The Regime of Self-Evaluation and Self-Conception in Education

Alison M. Brady

MPhil/PhD Student at the Department of Education, Practice and Society, UCL Institute of Education, London, United Kingdom

Address: G/7/10 McMillan Village, Creek Road, Greenwich, London, SE8 3BU

Email: alisonmarybrady88@hotmail.com

Tel: +44(0)7821252056/+353(0)838434184
Introduction

A culture of evaluation has burgeoned in the recent past, and education is not exempt from this. For decades, inspecting bodies such as Ofsted have been criticised by teachers and policy analysts as instruments of the neo-liberal agenda in schools, applying, so it is alleged, superficial criteria of good practice without any consideration for the cultural, economic or social factors that influence their perceived successes or shortcomings (Richards 2001, 2015). Such systems of inspection have led to the formation of much-contested league tables, and there is evidence that these have driven the wedge even deeper into an already segregated community (Coldron et al. 2009; Ball 2003; Allen and Vignoles 2007). Despite this, Ofsted still manages to maintain a powerful position in the field of education, and in some quarters, its results are highly regarded and respected. The neo-liberal tendencies evident here are complemented by a perception of the ostensible needs of knowledge-based economies – the accountability of education not only to pupils, but to society at large, the commoditisation of viable workforces, the marketisation of curricula and schools, and the transferability of ‘good practice’ across not only school walls, but also national borders - all in an effort to boost levels of competitive advantage in the global economy.

School inspection has taken another turn in recent years, however. Instead of merely external inspections which applied criteria equally to all schools and their staff, the idea of ‘self-evaluation’ has become a prevalent theme in the field of educational policy. Teachers and schools are encouraged to formulate their own development plan, to discuss their own perceived strengths and weaknesses, thus fostering collegiality and cohesiveness in terms of the school’s own mission and aspirations for improvement (MacBeath 2006). It seems, therefore, that the likes of Ofsted have taken on board the varying nature of schools, their uniqueness in terms of their student body, teaching and management styles.

Or so, perhaps, it seems. The autonomy supposedly inherent in this new turn in inspection becomes quite questionable when one considers, for example, that the framework for self-evaluation in both countries is inherited almost exclusively from the inspectorates’ own criteria for good or bad teaching (MacBeath 2006; McNamara and O’Hara 2008), and are therefore not generated by each of the schools themselves. Could we argue that this new approach, however true to the notion of self-determination it seems, is not enacted in a way that would be more attuned to what true self-evaluation might reasonably be held to stand for? How autonomous is a school, really, when the criteria that it uses to judge itself are sourced from the outside?

Indeed, there seems to be an inversion of sorts in terms of the general direction of school and teacher inspection in recent years. What may have traditionally been deemed as a more ‘top-down’ approach, where the likes of Ofsted employed specific criteria to judge the practice of teaching in schools, has been replaced with a more ‘bottom-up’ venture, where teachers and schools are tasked with evaluating themselves, using the idea of ‘intelligent’ or ‘robust’ accountability (Hislop 2012) (Miliband, 2004), a kind of ‘smart regulation’ (Hislop, 2012) as their guide. It is difficult to argue with such logic. Surely this is a desirable new direction,
given some of the criticisms that were launched at the entire inspection process in the past (Denison, 2005).

Yet, when the ways in which teachers evaluate themselves naturally depend upon externally produced criteria, can we still call it self-evaluation? It seems that the lines of externality and internality have become blurred. What was traditionally the task of the external inspector becomes enacted on an internal level. Self-evaluation becomes merely a form-filling exercise without merit, and any hope of improving practice is very much likely to suffer as a result. Moreover, questions regarding what criteria is even appropriate for evaluating teaching in the first place must be considered, more of which will be touched upon below.

