



Reforming Inspection of Childcare Provision: Lessons from Israel

Smadar Moshel¹

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of transitioning from structural quality to process quality in the regulation of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for children aged birth to 3 years on the professional identity of inspectors. The research centers on a pilot program led by the Day Care Division at the Ministry of Welfare in Israel, which aimed to reform the inspection of day care facilities in the country. The methodology involves conducting 24 interviews with day care inspectors who participated in the pilot program, tracing their evolving understanding of their professional identity and their adaptation to the new regulatory model. The study's findings reveal that inspectors' professional identity comprises five key aspects: source of authority, inspection methods, superintendent's skill set, role perception, and their perception of the regulated entities. Inspectors are compelled to redefine their professional identity in response to changes in the regulatory model. In conclusion, this research underscores the intricate nature of inspectors' roles during periods of regulatory transformation. Shifting toward a process-oriented ECEC regulation necessitates the development of a new professional identity for inspectors. This shift presents them with heightened ethical dilemmas and exposes them to the risk of regulatory capture.

Keywords Inspection · Early childhood education and care · Regulatory reforms

Résumé

Cette étude explore l'impact de la transition de la qualité structurelle à la qualité du processus dans la réglementation de l'Éducation et la Protection de la Petite Enfance (EPPE) pour les enfants âgés de 0 à 3 ans sur l'identité professionnelle des inspecteurs. La recherche se concentre sur un programme pilote dirigé par la Division des Garderies du Ministère des Affaires Sociales en Israël, qui visait à réformer l'inspection des garderies dans le pays. La méthodologie consiste à mener 24 entretiens avec des inspecteurs de garderies qui ont participé au programme pilote,

✉ Smadar Moshel
Smadarm@openu.ac.il

¹ Department of Education and Psychology, The Open University of Israel, Ra'anana, Israel

retracant leur compréhension évolutive de leur identité professionnelle et leur adaptation au nouveau modèle réglementaire.

Les résultats de l'étude révèlent que l'identité professionnelle des inspecteurs comprend cinq aspects clés : la source de l'autorité, les méthodes d'inspection, l'ensemble des compétences du surintendant, la perception de son rôle et sa perception des entités réglementées. Les inspecteurs sont contraints de redéfinir leur identité professionnelle en réponse aux changements du modèle réglementaire.

En conclusion, cette recherche souligne la nature complexe des rôles des inspecteurs pendant les périodes de transformation réglementaire. L'évolution vers une réglementation de l'EPPE axée sur le processus nécessite le développement d'une nouvelle identité professionnelle pour les inspecteurs. Ce changement les expose à des dilemmes éthiques accrus et ainsi qu'au risque de captation de la réglementation.

Resumen

Este estudio investiga el impacto en la identidad profesional de los inspectores durante la transición de la calidad estructural a la calidad del proceso en la regulación de la Educación en la Primera Infancia para niños desde el nacimiento hasta los 3 años. El estudio se enfoca en un programa piloto creado por el Ministerio Bienestar Social de Israel; que se enfoca en la reforma de la inspección de guarderías. El estudio consiste con 24 entrevistas a inspectores de centros de primera infancia, los cuales participaron en el programa piloto. El estudio sigue la evolución de los inspectores en la parte profesional y su adaptación al nuevo modelo regulatorio. Los resultados muestran cinco aspectos clave; autoridad, métodos de inspección, habilidades de superintendente, percepción de rol y su percepción de las entidades reguladas. Esta investigación destaca la complejidad de las funciones de los inspectores durante las reformas regulatorias, requiriendo el desarrollo de una nueva identidad profesional para enfrentar los desafíos éticos y el riesgo de una captura regulatoria.

Introduction

Recognizing the critical significance of high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, many countries are reforming their oversight and regulation of ECEC services. This change is marked by a move from structural to process regulation. Structural quality includes factors like health and safety standards, child–adult ratios, group size, physical facility specifications, curriculum frameworks, and minimum staff qualifications. By contrast, process quality concerns the quality of interactions between staff and children (Gomez et al., 2022). This transition is driven by several key factors. First, research evidence consistently shows the profound effect of high-quality interactions and experiences on children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, demonstrating the limitations of structural regulations alone. Additionally, a shift toward process quality makes possible a more holistic approach to learning, acknowledging the diverse needs and abilities of individual children (OECD, 2021).

Reforms related to the provision, access, and quality of childcare have prompted many countries to reconsider their oversight of ECEC regulation and inspection. For example, in New Zealand, the Education and Training (Early Childhood Services) Amendment Bill of 2020 is intended to improve the regulation and monitoring of early childhood services; it proposes to increase the frequency and scope of inspections conducted by the Education Review Office. Additionally, it mandates early childhood services to report on their compliance with health and safety standards. Likewise, in the UK, the Childcare (Inspection) Bill of 2021 focuses on improving the quality and consistency of inspections of childcare providers in England. The Bill would require the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) to inspect all childcare providers at least once every three years and make their inspection reports available online (Childcare Inspection Bill, 2021, c. 4).

