

The Evaluative Gaze in Education: Teacher Evaluation, Disciplinary Power, Visibility, and Performativity in the Greek Educational Context

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Abstract

Teacher evaluation has become a central yet highly contested component of educational reform worldwide, situated between the goals of professional development and institutional accountability. This article critically explores the implementation of teacher evaluation in Greece through Michel Foucault's theoretical framework of disciplinary power. It argues that evaluation functions not only as a mechanism for assessing teaching quality but also as a technology of governance through which visibility, normalization, and self-regulation shape teachers' professional identities and practices.

Focusing on classroom observation, evaluator expertise, subjectivity in evaluative judgment, and the formation of an evaluative culture, the article examines the tensions between developmental purposes and disciplinary effects. While evaluation may encourage reflection and professional learning, it may also generate performative practices, strategic compliance, and conflicts between externally imposed standards and teachers' perceptions of authentic pedagogy. The analysis suggests that the legitimacy and effectiveness of evaluation systems depend on qualified evaluators, contextualized judgment, and a culture based on trust and collaboration. The Greek experience illustrates that sustainable evaluation reform requires more than legislative change; it requires the transformation of professional relationships and shared understandings of evaluation as a tool for improvement.

Keywords: Teacher evaluation, disciplinary power, classroom observation, Greece

1. Introduction

Teacher evaluation remains one of the most debated and politically sensitive issues in educational policy worldwide. While it is commonly presented as a mechanism for improving instructional quality and promoting professional development, teacher evaluation also constitutes a process through which educational systems define, regulate, and legitimize particular forms of teaching practice. Consequently, evaluation cannot be understood merely as a neutral procedure for assessing teachers' performance. Rather, it reflects broader ideological assumptions concerning accountability, professionalism, and the exercise of institutional authority within schools.

The recent implementation of a formal teacher evaluation system in Greece, following decades of political controversy and institutional resistance, has renewed debates concerning the purposes, methods, and consequences of evaluation. Although official policy frames evaluation as a developmental process intended to enhance teaching quality, concerns remain regarding its potential to reinforce surveillance, standardization, and performative practices. These concerns invite a critical examination of evaluation beyond its administrative and technical dimensions.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, this article conceptualizes teacher evaluation as a mechanism through which visibility, observation, normalization, and self-regulation operate within educational institutions. From this perspective, classroom observation is understood not simply as a means of collecting evidence about teaching effectiveness but also as a disciplinary practice that shapes teachers' professional identities and pedagogical decisions through the internalization of evaluative expectations. Evaluation therefore functions simultaneously as a process of assessment and as a technology of governance that influences how teachers understand and perform their professional role.

At the same time, the article considers two additional dimensions that are fundamental to the effectiveness and legitimacy of evaluation systems: the qualifications and professional expertise of evaluators and the development of an evaluative culture within schools. It argues that meaningful evaluation requires not only technically competent evaluators but also a culture that promotes reflection, professional learning, and continuous improvement rather than compliance and punitive accountability.

By integrating Foucauldian theory with contemporary scholarship on educational evaluation, this article seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions regarding the nature, purposes, and implications of teacher evaluation. Rather than treating evaluation solely as an administrative reform, it explores its broader impact on teachers' professional practice, autonomy, and identity, while highlighting the conditions under which evaluation may function as a genuinely developmental rather than merely disciplinary process.

2. Visibility, Control, and the Politics of Classroom Observation

The evaluation process, institutionalized by law and accompanied by penalties for non-compliance, carries the authority inherent in any mechanism of observation and control. In this form, it renders

those being evaluated as objects of observation and sources of information through the visibility it mandates and enforces. The visibility of the evaluated teachers results from the dialogical synthesis of elements gathered through evaluation tools, among which classroom observation holds a prominent position. The entire process encapsulates and integrates Michel Foucault's concept of Power, specifically Disciplinary Power, which is exercised by the state—here, the Greek government—through legislation that defines the institutional framework of teacher evaluation.