What exactly is ‘self-evaluation”? Where does the ‘self” fit into this process? There can certainly be unproblematic uses of the prefix self-, which I shall consider further at a later stage in the paper. It is at least worth registering now that the prefix can be given a subject sense or an object sense, where the emphasis is respectively on the agent and on the possessor of a various qualities and characteristics. Is it that the self is the object of the evaluation, the self being something which is not considered inherent to the person as such, but rather as an mechanistic array of various qualities which can be ‘objectively’ examined? Or is it, rather, is it that the self is the subject of the evaluation? Is it that the teaching-self is that which is performing the evaluation of itself? In this sense, one’s personhood is tied to the way in which one behaves in a classroom, to the way in which one understands modes of teaching and learning, to the way in which one interprets one’s role as an educator. How are we to interpret the purpose of self-evaluation in light of this? When, as self-evaluation policy seems to indicate, we have an oscillation between the self-as-object and the self-as-subject, self-evaluation becomes a circular practice, a constant striving towards evaluating a self through it-self, i.e. through the lens of the context in which it is formed and reformed.

The issue I would like to specifically focus on, therefore, relates to the way in which this degraded version of self-evaluation is in danger of seeing the self as an appendage. In doing so, the self may become interpreted as something which can be removed and analysed without any reference to that to which it is attached. It may be conceived as something necessarily abstract, with its own essence, capable of being methodically examined in a way that is external to the person, and to the culture and context in which that person has developed and continues to be determined by. This would impose an image of the self as a component only capable of change through instrumentalized reflection, prescribed by externally-defined mandates of what it means to be a ‘good’ teacher.

**Self-Evaluation in Ireland: Debased Practices?**

In 2003, the Irish government introduced “Looking at Our Schools”, (herein known as LAOS) (Department of Education and Science (Ireland) 2003) a policy document which, for the first time, announced its plans to begin systematic inspections of teachers and schools across the country. Prior to this, inspections in schools had virtually ceased to exist, or at the most, were very sporadic in nature (McNamara and O’Hara 2006). As a result, teachers in Ireland are now receiving an ‘unprecedented level of monitoring and evaluation of their work’ (Macruaic et al. 2008, 502). This is a stark contrast from the previous, individualistic
nature of schools, maintained for a number of reasons, including resistance to inspection on behalf of the Teacher Unions (NcNamara and O’Hara 2009), as well as the influence of the Catholic Church in purporting an image of the school as a kind of sanctuary, appropriately void of governmental involvement (Mooney-Simmie 2012).

At present, the school evaluation procedure in Ireland is a combination approach between both external and internal inspection, with a seemingly heavier emphasis on self-evaluation and development—planning of schools themselves (Department of Education and Science (Ireland) 2003). After an extensive pilot was conducted, the Department of Education and Science decided to introduce both Whole School Evaluation: Management, Leadership and Learning (also known as WSE-MLL) (DES (Ireland) 2011) and Subject Inspections (DES (Ireland) 2004) as the main vehicles for external assessments of both secondary and primary schools across the country. Similar to the case in England, external evaluations in Ireland focus a great deal on so-called objective information through data gathering, including the use of school information forms, statistical information regarding state exam results, pupil-teacher ratio and enrolment patterns. The main basis of the judgements of the Inspectorate, akin to the case of Ofsted in England, is on a number of quality indicators outlined in LAOS (DES (Ireland) 2003). The role of the Inspectorate, delineated in the Education Act of 1998, does not only encompass the provision of external evaluations in schools, but is also meant to foster a culture of self-evaluation, providing support and advice to schools who were charged with undertaking development planning for themselves (DES (Ireland), 1998). This new inspection policy specifically focused on the rhetoric of greater school autonomy, with a de-emphasis on such notorious ideas as accountability and performance-measurements. The extent to which what is happening in practice is a corruption of what was initially anticipated and, hence, its potentially distorting view of the self, is what I would like to address here.

Emphasised throughout the policy literature is the idea that the results of the evaluation were meant to signal the potential for improvement on behalf of the school, as something which should be viewed positively rather than as a means to formulate unfair league tables upon which schools could be judged. “The intended aims of inspection” (DES (Ireland) 2003 and 2004)(DES (Ireland) 2011) are laid out using vague notions regarding the continuance of improving quality in education, without any salient aims or goals. On the other hand, LAOS (2003), the main framework behind both the WSE-MLL (2011) and the Subject Inspection (2004) criteria, consist of a colossal list of self-evaluation themes, the idea being that such themes would directly inform self-evaluative practice. Therefore, the criteria with which schools evaluate themselves are not internally produced, but externally imposed. Is it possible, then, to say that schools are more autonomous with such procedures in place?