Most ECEC policy research has traditionally focused on examining the design and implementation of ECEC reforms (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014). Yet, limited research has been conducted to explore ECEC regulatory reforms, specifically regarding the role of inspectors in the transition from regulating structural quality to regulating process quality and how these changes become integrated into the inspectors' professional identity.

This study examined the challenges faced by inspectors in the transition from a structural regulatory model to a process quality regulation framework and their understanding of their professional identity following the shift. The research investigated in particular a nationwide intervention program in Israel in 2016–2018. The program covered all state ECEC inspectors responsible for overseeing childcare settings for infants aged 3 months to three years. The primary objective of the program was to transition the regulatory model from one that emphasized primarily minimal structural childcare requirements, such as adult–child ratios and safety regulations, to one that prioritized process regulation. The new approach centered on enhancing the quality of interactions in daycare settings, including the use of a rich vocabulary, and implementing strategies to foster positive social interactions, develop conflict resolution skills, promote emotional regulation, and cultivate children's empathy. Thus, the Israeli pilot program presents an opportunity for understanding the challenges ECEC inspectors encountered as they transitioned from the inspection of structural aspects to the evaluation of process quality.

The study begins by investigating the concept of professional identity and its formation and then proceeds to analyze the role of inspectors, with emphasis on ECEC inspectors. Next, it examines the perspectives of daycare inspectors regarding the transition from one regulatory model to another, offering a comprehensive account of various facets of this transformation in the inspectors' roles and perceptions.

Professional Identity

The concept of identity is rooted in how individuals position themselves within society or a community. People develop their professional identities through interactions across various environments over time. These identities are deeply influenced by an individual's personal history, personality, and work-related experiences (Busher,

2005). Professional identity, as a self-concept, refers to individuals' understanding of the effect of society on their profession and the significance of their work. It serves as the psychological foundation for individuals to excel in their jobs and achieve organizational goals (Moore & Hofman, 1988).

Professional identity is based on attributes such as specialized knowledge or professional designations, personal beliefs and values related to one's profession, and motivations for pursuing a career in one's chosen field and becoming a successful professional (Gendron & Suddaby, 2004). Professional identity is reflected in the attitudes shared by members of a professional group, in what is considered appropriate and desirable within that group, and in discussions about which behaviors warrant social or formal sanction (Stack & Malsch, 2022).

The development of professional identity is a dynamic process that links one's job role to clear self-perceptions, including professional interests, skills, goals, and values. It provides meaning and direction to one's profession. For example, teachers shape their professional identity in interactions between themselves and others, including students, supervisors, and parents. Their professional identity significantly influences job satisfaction and plays a pivotal role in determining their openness to educational changes and reforms. The ability to implement and integrate educational reforms is directly linked to the construction of professional identity in teaching, which affects their willingness to participate in shaping change processes and their professional growth (Beijaard et al., 2004).

Professional identity also affects the intention to quit, job satisfaction, and work engagement. High professional identity is associated with a reduced risk of intention to quit (Zhang et al., 2018). Professional identity can greatly influence the successful implementation of educational reforms. Reforms often require the construction of new role perceptions that align with existing professional identities. The degree of alignment between these new role perceptions and the components of professional identity can promote or hinder the implementation of change and reform (Beijaard et al., 2004).

Frontline Inspectors¹

Inspectors play a key role in enforcing policy: "The word 'inspector' suggests, routine inspections and check visits are the 'traditional' methods of operation for many regulatory officials and ones which are regarded as fundamental by field staff," (Hutter, 1997: 107). Lipsky (2010) referred to inspectors as street-level bureaucrats who are responsible for the day-to-day functions of government; their actions implement policy because of their close interactions with the regulated community. Inspectors usually perform site visits and have other duties, including extensive record-keeping and documentation of complaints. Some inspectors have the authority to conduct investigations upon discovering regulatory violations (Pautz & Wamsley, 2012).

¹ The term "inspector" is used here as in the UK, in the sense of a school inspector. In other countries, terms such as "superintendent" or "supervisor" may be used. In this study, I use mainly the term "inspectors," but also "superintendents" when referring to other scholarly studies.

Inspectors may also help shape policy. They often take part in formulating state reforms by serving on committees and task forces and by using informal networks of contacts (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990). Although inspectors have vast influence over the design, implementation, and enforcement of policy, inspection and the role of inspectors are rarely mentioned in public discourse (Hall & Sivesind, 2015).

Inspectors' enforcement style has been defined as "the character of the day-to-day interactions of inspectors when dealing with regulated entities" (May & Winter, 2000: 146). Inspectors may differ in enforcement styles, in their behavior, and in relation to those they regulate (May & Winter, 2000). Research often distinguishes between inspectors as policing agents, employing a more reserved, formal, and legalistic approach, and inspectors as consulting agents, using an informal, facilitative approach (Braithwaite, 1985). This dichotomous distinction has been criticized following findings that enforcement styles are more complex. May and Winter (2000) argued that inspection styles differ with respect to the degree of formalism, that is, being clear about the rules, and the degree of coercion in inspectors' dealings with regulated parties (i.e., the regulatees).