O'Leary (2016) emphasizes that the observation of teaching can serve as a means of 'exercising power and control over what teachers do and how their professional worth is evaluated and subsequently valued' (p. 2). The role of the evaluator resembles that of the inspector in Bentham's Panopticon prison¹, who, even if placed in this position suddenly and without warning, can grasp and understand the institution's operational framework. In the context of teacher evaluation, the 'Panopticon' is the classroom where the teacher instructs, where everything is 'visible' to the evaluator from the moment he/she enters, even before the lesson begins. The arrangement of desks, the visual stimuli adorning the walls, and even the teacher's positioning and movement within the classroom provide valuable information about the teaching methods and pedagogical techniques employed.

The evaluated teacher is the primary object of observation and, during the evaluation process, is 'subjected to a field of visibility' knowingly while simultaneously he makes the constraints imposed by the active forces of power 'play spontaneously upon himself'— in this case, the criteria that define the characteristics his/her teaching must exhibit to achieve the highest possible score (Foucault, 1977, p. 202). Under these conditions, he/she 'inscribes in himself [/herself] the power relation in which he [/she] simultaneously plays both roles; he [/she] becomes the principle of his [/her] own subjection' (p. 202-203). Consequently, the evaluated teacher internalizes the expectations surrounding teaching practices and organizes his/her instruction accordingly, suppressing potential alternative daily educational routines, practices, and pedagogical approaches. The existent power relations and evaluative criteria defined by the regulatory framework overshadow and override established teaching practices. The decoding of the legislative texts and the messages they carry transforms the recipient into both the enforcer and the authoritative power over himself/herself, compelling his/her submission to the prescribed regulations.

¹ The Panopticon is a circular prison building designed by the English philosopher and sociologist Jeremy Bentham in 1785. The prisoners' cells are arranged around a central watchtower. The circular design allows a single guard to monitor all inmates simultaneously without them knowing if and when they are being watched, thereby creating a sense of constant surveillance. The idea behind this design was to reinforce self-discipline and obedience through the psychological pressure of potential observation, thus influencing the prisoners' behaviour.

Thus, classroom observation functions as an exceptionally efficient mechanism with ‘the ability to penetrate into men’s behaviour’, altering it according to the expectations and impositions of power (Foucault, 1977, p. 204). This exercised power intensifies the evaluated teacher’s sense of pressure and oppression, and ‘acts even before...mistakes...have been committed’, since its strength lies in the fact that ‘it never intervenes, it is exercised spontaneously and without a noise... without any physical instrument... it acts directly on individuals; it gives power of mind over mind’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 206).

The disciplinary power imposed by these mechanisms creates a reality in which ‘through observing a teacher’s lesson for just one hour a year, [evaluators] can successfully measure and make conclusions on their overall performance [of the evaluated teachers]’ (Roberts, 2019, p. 36). O’Leary (2016) warns that this practice may lead to superficial judgments that deviate from the broader purpose of evaluation. Nevertheless, the process is presented as a ‘form of power...which categorizes the individual... imposes a law of truth on him [/her] which he [/she] must recognize and which others have to recognize in him [/her]’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 781). The ‘law of truth’ that Foucault refers to can be equated with the teacher’s evaluation outcome, which he/she must accept, as it constitutes ‘a form of power which makes individuals subjects... [in the sense that] they are subject to someone else by control and dependence’ (ibid).

Under these conditions, the qualifications of the evaluators, their scientific expertise, educational specialization, and experience do not alter the situation or mitigate the presence and influence of power structures at play during classroom observation. Evaluators themselves are also subject to analogous forces, dictated by the prevailing educational policies and relevant legislation. Thus, they too appear ‘normalized to fulfil the accountability and improving standards agenda and self-govern the regimes of practice’ (Roberts, 2019, p. 36). This reveals the multiple manifestations of dominant power held by the centralized, bureaucratically structured, and administered state, where individuals comply with the rules and laws imposed upon them, ‘normalizing’ patterns of action and functioning in their daily lives. This is a form of power that appears as ‘an original right that is given up in the establishment of sovereignty [of the Greek state], and the contract [laws], as matrix of political force, provide its points of articulation’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 91).