Following on from a speech given by the Chief Inspectorate, Harold Hislop, who, with respect to the 2012 PISA results (OECD 2012), called for greater levels of quality assurance across Irish schools, a number of new initiatives were proposed which aimed at achieving just that. Hislop (2012) argued that the external aspect thus far had been much too elaborate and time-consuming and thus, would need to be significantly reduced if it was to remain a sustainable practice. He criticised the broadening and obfuscating of criteria used to evaluate

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1The Department of Education and Science in Ireland officially changed its name to the Department of Education and Skills in 2010, and will herein be referred to as DES (Ireland).
schools, as a more clearly-defined set of standards could be used by Inspectorates in order to ensure equal assessments for all schools, as well as a high level of transparency and fairness. For Hislop (2012), the main reason why self-evaluation is avoided in schools is precisely because of a lack of detailed criteria provided to teachers in LAOS with which they can evaluate themselves, thus making teachers directionless and ill-advised of their own weaknesses and strengths. What he refers to as a ‘robust self-evaluation’ would require not only this, but also sufficient training in the art of data-collection, thereby further informing their own self-evaluation practices.

Given these definitions and requirements, what exactly then, for Hislop, is self-evaluation? It is clearly not the case that teachers evaluate themselves, for themselves, using their own perceptions, criteria and beliefs about teaching. Rather, what was traditionally the task of the Inspectorate, especially when it comes to collecting data used to inform judgements about good or bad teaching, has now been devolved to the level of the teacher. The criteria used are in themselves problematic, as will be explored below. Furthermore, it has ruled that teachers must now be completely ‘objective’ in their own evaluation, the only way possible being to separate oneself from their practice, and ultimately from their selves.

As a result of the new direction proposed by Hislop, ex-education minister Ruairí Quinn decided to release a guide to self-evaluation that same year, which explicitly accounts for the merits of a self-evaluation approach to inspection, and how, as a continuous process, it is now mandatory in all State schools. The document (DES (Ireland) 2012), perhaps somewhat patronisingly, gives its users prescriptive, step-by-step manuals on how to self-reflect, on what their definition of self-evaluation is, as well as tabulated diagrams of the various outcomes which self-evaluation processes should aim to achieve.

One could certainly not argue that this document is not thorough, so thorough in fact, that it leaves very little room for the teacher’s own self to be present in the evaluation, their own criteria for good teaching to be developed or even considered, despite its apparent aims. With its preoccupation with ensuring that self-evaluation is taken seriously, and perhaps also with allowing for certain cost-saving measures by inverting the process of evaluation as mentioned above, this document is evidence of the fact that we have forgotten what internal evaluation is supposed to be – an evaluation of the self, in terms of that self. Rather, it has inflicted its own definition of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ teaching, and how to spot it, onto the selves of teachers, making what is supposed to be a spontaneous and self-generated process into a bureaucratic, externally-produced, criteria-driven procedure, which extrapolates the self into some malleable, controllable entity, and which disallows any genuine self-reflection from taking place by suffocating the self with singular, outwardly-mandated visions of education.

Self-Evaluation in England: A History of Burgeoning Control

Although the history of England’s inspection regime is quite different from that of Ireland, the rationale behind it is strikingly similar. The Great Debate in education, sparked by the then-Prime Minister James Callaghan, is still ongoing (Callaghan 1976). When New Labour would-be Prime Minister Tony Blair gave a similar speech 20 years later (Blair 1996), however, the tone had dramatically changed. Education now seemed to be more so focused
on raising standards of achievement, about holding teachers accountable for their performance, and seemed to discourage different visions of education, which Callaghan was keen to promote. Just a few years previously, Ofsted was established in place of the previous HMI modes of inspection (DfES (U.K.) 1992). It remains problematic throughout the field in education, and although severely criticised in academic literature (Case et al. 2000) (Richards 2001) (Rosenthal 2004) (Avison and de Wall 2008), still holds a significance place in the education system of England.