Enforcement styles may affect compliance and motivation for compliance. The motivation for compliance can be explained by (a) deterrence or fear of consequences for violating regulations; (b) a sense of civic duty and identification with regulatory goals; and (c) social factors (May, 2005). The motivation to comply can also be affected by inspection style and the combination of inspection style and motivation for compliance. For example, a study that examined building inspection found that increased thoroughness leads to lesser compliance (May & Wood, 2003). Compliance may also take the form of cooperation between the inspector and the regulatee. The relations between the two, especially in cases of repeat interactions, can form interdependence and collaboration, increasing effectiveness. High levels of transparency are also associated with compliance and have been found effective in imposing technical standards (Wilkinson et al., 2014).

Early Childhood Regulation and Inspection

ECEC inspectors are professionals responsible for assessing the quality of ECEC services and programs. They can be employed by government agencies, regulatory bodies, or independent organizations charged with ensuring that ECEC providers adhere to the standards and requirements mandated by the relevant authorities. ECEC inspectors also provide feedback and guidance to ECEC staff and managers and assist them in enhancing their practices and the outcomes for children in their care. The duties of ECEC inspectors often include visits to childcare facilities, observation of the children's interactions, activities, and environments, as well as enforcement of policies and procedures regarding curriculum, staff qualifications, and health and safety measures. They compile reports summarizing their findings and recommendations based on the inspection results and communicate these to the relevant stakeholders (OECD, 2022).

Research findings are inconsistent regarding the effect of diverse types of inspection in the education system. Moderate positive effects have been reported

on the feeling of self-efficacy of the staff in the inspected schools and slightly stronger positive effects on collective efficacy. Some findings indicate that a stick-and-carrot approach may motivate schools to improve, for example, when schools and principals are aware of the importance of the standards and when sanctions and rewards are at stake (Matthews & Sammons, 2004). Other findings indicate that accountability mechanisms may stimulate unintended and undesirable behavior. Schools operating under severe sanctions—such as reconstitution and probation—struggle with making fundamental changes in their core processes (Elmore & Fuhrman, 2001). Gustafsson et al. (2015) claimed that clear expectations from inspection are necessary for school improvement. Transparent expectations are also correlated with the wider use of self-evaluation, implying that schools rely on self-evaluation as a strategy when responding to school inspection.

Inspection tools can also affect the outcomes of inspection. For example, class observations were found to “place an inequitable proportion of control and decision-making at the behest of the observer, thus limiting the role of the person being observed (the observee) to that of a passive recipient rather than an active participant” (O’Leary, 2006: 192). Models of inspection based on dialog may be more effective in promoting the goals of inspection and improving teachers’ practice. Inspectors’ feedback was found to contribute to teachers’ learning. Teachers perceived feedback as useful when it provided information about current performance, desired performance, and possible improvements (Dobbelaer et al., 2013).

Other studies found that inspection had only moderate conceptual and instrumental effects on schools, together with minor symbolic and strategic ones. Classroom-related inspection had stronger instrumental effects at the teacher level than at the school policy level (Penninckx et al., 2016).

Superintendents maintain complex relations with their subordinates because the former are the direct supervisors of the latter, and because superintendents have extensive power over their subordinates. In education systems, superintendents exercise extensive power over their subordinates, and relations between them may be complex. (Bogler, 2014).

Certain studies investigating school superintendents and professional development addressed superintendents’ professional needs (Spanneut et al., 2011). School supervision, however, usually differs from ECEC inspection. First, in most cases, school superintendents are qualified educators, which is not necessarily the case with ECEC inspections, where early childhood development expertise is needed. The shortage of qualified personnel (Cumming et al., 2015) and the decentralized provision of services in many countries, as well as the fact that these services are often privatized (OECD, 2022), present considerable challenges to ECEC inspection. Such challenges are less common in the still mostly public formal education.

Assessment serves as a valuable tool for improving quality by collecting evidence on areas that may be candidate for improvement. Program assessment has various functions, such as communicating with parents, tracking progress toward goals, and offering a versatile tool for both monitoring and planning instructional activities (Frede, 2005). It has been suggested that consistent program assessment and evaluation can serve as a means to improve quality. This approach enables data-driven

decision-making concerning funding, program development, policies, and long-term strategic planning (McLean et al., 2023).

A relatively small body of research specifically explores the inspection of ECEC services. We know that a study investigating the influence of inspectors of early childhood services on the quality of services in Ireland found that inspectors successfully identified violations of state regulations concerning children's health, welfare, and development, as well as the safety and governance of the services and their facilities (Rouine et al., 2020). Another study conducted in Ireland discovered that inspectors were seen as instilling a "culture of fear." Inspectors were also criticized for their perceived lack of professionalism and relevant qualifications, which led to inspections being viewed as inconsistent. Similarly, in the UK, an evaluation of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) identified teachers' concerns about discrepancies in inspections, which included the absence of a cohesive inspection approach. Furthermore, it was noted that certain inspectors had a limited grasp of the characteristics of the settings they were tasked to assess (Moloney, 2016).