The question arises as to whether, upon the evaluator’s departure and the completion of the classroom observation, the evaluated teacher reverts to previous practices and habits that do not align with the criteria for a positive assessment. Consequently, the entire process is reduced to a performance, meticulously designed and orchestrated to satisfy the ‘gaze’ of the institutional figure of the evaluator. Howard (1996) also discusses the power of the evaluator’s gaze, highlighting its ability to transform those being evaluated into objects of study. Drawing on the work of French existentialist philosopher Sartre², she interprets her own experience of being evaluated while teaching, describing it as a staged performance that reduces her pedagogy to the mere ‘execution of

² Sartre, J.P. (1977). *Being and nothingness*. London: Methuen.

items on the checklist or boxes on the form' that do not represent her daily work and interactions with students (p. 176).

Howard attributes this phenomenon to the peculiar objectifying power of the evaluator's gaze, which compels her to judge herself as an object, as she appears to be under the gaze of the 'Other' who observes her. As a result, she experiences a dual critique, leading to a detachment from her authentic self as she becomes an inauthentic entity wearing the mask 'that pretends to be' (p. 177). Howard's reflections align with Foucault's (1982) argument that individuals undergo a process of objectification both from external power forces and from themselves as recipients of these influences and directives.

The evaluator's gaze functions as an external force that imposes behaviours and temporarily alters habits and practices. Edgington (2013) refers to this phenomenon as 'surface acting... in favour of a performance perceived as meeting the needs of the observer' (p. 139). Under such conditions, the evaluated teachers appear 'submissive to the needs of the observer's tick boxes,' generating feelings of anxiety and stress as a result of the conflict between what he/she is expected to do and the authenticity of his/her teaching process (ibid, p. 141). Ball (2003) also discusses the sacrifice of authenticity on the altar of organized performance aimed at creating favourable impressions, describing it as 'displays of quality' (p. 216) that come at a cost for teachers, who experience 'a kind of values schizophrenia... a potential splitting between... [their]... own judgments about good practice, students' needs, and the rigours of performance' (p. 221).

O'Leary (2016) refers to the phenomenon as the normalization of teachers' practices. Having understood the function and requirements of evaluation criteria, teachers adjust their teaching accordingly to achieve the desired outcome in their evaluation. Consequently, they are 'self-governing themselves to conform...to fit the criteria [and secure].... a positive outcome' (Roberts, 2019, p. 36). For Foucault, this is both evidence and a result of the existence of power relations, as he observes that '...a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action... guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome' (1982, p. 789).

However, there is also the possibility that the evaluation process fulfils its formative role and leads the evaluatee to make changes in his/her daily pedagogical practice based on the evaluator's advice, feedback, and suggestions. In this case, and according to Foucault, the duration of the desired behaviour's manifestation—aligned with the provisions of relevant regulations—depends on the continuous and discreet exercise of power, along with the elimination of 'sudden, violent, and discontinuous forms [of it] that are bound up with the exercise of sovereignty' (Foucault, 1977, p. 208).

Nevertheless, according to Foucault, power coexists with resistance, and often, the presence of the latter is the means of identifying the former. Resistance functions as 'a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, and find out their point of application, and the methods used' (1982, p. 780). Similarly, Edgington (2013) suggests that some teachers refuse to submit to the demands of evaluation criteria that strip them of their personal pedagogical beliefs and

‘resist the pressure to *perform*’ (p. 139). They might, therefore, agree with Howard (1992), who raises concerns about the relationship between her pedagogical practice as a teacher and her evaluation, as she feels that during the process, she is transformed from an active subject into an object of observation under the evaluator’s gaze, to have her ‘value measured.’ More specifically, she states that ‘by being measurable, we become accountable, and by being accountable we become part of the larger system of prediction and control, part of the system that purchased us, the system that will decide just how much we are worth’ (p. 158).