With New Labour’s re-election in 2001, self-evaluation became a central tenet in evaluation policy. Furthermore, with the hope of fostering the so-called ‘New Relationship with Schools’, the minister for school standards in 2004, David Miliband, promoted this more positive model of inspection, too seeing it as an effective cost-saving measure whilst useful for retaliating against the destructive strains that existed between the government and schools following the era of Thatcher. Dissolving such tensions did not mean that Miliband would agree to being ‘soft on teachers’, as previous opponents would have claimed, but it would at least allow for some level of greater school autonomy, or so one might hope (Miliband 2004; DfES, (U.K.) 2006).

This new relationship had three main aims – to have a more effective accountability framework through the promotion of self-evaluation, to simplify the school improvement process by reducing the level of direct State involvement, as well as a greater flow of information and data between schools, parents and governmental bodies. (Miliband 2004) (DfES (U.K.), 2006) (MacBeath 2006). With the use of a Self-Evaluation Form, invariably provided by Ofsted, it was argued that schools would no longer be subject to externally imposed criteria for development, or at least a less rigorous version than what had previously been in place. This would then serve as a basis for the external Ofsted inspection, allowing the evaluation process to be, according to Miliband (2004), sharper, shorter and therefore, more frequent. Although Ofsted specifically stated that the Self-Evaluation Form was not self-evaluation per se, this message seems to have been somewhat lost amidst the education community (MacBeath 2006).

What is the purpose of self-evaluation for Ofsted? According to them (2013), it is vital in order to ensure that the highest standards of teaching are met, and that pupils are provided with the best possible learning experience. But where do these standards come from? Although completing the self-evaluation form is optional, if utilised and submitted to Ofsted it will be used to judge teacher’s awareness of their own perceived strengths and weaknesses, as well as how such teachers have established such self-perceptions, and whether or not such self-perceptions are compatible with their own, over-arching judgements. Hence, this reveals where such standards of judgement can be sourced from, and if one wants to receive a favourable self-evaluation report, the map to such attainment has been clearly marked by Ofsted itself.

Indeed, the reductive technologies employed by Ofsted have been criticised on numerous occasions. Some argue that they simply cannot achieve what they claim they can – wholly objective judgements of the success or failure of schools (Richards 2001, 2015). Others are
disheartened by the neo-liberal visions of education it purports, and the debased notions of what constitutes ‘good teaching’ it continues to espouse (Lefstein 2013). Many have accounted for the detrimental effect Ofsted has had on institutions and their staff, including low staff morale and burn-out by those over-burdened with an impossible workload (Rosenthal 2004; Clapham 2015). The biggest worry addressed here, however, is how this corruption of genuine self-evaluation is perhaps imperceptibly yet irreversibly so, changing what it means to be a ‘teaching self’, and through employing tactics such as excessive monitoring, self-surveillance, and also through ‘reward systems’ such as pay-related performance, an idea of the self as something instrumental, external and stagnant becomes inescapable.

A Problem of Criteria
Thus, we have two different contexts attempting to implement the same system which is meant to allow for greater school and teacher autonomy, whilst in practice, seems to be doing the exact opposite. One began with a more cautious approach, only to be made extreme following the global recession. The other was always quite extreme, one could argue, but tried to be less so, only to merely invert the process instead of improving it. With more autonomy comes greater accountability. Self-evaluation is supposed to mean that inspectors will no longer be the only source which dictates what teachers should do in their classroom. But when the criteria used to evaluate oneself are generated by the same framework, this is clearly the case. Now, teachers are made responsible for their own assessments, using criteria that are not theirs (Simons 2014). This is presumably to allow for the transference of good practice, as well as higher levels of transparency. What it does, however, is misdirect teachers into attempting to objectively examine something, i.e. the ‘self’, which is subject to constant change, or in the words of Charles Taylor, constituted within a continuous struggle (Taylor 1989, 1991).

Before endeavouring to outline the various issues that arise from the particular kind of perception of the self as something ‘fixed’ evident in self-evaluation policy, it is important to briefly point towards the issue of the use of specific criteria in the process of inspection, be it external or internal. This particular issue warrants more attention than I am able to give it here, however, it is worth registering the dangers of using such kinds of ‘check-list’ criteria in the field of teaching, particular as it relates to a debased vision of what constitutes a ‘self’.