ECEC Regulation and Inspection Policy

The regulation of ECEC services can take the form of government oversight and inspection, self-regulation, or public supervision using accountability mechanisms. For example, in the UK, Ofsted serves as the external quality regulatory agency that encourages school self-evaluation. Schools are mandated to periodically update their self-evaluation records online, establishing a system of accountability (Mac Ruairc, 2018). In Japan, preschool regulation involves a three-tiered approach: self-evaluation by ECEC operators, external government inspections, and for public accountability, the publication of findings of external inspections (Wong & Li, 2010). In Finland, there is no established inspection mechanism. Because of the extensive education and qualifications of Finnish teachers, they have a significant degree of autonomy, and the involvement of the state in regulating quality is limited (Moloney, 2016).

Regulation in the field of ECEC can take various forms, including access to services, safety, and the quality of services. For example, in 2003, Norway implemented a law mandating equal access to public funding for both private and public kindergartens. This legislation directed municipalities to progressively increase funding for private kindergartens, aligning it with the grants provided to municipal childcare centers, reaching a 98% funding level by 2014 (Engel et al., 2015). Regulation can also focus on safety. In Israel, the Daycare Act of 2018 focused primarily on the registration of childcare providers and the enforcement of minimal safety regulations. Last, regulation can prioritize the quality of services, including factors like child–adult ratios, group size, and caregiver training. In 2009, Australia introduced the National Quality Framework (NQF) for ECEC settings. The NQF establishes quality standards for ECEC settings, including guidelines for educator–child ratios, the implementation of a national curriculum, and the regulation of services (ACECQA website). In the USA, Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRISs) have been established to evaluate, improve, and communicate the quality of ECEC settings.

QRISs are designed specifically to assess the quality of both ECEC and school-age programs, offering financial incentives and professional development support, and delivering information to parents and guardians about programs in their community (Gomez et al., 2022).

The present study investigated the evolution of inspectors' professional identity when they were assigned new roles. Educational inspectors, particularly those involved in ECEC, play a crucial role in implementing and enforcing reforms aimed at enhancing process quality in ECEC frameworks. Nevertheless, there is limited research on the transformation necessary in their professional identity when tasked with implementing these reforms. This study focused on the inspectors' perceptions and understanding of their roles in this context.

Study context

The Day Care and Nursery Division (DCND) of the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and Social Services in Israel is responsible for childcare settings (birth to three). But the DCND regulates only supervised childcare settings (childminders with fewer than 8 infants are not subject to state regulation). About half the settings are defined as "private" and until 2018, when The Day Care Supervision Law was passed, were not subject to state regulation. Even after 2018, these settings continue to work without regulation and inspection. (Rabinowitz, 2019). Regulation includes setting standards for facilities, personnel, and occupancy. The structural quality of care in recognized childcare settings in Israel is relatively low by average standards in OECD countries. According to the OECD, Israel maintains high child—adult ratios and highly populated classrooms (three caregivers for a group of 35 three-year-old children, two caregivers for a group of 12 babies younger than the age of 18 months) (Stolarski et al., 2023). In contrast with countries such as the UK and Finland, there is no official 0–3 curriculum. Furthermore, staff training and professional development are minimal, with most caregivers having no formal training, largely because of the high rate of turnover and chronic staff shortages. Finally, annual public expenditure per child is fourth from the bottom in the (OECD, 2021).

According to the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) Information Center, in 2018, 95,540 infants were enrolled in 2200 daycare settings, supervised by 22 inspectors. Most of the inspectors had no relevant academic training in early childhood education; some had no higher education at all and, before becoming daycare inspectors, were administrative workers at the DCND or in other governmental departments. Before the reform, daycare inspectors were responsible mainly for the safety of the facilities and ensuring that daycare settings met the Ministry regulations regarding child—adult ratio, group size, etc. The inspectors rarely visited daycare facilities, in some cases, less than once a year. A visit lasted 15–30 min and involved little communication with the staff or manager. The inspectors had a checklist of items they were required to check, mostly regarding safety and hygiene (Rabinowitz, 2019).

For many decades, inspection of daycare centers in Israel was considered to be administrative work, mainly dealing with overseeing the safety of daycare centers and occupancy regulations. The inspectors, most of whom were women, had no

relevant education (Table 2). Regulation was minimal, focusing on structural quality emphasizing mainly the safety of the facilities and setting minimum standards for initial staff training. Other aspects of day care—such as curriculum and staff in-service training—were left to the judgment of the operating organization, with little regulatory involvement (Moshel, 2022).

In 2014, several Israeli authorities collaborated on a national pilot program aiming to reform the quality of supervised frameworks. The *Misgarot Tchila* [Daycare Facilities First] program (hereinafter, the MT program) was intended to improve childcare quality by a shift in the inspectors' role, emphasizing pedagogical oversight and guidance (JDC & DCND, 2014). The reform sought to shift regulatory strategy from structural regulation to process regulation based on the inspectors' expertise. This study examined the challenges faced by inspectors in the transition from a structural regulatory model to a process quality regulation framework and their understanding of their professional identity following the shift.

