescribed by the institution and the professional practices actually observed among primary school inspectors in Brazzaville. These findings are organized around five major cross-cutting themes:

Competency frameworks insufficiently contextualized: The inspectors interviewed emphasized the excessively theoretical and prescriptive nature of ministerial reference documents, which fail to take account of local socio-educational realities, particularly in rural or isolated areas. These documents often remain generic and not very operational, with a lack of concrete indicators to guide action in constrained contexts (overcrowded classes, degraded infrastructures, low teacher supervision). This criticism ties in with the work of Maroy (2017) on the lack of contextualization

Initial and in-service training ill-suited to the demands of the field: Although training programs are in place, they are considered insufficient, too academic and disconnected from day-to-day professional life. Many inspectors report a lack of practical training on key issues such as local pedagogical guidance, managing teacher-parent conflicts, and the use of digital tools. What's more, the lack of contextualized ongoing training and post-training follow-up limits the lasting effects of professional learning.

"We had training in 2019, but since then, nothing... and in the field, realities have changed."

(Inspector, peri-urban area)

Professional practices marked by adaptation and informality

Faced with limited resources (means of transport, documentation, digital tools), inspectors develop pragmatic adaptation strategies, sometimes on the bangs of official norms. These practices include:

- Local negotiation of rules with school heads;
- Tolerance of certain deviations (late arrivals, teacher absences);
- adjusting pedagogical assessment to the material context.

This informality is indicative of real work under constraint, as described by Clot (2022), and illustrates the gaps between prescribed and actual action.

Highly heterogeneous practices in different geographical contexts

The study highlights a significant disparity between the practices of inspectors in urban and rural areas. While the former benefit from greater administrative resources and easier access to training and information, the latter have to contend with isolation, reduced resources and often very local school dynamics. This contextual variability accentuates inequalities in the implementation of inspection missions, and reinforces the feeling of professional inequity.

The weight of informal norms and relational logics: Finally, the results reveal that hierarchical dynamics, loyalty networks and certain clientelist practices strongly influence inspectors' modes of action. These informal, sometimes implicit norms restrict the professional autonomy of the players involved, and

affect their ability to fully exercise their regulatory, evaluation and pedagogical advisory functions. This phenomenon feeds a feeling of statutory ambiguity and moral wear and tear, particularly among young inspectors. The results highlight a persistent structural tension between the prescriptive norms imposed by the institutional framework and practical realities, marked by constraint, adaptation and contextual variability. This tension calls for a critical re-reading of the inspector's role, a revision of the modalities of professionalization, and a more territorialized approach to public educational action.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the results highlights a series of lasting gaps between the prescribed reference frameworks and the inspectors' actual practices. These discrepancies cannot be reduced to individual failings: on the contrary, they reflect systemic tensions within the inspection system. The aim of this discussion is to put these empirical findings into perspective in the light of the theoretical frameworks mobilized, in particular those relating to professionalization, action in educational organizations, and the tension between norms and practices.

A structural and systemic gap: The empirical data collected reveals that the gap between prescriptions and practices is not the result of a lack of commitment or competence on the part of inspectors, but rather of a structural misalignment between institutional expectations and the means available to achieve them. This phenomenon, already observed by Dubet (2002) in public services under constrained conditions, can be explained by:

- lack of logistical and human resources ;
- a fragmented inspection organization ;
- and a lack of local management.

Thus, inspectors operate within an institutional framework marked by paradoxical injunctions: to be simultaneously assessors, trainers, coaches and prescribers... without always having the tools or the autonomy to do so.

Training: between prescriptive standards and grounding in the field The results confirm that initial and continuing training remains focused on standards and theoretical knowledge, to the detriment of a situated approach based on the analysis of real work. Yet, according to the contributions of activity analysis (Clot, 2022; Saujat, 2012), effective professionalization cannot be limited to the transmission of prescriptions: it must be based on the recognition of real-life situations, reflexivity on professional dilemmas, and the collective construction of action knowledge.

This highlights the urgent need to rethink training systems around:

1. Concrete cases from the field ;
2. Peer-to-peer co-analysis (learning communities) ;
- And ongoing post-training support.

Tensions over legitimacy in the school environment: Inspectors today find themselves in an ambivalent position, at once representatives of state authority and pedagogical mediators for teachers. This dual injunction creates an identity tension that undermines their recognition, especially when they

are perceived as mere relays of ministerial standards, disconnected from local realities. In a context of scarcity (rurality, isolation, overload), their professional legitimacy is frequently called into question, for want of visible results or real room for maneuver. This difficulty of "being recognized in one's role" ties in with work on blurred professional figures (Barbier, 2014) and shows how legitimacy depends not only on status, but also on the ability to embody a perceived usefulness in field interactions.