What exactly might count as reliable criteria for teaching? Teaching, in a sense, is similar to acting. By this, I am aware that such comparisons might lead to a conception of teaching as a mere performative activity, an idea I would certainly wish to avoid. However, in my mind at least, there are certain similarities between both professions that go beyond this.

Similar to teachers, an actor can be trained in one sense. They can be taught about certain things that are required or expected of him, for example, being audible on stage. These certain aspects are precisely that – certain – since we can almost all agree that such criteria for acting are essential to their performance. But what of those things one cannot ‘teach’ an actor? The actor has a particular body, a particular presence on stage. He is exposed in a sense, to the audience, to his peers, perhaps, somewhat to himself. The way in which the
There is a complex interactions of signs here that is similar to teaching, where the teacher is ‘present’ in the classroom is an equally particular and immeasurable way. As with the actor, it seems non-sensical to use very specific, ‘check-list’ criteria to judge such performances because it is so varied and variable, because there is not always ‘one right way’ of doing things. Furthermore, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to apply singularised criteria for measuring or explaining this particular ‘presence’ in the classroom. We can give advice, tips, nuggets of wisdom that we may have collected from experience or practice in similar situations. We can even make certain expectations of teaching clear – safe-guarding of children, punctuality, expectation of care and commitment. These could be made into a ‘check-list’ of sorts because they are quite clear and unambiguous. But the real standards that matter in teaching cannot be subsumed in the same way. They can only be worked out within a community of practice, within which we can develop reasonable standards for teaching, standards which may, and should be subject to change. Such standards must also be open to interpretation or different manifestations in practice. With a form of self-evaluation that sees teaching in this debased form, such discussions and reasonable conversations with relation to standards remain fixed and is not only misrepresentative of the nature of teaching, but debases both it and the practice of self-reflection itself to a mere form filling exercise. Furthermore, it debased the very notion of the self which is at stake in this discussion.

A Question of the Self

The conception of the self in teaching may be said to be intimately linked to neo-liberal views of education. In order to perhaps better understand the rise of neo-liberal values, it may be useful to consider the ‘three malaises’ which have infected modern culture, according to Taylor (1989, 1991). Briefly, these three illnesses as described by Taylor (1989, 1991) include the proclivity of modernity to emphasise the importance of individualism, the rise of instrumental reason, and finally, what Taylor (1989, 1991) calls a ‘soft despotism’. An over-emphasis on the value of individualism has led to a demise in the sense of belonging people once felt when they were aware of their ‘proper place’ in society, based on a belief in hierarchical structures, dismantled by an overall disenchantment with the world due to the prevalence of instrumental reason. With this penchant in modernity for individualism, the self becomes a central tenet, which ‘both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning and less concerned with others or society’ (Taylor 1991, 4). Such nihilistic and narcissistic tendencies may have also led to an increase in the monitoring techniques employed by individuals on a daily basis, which may also explain the pervasive obsession with surveillance in audit culture.

Taylor’s writings of the early 1990s seem to be eerily prophetic of the gradual but relentless drive of neo-liberalism that was later to come. Education has been severely affected by this; we need only look at the emphasis that is placed on accountability, served alongside notions of greater autonomy and the seeming necessity of self-monitoring in order to achieve both
mutually exclusive ends. But it is not merely education that is disturbed by neo-liberalism. Through the use of the mechanisms of self-evaluation, hidden by the outward agenda of autonomy, teachers are now being constituted as neo-liberal selves.

Rarely is the ‘self’ addressed in self-evaluation literature, however. The prefix of the ‘self’ has been widely used in innocuous ways, for example, to denote activities that can be completed without any help from other persons. As was mentioned near the start of my discussion, it is worth registering the ambiguity between what might be thought of as subject and object senses in such usages. Sometimes, in the context of such expressions, the thing evaluated will be more or less external to the agent of the evaluation. If the tyre-pressure gauge at the garage is self-service, this means, on the one hand, that I and not the attendant will operate the pump. But it also turns attention to the thing that I will do, the object of attention, the checking of my tyres, which is after all the main focus of the exercise. When I do this, I shall be guided entirely by criteria that I only partly understand – the required pressures for the tyres on my car etc. These have been determined by expert engineers, and there is no need, nor room, for me normally to question them.