The MT program sought to improve the quality of childcare provision in Israeli daycare centers by three means: (a) changing the role of daycare inspectors from administrative to pedagogical inspectors; (b) increasing the professionalism of daycare staff instruction through professional development for instructors; and (c) a one-year professional development course for daycare center managers (JDC & DCND, 2017). This study focuses on the shift in inspectors' role from following a structural quality regulatory model, in which inspectors had technical and administrative roles, to a model of process quality regulation under which inspectors are ECEC experts:

Changing the inspector's role is significant for her... Inspection is [currently] very technical with a very low professional self-image. They told me that sometimes people ask them: "What does a daycare inspector do" and when they start elaborating on what they do they're ashamed, it's such a technical job that almost anyone can do it... What they're trying to do is... from an inspection that is focused mainly on safety and hygiene, which is also at a very, very basic level, dealing mainly with occupancy and standardization... to inspection that deals with educational programs. Suddenly, they're required to also develop some kind of educational stand, both to gain knowledge on the subject and to evaluate the educational conduct of someone else (interview with staff member of the MT program).

The program involved 36 daycare centers selected through discussions between the Ministry and daycare centers providing services to babies and infants from birth to age 3 years. All 22 inspectors underwent 300 h of professional development (PD) provided by academic specialists. The PD included an introduction to developmental and psychological theories, interpersonal communication, and acquaintance with daycare quality assessment tools, including the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ITERS-3).²

² CLASS is an assessment tool designed to evaluate both structural and process quality in ECEC settings. It comprises three domains that gauge emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. Each superintendent participated in supervision meetings and maintained individual sessions with a pedagogical instructor (Perlman et al., 2016). Similarly, ITERS-3 offers a framework for improv-

The DCND modified the daycare inspection report form to include items from ITERS-3 and CLASS emphasizing process quality. Responsibility for safety regulation was outsourced to private providers, leaving the inspectors to oversee daycare pedagogical quality (interview with high-ranking officials at the DCND, 2018). During the training period, the inspectors implemented their new knowledge and skills by visiting two daycare centers for two years at least three times a year. In the course of these visits, the inspectors were required to observe classes and pay special attention to caregiver-infant interactions, caregivers' use of language and vocabulary (process quality), and the educational environment. They also conducted feedback conversations with daycare managers to discuss progress (JDC & DCND, 2016; Table 1).

This study examined the redefinition of the inspectors role following the MT pilot program.

Method

The study examined the change in role perception of daycare inspectors whose role changed from structural regulation to process regulation following regulatory reform. I adopted a qualitative research approach that is naturalistic, investigative, inductive, minimally structured, and open to participant feedback (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). I embraced the phenomenological design and sought to understand a particular phenomenon: the inspectors' perceptions of their work and role following the reform. I explored their perceptions and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016) using semi-structured interviews (more on the method in the Data Collection section).

Participants

This research is part of an extensive three-year evaluation study involving interviews with inspectors, instructors, managers of daycare settings, with caregivers, high-ranking officials at the DCND, managers of organizations running daycare facilities. In addition to the interviews, the study involved fieldwork and conducting surveys. The focus of the present report is on 26 interviews conducted with inspectors, 7 interviews with high-ranking DCND officials, and 11 interviews with TM program leaders.

All 22 DCND inspectors were enrolled in the MT program as part of their official capacity. Participant's contact information was provided by program leaders, except for inspectors on extended leave or those who did not fully engage in the training program. The research team contacted directly the participants, inviting them to take

Footnote 2 (continued)

ing program quality. It also evaluates a range of elements, encompassing environmental conditions and interactions between teachers and children, which include language, cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development, with emphasis on health and safety (Harms et al., 2017).

Table 1 Inspectors' role before and after the reform

	Before the reform	After the reform
Main responsibilities	Safety regulation, hygiene regulation, enforcing standards (child—adult ratios, number of children per group, etc.), administrative work	Pedagogical inspection focused on the educational environment, use of language, adult—child interactions
Number of annual visits to childcare settings	Once a year, at times less	3–4 visits per year
Tools used during visits	Checklist focused on safety, hygiene, and child—adult ratios	Pedagogical report based on ITERS-3
Inspectors' qualifications	Most had no pedagogical knowledge	300 h of in-service training, including child development, acquaintance with various childcare evaluation tools (CLASS, ITERS)

Source: interviews with inspectors, MT logic model, 2016

Table 2 Participants

	Name	Seniority	BA degree	MA degree	Academic education in ECEC
1	Inspector 1	17	No	No	No
2	Inspector 2	3	Yes	No	No
3	Inspector 3	3	Yes	No	No
4	Inspector 4	3	Yes	Yes	No
5	Inspector 5*	13	No	No	No
6	Inspector 6*	16	Yes	No	No
7	Inspector 7*	6	No	No	No
8	Inspector 8	9	Yes	Yes	Yes
9	Inspector 9*	6	Yes	No	No
10	Inspector 10*	8	Yes	No	No
11	Inspector 11*	11	Yes	Yes	No
12	Inspector 12*	6	No	No	No
13	Inspector 13	6	Yes	Yes	No
14	Inspector 14	10	Yes	No	No
15	Inspector 15*	6	No	No	No
16	Inspector 16*	3	Yes	No	No

*Participants interviewed in both years of the study

part in the evaluation study. Eventually, 14 of the 22 inspectors consented to participate. During the second year of the evaluation, 9 of the original inspectors remained in the study, and 5 withdrew for personal reasons, and 3 new inspectors joined the study.