Towards renewed, contextualized professionalization: In the light of these observations, it would seem essential to restructure the professionalization of inspectors along three complementary lines:

- **Reinforcement of contextualized continuing training**, based on local realities, situated practices and collective analyses of activity.
- **Institutional support for collaborative practices**, in particular through the creation of peer networks, professional exchange communities and forums for pedagogical dialogue between inspectors and teachers.
- **Improved working conditions and mobility**, to enable inspectors to carry out their duties in conditions conducive to constructive assessment and lasting support.

This implies a paradigm shift: from an inspection system based on prescriptive control to a professional development support model, capable of combining high standards, contextualization and recognition.

In view of the findings of this study on the gap between prescribed reference frameworks and the actual practices of primary school inspectors in the Republic of Congo, several recommendations can be made, aimed at public decision-makers, training institutions and field actors.

Revising and contextualizing competency frameworks

- Adapt skills frameworks to local realities (particularly rural) by integrating authentic professional situations.
- Involve inspectors in the development of skills frameworks to ensure their relevance and appropriation.
- Include cross-disciplinary skills related to pedagogical mediation, team support and change management.

Strengthening initial and continuing training

- Introduce a "sandwich" type of training combining theoretical input and immersion in professional situations.
- Develop modules focusing on observation, reflective analysis of practices, and pedagogical interviewing.
- Create individualized, contextualized and regular ongoing training programs, breaking with top-down approaches.

Developing a collaborative professional culture

- Encourage the creation of exchange networks and communities of practice between inspectors.
- Encourage co-inspection, intervision and experience-sharing between peers.
- Promote inspectors' expertise through in-house publications, national seminars and conferences.

Improving working conditions

- Strengthen logistical resources (transport, digital tools, documentation).
- Reduce administrative burdens to refocus on the heart of the profession: pedagogical support.
- Introduce a system of formative evaluation of inspection work, based on shared, negotiated criteria.

Enhancing the inspector's strategic role

- Recognize the inspector as a key player in pedagogical guidance and the professional development of teachers.
- Promote their role in educational reforms as a lever for qualitative transformation of the education system.
- Build bridges between inspection, educational research and pedagogical innovation.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to analyze the discrepancies between the competency frameworks prescribed for primary education inspectors in the Republic of Congo and the practices actually observed in the field. Using a comprehensive qualitative approach based on interviews, participant observation and documentary analysis, the study shed light on the logics of action, structural constraints and professional dynamics at work in the inspection activity.

The results reveal a marked dissonance between institutional expectations and practical realities, due in particular to decontextualized reference frameworks, unsuitable training systems, a lack of resources, and little recognition of professional knowledge built up in situ. Far from being the result of individual disengagement, these discrepancies reflect a crisis in the professionalization of the inspector's function, caught between prescriptive norms and pragmatic management of everyday educational life.

This analysis has highlighted a crucial need to reconfigure the inspection system, based on a more integrated and contextualized vision of training, pedagogical support and assessment. From a professional development perspective, the aim is to strengthen inspectors' ability to act as pedagogical mediators, in the service of educational quality, school justice and the continuous improvement of teaching practices.

With this in mind, a number of avenues for improvement can be envisaged: reworking reference systems on an empirical basis, anchoring training in concrete work situations, setting up professional communities of practice, and institutional recognition of the strategic role played by inspectors in transforming the education system. Ultimately, this study invites us to reexamine the foundations of the professionalization of middle managers in education, taking into account local specificities and contextual constraints, as well as the margins for pedagogical innovation available within the system itself. This study, focusing on the practices of primary education inspectors in the Republic of Congo, highlights the tensions between institutional prescriptions and professional realities. However, it does not exhaust all the issues linked to the reconfiguration of pedagogical management in changing education systems. An interesting opening would be to extend the analysis to other intermediary

players in the education system (school heads, pedagogical advisors, district coordinators) in order to gain a better understanding of the logics of educational governance at local level. Similarly, an international comparative approach, including other French-speaking African countries facing similar challenges, would enable us to identify transferable invariants and levers for professionalizing inspection.

Finally, longitudinal research, based on the follow-up of inspectors' career paths, could enrich our understanding of identity dynamics, resistance to change and professional learning processes in pedagogical supervision functions.

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