But let’s take another case. Suppose, as a second example, that I am concerned about my blood pressure. I monitor myself using a machine I have at home. I do not fully understand the criteria for healthy blood pressure, but I know what numbers to look for and that if there is any severe deviation from the norm I should seek medical advice soon. As is the case with tyre pressure, it is unnecessary for me to comprehend such complicated matters, but I do need to know what to do. I place my trust in the expertise of medical staff who can situate such numerical results within a wider frame, and who will then retranslate the reading, if need be, so that I can grasp the problem in simpler language. Although in a sense it is intimately a part of me, my blood pressure can reasonably be perceived as a fact about my body rather than something that tells you or me who I am. My blood pressure is not part of my personhood. It is not necessarily tied to the context in which I reside nor the work I engage in.

In both the cases considered, I am self-monitoring and, to the extent that I am carrying out the evaluation myself, I am self-evaluating. In neither case is anyone likely to be in any confusion as to what is going on. But in the case of the self-evaluation of teachers, the term operates in an altogether more slippery way. In part such self-evaluation can be taken to imply the self-monitoring of teachers against standards that are externally established and not open to reflection or interpretation. On the other hand, it might imply something more like self-examination, partly in the tradition of the reflective practitioner but also given a more existential edge in that it may reasonably involve my self-questioning about the quality of my engagement with my students and what I teach, about how I am affected by the experience of teaching. These are not idle questions because, as both experienced and trainee teachers will realise, teaching typically affects the person in profound ways, moving their life as a whole. And this reflects a level of personal investment and commitment that is crucial to good teaching.

Furthermore, we are asked specifically to evaluate the self. What could this mean? Surely, in neither case, it does not fall into the same category as the innocuous usages of the ‘self’
mentioned above. Self-evaluation means evaluating one’s very own *personhood*, a complex amalgamation of experiences and events which make up a *self*. Given that the criteria for good teaching are almost always externally generated and therefore, applied equally regardless of context or internal differences, it seems clear that the version of self-evaluation being enacted in schools imagines the self as something which can be examined externally and mechanistically.

We should be careful not to establish a false dualism between the subject and the object here. In self-evaluation, the self may be considered as the direct object of the evaluation – the self as the thing which is evaluated. This would imply a dichotomy between the self and the process of evaluation. But how would this make sense? Surely the self, that which is evaluating but at the same time, that which is evaluated, a key component of the process itself? To speak of the self otherwise is to consider it as something separate from the object of teaching. But, as has been discussed previously, the self is always present in the practice of teaching. It is for this very reason that a check-listed, overly specific criteria does not make sense in the evaluation teaching, where the presence of the teacher in the classroom, the way in which the teacher uses their bodies, and simultaneously embodies certain perspectives and values, is an inseparable element to the practice of teaching itself.

If, however, we consider the self as the subject of the evaluation, we may understand it in a less debased way. This would allow for the self to become a vital component of the process, and recognise that the self is present in teaching. If we extend the definition of the self to the wider school community, given that it is dialogical in nature, this may make self-evaluation a very worthwhile endeavour indeed.

In order to purport such a view, we need to dismantle the view of the self as an appendage. The self is not something that exists outside the bounds of context. It does not remain as an unchanged essence. It is continuously modified and reinvented through external influences, which govern the way in which a person behaves. It cannot be considered acontextually, therefore but as something which is persistently dynamic.

To evaluate the self requires that we evaluate a context individual to each person, the past and the present that affects how this self comes to be in practice. With the use of specific standards equally applied to all regardless of context, this poses a number of difficulties. In our attempts to remain objective and fair, we have lost our connection to the context which is vital for understanding the self. When we tried to introduce a way in which to include context, such as is the prime objective of self-evaluation, we end up with a long list of ingredients and a clearly demarcated manual on how to undertake this crucial task. When this manual becomes the primary source upon which teachers base their self-evaluative practice, the teaching-self is no longer theirs. Just as it is influenced by our socio-economic background, by our families, by our culture-related rules, among many others, it is also influenced by the perceived authority of expertise which dictate the way in which one views oneself as a teacher and the task of evaluating one’s own performance. The aforementioned inversion of inspection comes to full realization when the teaching-self is the product of educational policy and not of one’s own context and self-(re)formation. By using the word
self-(re)formation, I want to avoid a term (formation) that would imply a completion, because the self is never fully formed but is perpetually transformed through our openness to new encounters and new ‘horizons of significance’ (Taylor 1989, 1991). We need to ask ourselves this: is such openness possible in the case of self-evaluation, when the self is considered as something fixed?