The participants (100% female) were tenured government employees with an average of 8 years of experience as inspectors in the daycare education and care system. Before serving as inspectors, most of them held administrative government positions. Only one of the inspectors had an academic background in ECEC (Table 2).

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews provided a general framework and ensured coverage of the main topics, allowing participants to raise new ones (Drever, 1995). The interviews were guided by an interview protocol that was reviewed by the advisory committee of the MT program made up by leading Israeli ECEC researchers. Interviews lasted 60–90 min and were conducted mostly at the inspectors' offices. Among representative questions in the protocol were: What were your main job requirements before the reform? What aspects of your work have changed following the reform? What did you learn during your PD? Which topics did you find meaningful? What parts of the PD have contributed to your

Table 3 Transformation of the inspectors' professional identity

	Inspector's professional identity in structural quality regulation	Inspector's professional identity in process quality regulation
Source of authority	Legal	Rational
Patterns of action	Technical inspection	Pedagogical inspection
Skills	Hard skills	Soft skills
Role perception	Police	Expert
Perception of their regulatees	Potential offenders	Partners

work? What changes did you make in your work routine? Did you notice any changes in daycare centers that participated in the pilot following your inspection visits?

Nearly all the interviews were recorded and transcribed. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, who were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity (Table 3).

Data Analysis

The process of thematic analysis adhered to the six-step framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step involved a comprehensive review of the transcripts and interview notes to gain a profound understanding of the data. Each interview was independently reviewed by two researchers, the primary investigator, and a research assistant. The second step involved the assignment of codes to specific text segments that encapsulated key concepts or ideas related to inspection. For example, the code "source of authority" was used to label statements like "I believe that there should be sanctions for those who do not comply with the regulations." In the third step, these codes were consolidated into broader ones that encapsulated the principal shifts in the inspectors' perspectives. For example, the theme "From technical to pedagogical inspection" included codes like "former job definition," "current job definition," and "role expectations." To ensure validity and reliability, the research team discussed and reconciled their independent analyses, following the principles outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1994). The fourth step involved a rigorous examination of the themes against the original data to ensure coherence and consistency. The fifth step entailed the refinement and naming of the themes to succinctly convey their essence and meaning. For example, the theme "state authority" was modified to "legal authority." Finally, in the sixth step, findings were synthesized and connected to the research questions and existing literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I added another layer of analysis based on central characteristics from the literature, with emphasis on the inspectors' work and their relationships with the regulatees (May, 2005; May & Wood, 2003).

Ethics

This study was overseen by a committee comprising prominent ECEC academic experts responsible for reviewing the research protocol and materials. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before they joined the study. They provided both oral and written consent to be interviewed, with the assurance that they could withdraw from the interview or the study at any point.

Findings

Shifting from structural to process quality regulation only required not a change in the professional abilities of the inspectors but also developing a different professional identity. Findings indicate that the inspectors had to make accommodations in five areas: (a) the source of authority shifted from legal to rational; (b) patterns of action shifted from technical to pedagogical inspection; (c) skills shifted from hard to soft—the new inspection model required the development of soft skills, such as empathy, not previously required; (d) role perception shifted from police to expert—inspectors had to change the perception and understanding of their work; (e) perception of their regulatees shifted from potential offenders to partners—inspectors had to modify their perceptions of daycare managers and caregivers.

1. **Source of authority: From legal to rational.** Before the reform, inspectors' authority derived from their ability to penalize daycare facilities that did not meet regulatory standards. In Weber's terminology, inspectors had to shift from legal authority based on law and sanctions to rational authority that recognizes the value of the inspection and acknowledges the inspectors' professionalism (Weber, 1964). Following the reform, the inspectors were asked to base their authority on professionalism. Some of the inspectors struggled with this demand:

I think anyone who doesn't comply with the regulators, then, yes, there should be sanctions... We want it to be better for the children of Israel. Those who don't implement [the regulations] and those who don't meet the criteria surely should face the consequences (Inspector 1).

The challenge with a professional or rational basis for power is that it does not have clear enforcement measures. Many inspectors wondered what they would do if a daycare manager failed to follow their advice. Other inspectors embraced the new source of authority and even felt it empowered them: "Sitting in front of a daycare manager giving feedback is exciting. It's a role we never had... to give feedback responsibly and professionally" (Inspector 3).