The above, along with the ongoing resistance from teachers’ unions over the years against the implementation of laws mandating teacher evaluations, can be identified with the struggles Foucault describes as ‘struggles against subjection’ (1982, p. 781). Thus, although teachers are subject to authoritative forces through the power relations imposed by evaluation procedures, they are not entirely powerless or devoid of options that contradict the prescribed or enforced behavioural patterns. On the contrary, they are ‘free subjects... faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving... several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized...the relationship between power and freedom’s refusal to submit cannot, therefore, be separated’ (p. 790).

Within this framework, some teachers’ choice to reduce their evaluated teaching to a procedural exercise of meeting specific criteria appears as a strategic move on their part, ‘the means employed to attain a certain end...to arrive at an objective...it is the way one seeks to have the advantage over others... the means destined to obtain victory’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 793).

3. The Expertise and Training of Evaluators

According to Scriven (1971, 1972), the evaluators must possess the skills of an anthropologist, as they are often required to engage with and communicate across diverse groups and communities, managing any emerging challenges that arise during collaboration. Additionally, they need the competencies of a modern sociologist, as they must interpret the conditions and situations in which they are involved during the evaluation process. Furthermore, their ‘extreme sensitivity to linguistic differentials’ is essential to ensure their reports contain precise critical descriptions (ibid, p. 183).

Similarly, Stufflebeam (2000, 2005) discusses the skills and competencies of the evaluators, as well as their appropriate training, which supports the successful fulfilment of their multifaceted and demanding role. Specifically, he asserts that the evaluators must have specialized training in areas such as systems thinking, decision-making, conflict resolution, consensus-building, report writing, communication, dissemination of findings, and promoting the utilization of evaluation results. Additionally, he emphasizes that for the successful and comprehensive implementation of the evaluation process, the evaluators’ technical training in the collection, processing, and analysis of collected information is crucial, as these serve as reference points and fundamental elements for drawing critical conclusions regarding both the value and quality of the evaluated subjects.

Within the same context, Taylor & Tyler (2012a) highlight the ability of the evaluators to provide insightful feedback and useful advice to the evaluated teachers. Their research findings indicate that students showed significant progress after their teachers were evaluated, a fact that the researchers

attribute to the appropriate guidance and advisory support provided by the evaluators. However, for this to be achieved, ‘the information from evaluation must be correct (in the sense that the changes implied will improved effectiveness if acted on)’ (p. 3631). The researchers underscore the necessity of evaluators’ scientific and educational expertise, as knowledge, combined with perceptiveness, constitutes both an essential qualification³ and a prerequisite for successfully carrying out their role.

4. Subjectivity and the Interpretive Nature of Evaluation

The implementation of the teacher evaluation process, as stipulated by Law 4823/2021, includes the observation of two (2) teaching sessions for each of the two evaluators, who will assess subfields A1 and A2 using a descriptive scale ‘in accordance with the principles of impartiality,’ guided by the full set of evaluation criteria described in Ministerial Decision 9950/2023 (Article 56, paragraph 2, Law 4823/2021). However, as Greene & McClintock (1991) point out, it is widely accepted that ‘all observations are imbued with the theoretical and value predispositions of the observer’ (p. 14). Additionally, Scriven (1994) emphasizes that, in some cases, ‘the evaluator’s disapproval is merely aesthetic, a matter of personal preference...a reflection of power or tastes’ (p. 152).