“We are expected to develop our own opinions, outlook, stances to things, to a considerable degree through solitary reflection. But this is not how things work with important issues, such as the definition of our identity. We define this always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the identities our significant others want to recognize in us.” (Taylor 1991, 34)

In terms of teaching, the inspector, equipped with the authority of expertise, is most certainly a ‘significant other’, who influences how one identifies oneself as a teacher. But it is not only that. For what kind of a teacher would one be if one only listened to what the inspector said about their practice, if one was not attentively in tune with the needs of one’s students, for example? And what of the reasons one chose to be a teacher in the first place? From where did such motivations arise? What noteworthy events in one’s life, perhaps, formed this mindset of desiring to teach? Such motivations are the driving forces behind what might be reasonably considered ‘good’ or ‘bad’ teaching. They do not appear uniform in nature, they do not arise out of a vacuum, and they cannot be measured in a fixed way. These are criteria which, external to the self, affect how it comes to be as such. When I speak of criteria in this sense, I am not talking about the sort of uniform, check-list criteria that is used in current inspection policy. Criteria in the former sense are understood in relation to a specific form of initiation that we experience into a particular context.

Within this context, a discussion around which standards are important in teaching, some articulatable, others less so, can ensue. These criteria demonstrate our commitment to a particular world-view as constituted by our upbringing, our orientation towards the good, our sense of being in the world, the frameworks in which we reside (Taylor, 1989, 1991). Such criteria are open to change, are dynamic, and can acquire a certain nuanced approach to being in the world. The way in which we are committed to a certain community in which we reside, and the particular criteria that determine what is appropriate within that community and what is not, correlate to the commitment to certain standards or criteria of teaching, and not the sorts of debased criteria or standards that are externally imposed via the neo-liberal agenda in education, such as through a technicist approach to teaching, the prevalence of accountability measures and performativity.

The issue with self-evaluation operated in this technicist way is that the only criteria or standards of good teaching arise from a specific, occasioned political view of the then-purpose of education, and with being overly concerned with ‘objectivity’, thus treating the self as something which can be examined in the same way, thereby does not allow for a more accurate, dialogical conception of the self, or as the self as that which is always, unavoidably oriented towards some account of the good, or some vision of what worthwhile practice might look like (Taylor, 1989).
Alongside the advances of the Enlightenment came the notion of ‘self-determining freedom’, *a la* such thinkers as Rousseau. This idea purported that one could decide what was best for oneself irrespective of and uninfluenced by those who surround us. Coupled with modernity’s seemingly unending drive towards self-fulfilment, what one might call ‘authentic’ or ‘good’ is now considered merely in personal terms. This is something I wish to also avoid here. In thinking of the self in this way, we begin to treat other selves in a purely instrumental fashion.

Yet, if we are to accept the idea that the self is constantly formed and re-formed in dialogue with others, this instrumental view of the self becomes severely problematic. Our identity, and therefore our self, is forged and re-forged through what we have experienced or lived through thus far, the meaning that we apply to those experiences in retrospect and also, the orientation of the good towards which we direct ourselves in terms of the future, which is necessarily established through our understanding of the past. Hence, to view the self and others in a purely instrumental way causes stultification. We can no longer understand ourselves if we are abstracted from those experiences which have influenced us, which account for our differences, and which therefore necessarily means that a check-list, externally-produced criteria equally applied to all individuals will no longer make any sense, especially if it is used to assess a self.

**Conclusion: A Way Forward?**

Hence, we have established, to an extent, why treating the self as something which can be understood ‘objectively’ is problematic. Thus, the policy of self-evaluation, which seeks to do precisely that for reasons inspired by neo-liberal ideology, as discussed previously, does not live up to its name. Rather, it is merely an inversion of the older system of external evaluation which has been severely criticised as, consequentially, not being contextual enough. Self-evaluation attempted to combat this, but in my mind at least, failed to do so in practice. Subsequently, the more thorough we become in setting forth this criteria, the more fixed it becomes, and the less room there is, therefore for the self to be present.