2. **From technical to pedagogical inspection.** Before the reform, most inspectors had no relevant ECEC education or pedagogical knowledge. The inspection of

daycare focused on administrative and technical aspects such as meeting child--adult ratios and safety:

Key tasks (before the reform): We'd go with a Visit Report Form and [we did] safety checks. Hygiene-related things. After the report was written, we'd upload it to the system and make sure the organizations corrected the faults. We checked the occupancy and room size ratio. There was no educational aspect. Even if we had an educational comment, there was no place to express it in the report (Inspector 3).

The transition to expertise-based inspection required that the inspectors develop their ECEC content knowledge on topics such as the pedagogical design of the daycare environment, understanding the importance of interaction between the caregiver and the infants or toddlers, paying attention to language and the positive or negative climate of the daycare facility. For example, Inspector 6 felt that "the big contribution is the educational discourse and not administration and [other such] nonsense." Others, like Inspector 9, indicated that the professional development training had changed the way they observed the daycare centers they regulated: "It teaches me how to observe. I look at daycare centers differently... It changed the observations, too. I look at other things, like conversations. I've learned to ask questions about things I don't see."

Following the reform, the inspectors were required to replace their previous professional language and embrace new terminology. Findings indicate that they embraced the new language rapidly and willingly:

I come in with a different perspective on daycare. I see a lot of things we learned. I use professional terms—proactivity, emotional climate— ... I can speak to the educational instructor in a common language. It's empowering. The word inspector takes on a different meaning (Inspector 9).

The shift to pedagogical inspection created a bridge between the inspectors and the daycare centers under their supervision. The pedagogical training provided the inspectors with a professional language that allowed them to communicate with daycare managers and instructors: "Now I can write it more professionally and create a common language with the manager and the instructor who understand the same language I speak" (Inspector 13).

3. **From hard skills to soft skills.** The change in the inspection model required that inspectors develop soft skills such as empathy and communication based on reciprocity rather than technical or hard skills. First, inspectors were required to develop interpersonal skills, as Inspector 4 described it: "When a supervisor comes in the morning and says good morning and asks where to sit, it creates a good atmosphere. I believe in this approach. It's like magic."

Second, inspectors had to develop empathy toward the daycare staff. Following the reform, the inspectors began to acknowledge the caregivers and the children:

"Nowadays, we hear not only about safety but also the formerly inaudible voice of the caregivers" (Inspector 16). Another inspector reflected on the change in attitude she underwent, which also includes empathy:

There is a change in attitude in daycare visits. I was a sinister regulator who came to check what wasn't right. [Today], entering the daycare center is different. More with a smile... more pleasant. There is more understanding of what the other side is going through... If I used to be more attuned to why things aren't done, today I try to be more empathetic (Inspector 13).

Third, the shift to expert-based regulation demanded that inspectors justify their comments:

Yesterday, I was told how nice it is that I start with positive comments. It's easy to learn from me because it's easy to fix. After hearing the good things, I light up... I comment [on what to improve] but I also love to provide explanations (Inspector 6).

4. **Shift in role perception from police to expert.** The shift to rationally-based authority required inspectors to develop a new role perception and changed their feelings of self-efficacy. Under the previous regulatory model, inspectors saw themselves and their role first and foremost as enforcing rules. The transition to the expert model demanded that they reinvent themselves as ECEC specialists:

Today my understanding is more profound than it used to be. I feel that the operating organizations look at me differently. In the past, I was looked at as a safety and personnel auditor. Today I am looked at as a pedagogical inspector who is more attuned to the educational environment and the staff working in the daycare center (Inspector 11).

As Inspector 11 noted, following the reform she perceived her role differently. Aspects of enforcement that were central to her work have been replaced by pedagogical considerations. Becoming a pedagogical expert changed inspectors' self-perception from bad (police) to good (experts), as reflected in the following statement:

It is important for me to say good things and also things that are not so good. I'm not here just to criticize. If you only talk about the bad things, you lower motivation... It provides a feeling that I'm giving a balanced [view], and motivation for [the work at] the daycare center.... We're not only bad but also good. It's uplifting and important (Inspector 1).

5. **Change of perception of regulatees from potential offenders to partners.** The shift to the expert model of regulation required the inspectors to change the way they perceived the providers, from potential offenders to partners sharing a similar goal: the wellbeing of young children. Thus, the weight of regulation shifted from enforcement to dialogue. Some inspectors found this particular requirement chal-

lenging. Instead of sending the daycare center a list of faults they were required to remedy, inspectors had to lead a dialogue and consider the daycare managers' opinions regarding their comments. The dialogue also reflects the shift from the low trust in childcare providers that characterized the structural quality model of regulation to the expert model of regulation, which is characterized by a high level of trust. Similarly, dialogue assumes that providers have reasons for the way they act:

Every note in the report I see implemented is thanks to a good team, instructor, and manager. It also has to do with my dialogue with them and my attitude toward them. The principle is that we are all working for the benefit of the child (Inspector 4).

Discussion

Much research has been dedicated to studying ECEC reforms, but the role of inspectors in implementing them remained under-investigated. The growing use of regulation and standard-setting as policy instruments, specifically the transition from structural quality to process quality, make inspectors' roles even more central to the success of these reforms, as inspectors are the face of the reform. In this process, inspectors are required to adopt a new professional identity.

Following in the footsteps of May & Winter (2000), this study argues that inspection style and the relations between inspectors and regulatees are influenced by the regulatory model, the inspectors' expectations, and their training. This study shows how challenging the shift from one regulatory model to the other may be for inspectors.

The article makes a theoretical contribution by outlining the components of inspectors' professional identity, which experienced significant changes during the transition from structural quality to process quality regulation. These components include sources of authority, patterns of behavior, essential skills, perceptions of inspectors' role, and perspectives on the individuals they oversee.

PD training for the inspectors made a key contribution to assimilating the new concepts of inspection. These findings are consistent with previous studies concluding that continuous professional development can contribute to assimilating counter-intuitive professional norms and the development of professional identity (Gendron & Suddaby, 2004), as expected from inspectors under regulatory reform.

Implementing a reform takes time, and change is gradual following a reform. The study dwells on the role of the inspectors' professional identity in implementing ECEC reforms. Previous studies that explored the shift to market-based regulation implied that it takes the market time to adjust following a transitory cost. It can take three to four years for processes of deregulation to bring positive effects on output and employment (Bouis et al., 2020). This study indicates that some of the gradual change may be explained not only by the adjustment of the market but also by how the inspectors adjust. Inspection of daycare centers in Israel is a relatively narrow

field, with a handful of inspectors who need to be trained. Reforming regulation of inspection of larger systems, such as schools, may take even longer and require more resources.

The transformation in the professional identity of inspectors and the shift to a process quality regulation may increase the hazards of regulatory capture (Dal Bó, 2006). The interviews reflect an increase in inspectors' identification with daycare managers and caregivers: inspectors demonstrated a higher level of empathy toward daycare staff and their difficulties than they had before. The newly acquired professional language also created a common ground for inspectors and regulatees. This can blur the role of the inspector and gradually erode the effect of inspection on daycare practice.

Conclusions

This study focused on the importance of further understanding the way inspectors experience and cope with regulatory reforms. This perspective has not been thoroughly investigated to date. The study mapped five areas of change inspectors faced during a regulatory reform: the need to change their source of authority, the need to increase their professional knowledge, the need to update their skills, the need to change their role perception, and the need to change their perception of the regulatee. Results show that this is a highly demanding task.

The study has important implications for policymakers. It demonstrates the need for policymakers to carefully consider the pivotal role of inspectors when implementing regulatory reforms. The research findings point to the multifaceted changes that inspectors must undergo to effectively lead and adapt to regulatory reforms.

The shift from traditional structural quality regulation to a more process quality-focused regulatory framework, as seen in several countries, presents a significant challenge for inspectors. This transition necessitates a higher level of professionalism and greater reliance on informed judgment. Consequently, any comprehensive regulatory overhaul should be complemented by an equally comprehensive program of professional development for inspectors. Inevitably, this shift to process regulation places inspectors in a position where they encounter more professional challenges.

Governments should reconsider the qualifications and professional criteria of individuals employed in the role of inspectors. Process quality regulation demands a set of skills and qualifications different from those needed for traditional structural quality regulation, therefore the importance of aligning the qualifications of inspectors with the evolving regulatory landscape.

This study represents an initial step that has implications for the broader research community. There have been relatively few analogous studies conducted in the field of ECEC or in the broader education field in general. Therefore, this study relied considerably on research on regulation rather than the educational literature.

Further research is imperative to thoroughly grasp the roles undertaken by inspectors in ECEC and preschool settings, the effect of inspections on the quality of childcare, and the implications of regulatory reforms for the work of inspectors.

A comparative approach that examines the work of inspectors in different countries and explores inspections from a cultural perspective is also warranted. Moreover, it is essential to investigate the consequences of regulatory reforms and the evolving role of inspectors from the perspectives of childcare managers and caregivers. Additional research is currently in the planning stages to explore their experiences with the changing inspection regime. This will contribute to a more robust understanding of the multifaceted role of inspectors in this critical sector.

Study Limitations

This study tracked the implementation of a pilot program conducted between 2016 and 2018. A notable limitation was the exceptionally small pool of daycare inspectors in Israel. Consequently, our study incorporated a relatively limited number of participants. To obtain a more robust and comprehensive understanding of this field, further research is warranted in a different country with a larger cohort of inspectors.

It is also important to recognize that the ECEC system in Israel is characterized by relatively low standards compared to some other countries. Inspectors operating in countries where ECEC standards are higher may respond differently to reforms in inspection models, reflecting diverse cultural, institutional, and policy practices. Consequently, the transferability of our findings to settings with different regulatory environments should be approached with caution.

Another limitation stems from the fact that, despite the pilot program being considered a success, the ministry opted not to continue it. As a result, we were unable to follow up on the evolving perspectives of inspectors over an extended time. This limitation underscores the potential value of conducting similar studies in systems where pilot programs proceed to full implementation.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares she has no competing interests in this manuscript.

Informed Consent The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author SM. The data are not publicly available due them containing information that could compromise research participant privacy and consent.

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