So where do we go from here? Should we abandon school inspections entirely? Are there no models which allow for the context of the school, and the context of the teacher? Or is such an instrumental view of education, and of the self, simply inescapable?

To quote MacBeath (2006, 143) on what genuine self-evaluation is:

“It happens most of the time spontaneously and intuitively. It is embedded in the teacher-pupil relationship, in the daily discourse of the staffroom. It takes place at the photocopier and in the administration and management offices. It is implicit in the work that teachers take home with them and in the planning and preparation for the next lesson.”

Taylor introduces the notion of a ‘continuous struggle’, which I find to be particularly pertinent to our cause. In attempting to ‘find oneself’, we are met with a necessary struggle.
We struggle against the changing idea of who we are, of what we stand for. It is through this struggle that authentic self-evaluation, as described by MacBeath (2006), takes place. Self-evaluation should not be based on a clearly defined prescription of what constitutes ‘good’ practice. Once we allow a more authentic understanding of the self, which necessarily struggles throughout the discovery of what it is that constitutes our view of a worthwhile livelihood and practice, a view of the self that is open and receptive to constant change, through our encounters with others or with situations we may not have previously thought were possible, can a more robust version of self-evaluation take place. We must try to avoid articulating the self in binary language arising from a misapplication of science, which sees it as something which can be abstracted from context and examined accordingly. This struggle will most likely never be resolved, but such is the beauty of residing in a world where such new encounters can occur, and where the self can be continually be reformed, reinvented and re-forged.

Not only is this conception of the self vital for a more authentic understanding of teaching, it also raises fundamental questions about education itself. If we are to understand the self in teaching as something dynamic, there is reason to argue that both the school and the very nature of education should also be understood in the same light. Should education be merely a practice in conservation, that correlates with a ‘fixed’ notion of the self? Or should it be considered as something that goes beyond replicating the past, thus having implications for such issues as that which relates to social justice, perhaps? Perhaps it is only through addressing these issues of fixation and dynamism can such questions be considered.

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Reference List


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i Due to the economic boom of the 1990s, as well as seemingly feeling pressured by the apparent implementation of an array of evaluation approaches internationally, further exacerbated by accusations from such influential bodies as the OECD (1991), the Irish government became increasingly concerned with securing the country in the realm of global, knowledge-based economies. The Irish education system was considered to be a key factor in ensuring such socio-economic progress.

ii This message is somewhat disingenuous, however, when one considers the fact that, after the evaluation has been completed, such results are published on the Department’s website, available to the wider public, and thus naturally informing parental choice and school image in a similar manner to the contested league-tables in such countries as England (DES (Ireland) 2003 and 2004)(DES (Ireland) 2011).

iii In a survey conducted by the National College of Leadership (MacBeath 2006) which directly probed schools as to which self-evaluation framework they were adopting, the Ofsted SEF template proved to be the most popular. Their main rationale was that it was the most standardised and thus easily applied, and doing so would adequately prepare schools for any impending external inspections. More original or creative approaches became marginalised, despite aforementioned disclaimers from HMCI that Ofsted’s form was not self-evaluation per se. According to the most recent policy literature (2014), however, Ofsted has made clear that self-evaluation does not have to be of a specified format, length or level of detail. Conversely, when one considers the documentation on self-evaluation as provided on the Department for Education’s website. On it, Ofsted offers examples of good practice in terms of self-evaluation from schools that have successfully attained the ‘outstanding’ status, presumably in order to give guidance to those schools failing to achieve the same. In one such example (2011), the school’s own criteria for how they self-evaluate effectively are curiously in line with Ofsted’s own standards of good teaching – having high expectations of pupils, making staff feel accountable for the work they are involved in, utilising specific and targeted data collection which informs practice, monitoring and evaluating school processes on a regular basis. It may be that such generic aims are unarguably central to education, yet it is interesting to consider to what extent such targets arise from self-evaluation. (e.g see also DfES 2006 survey)