Consequently, it is impossible to claim the existence of objective evaluations, as they constitute each evaluator’s constructs and products of their personal evaluative judgments and interpretative skills, which have been shaped and evolved within the broader social context in which they operate. This perspective aligns with the principles of the Interpretive Scientific Paradigm, which suggests that human phenomena are understood not through universal laws but rather ‘as social constructions of meaning that are inherently time- and place-bound’ (Greene & McClintock, p. 14).

Accordingly, each evaluator carries specific values and personal criteria for interpreting phenomena and situations, which are inherently subjective and context dependent. However, the subjectivity present in their judgments and evaluations pertains only to findings derived from the use of qualitative tools such as the observation and the interviews. In contrast, evaluations based on quantitative data do not allow for multiple interpretations. These considerations relate to the characteristics of formative and summative evaluation, as well as the dual function of evaluation—assessing the value of quality and the value of significance.

In relation to this study and the evaluation process as defined by Law 4823/2021, it becomes evident that the aspect concerning the listing and documentation of the academic qualifications of those being evaluated aligns with the framework of summative evaluation or the assessment of

³ It should be noted that in the study by Taylor and Tyler, the participating teachers were evaluated over the course of a year, making the process a long-term educational function. Throughout this extended period, the evaluated teachers had multiple opportunities to engage with their evaluators, receiving valuable guidance within the framework of a constructive dialogue.

merit. Conversely, the evaluator's observation and the subsequent reflective discussion with the evaluated teacher assume the role of formative evaluation aimed at improvement. This process parallels an assessment of worth, as it takes into consideration the prevailing conditions, which differ for each individual being evaluated. Given these considerations, the interpretive paradigm is an integral part of formative evaluation and the final report that results from it. Consequently, the recorded outcomes are the product of the evaluator's interpretive processing, which inherently includes personal values, experiences, perceptions, and influences.

However, it is important to distinguish that this discussion does not concern personal biases that compromise the validity and reliability of the evaluation process by distorting the results. On the contrary, the strength of the interpretive paradigm in evaluation legitimizes subjectivity without permitting arbitrary or unfounded judgments (Greene & McClintock, 1991). The evaluator is required to allocate sufficient time to understand the conditions, listen to the stakeholders, grasp the meanings they have constructed through their experiences, and reflect on them to arrive at appropriate decisions and judgments.

5. Towards an Evaluative Culture

The term 'culture' carries multiple meanings and complexities in the existing literature. As Erickson (1987) characteristically states, culture is 'essentially ideational-not behaviour itself but a set of interpretive frames for making sense of behaviour' the study of which reveals how people shape the distinct forms of their lived history through implicit and explicit choices. Furthermore, culture shapes viewpoints and determines courses of action, 'it surrounds and envelopes...forming... perspectives and influencing... decisions and actions' (Hinde, 2004, p. 1).

The formation of shared beliefs and assumptions does not occur in a social vacuum. It involves the continuous negotiation of messages and information that lead to the construction of relative knowledge through constant interaction with others who coexist in the same social context. These 'circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation...of knowledge,' which includes meanings constructed under the influence of power dynamics that may not be visible per se but become evident through their effects (Foucault, 1977, p. 217). Thus, the individual is 'carefully fabricated in it' and part of a mechanism where specific techniques and power structures are always at the forefront of daily interactions, as they are embedded within one's very existence (ibid). Consequently, specific constraints and imperatives shape how individuals perceive their everyday reality and social actions, as well as the scope of available and desirable choices (Erickson, 1987).

Within this dynamic social framework, evaluative culture emerges, encompassing a set of shared assumptions, perspectives, perceptions, and behaviours regarding the evaluation process. Zouganeli et al. (2008) argue that fostering an evaluation culture requires educators to be aware of contemporary developments in educational evaluation and to take initiatives that allow them to recognize the utility of the evaluation process in their daily professional practice.

However, the concept of evaluation carries negative connotations, making any attempt at its implementation the starting point for reactions, resistance, and intense criticism. It is perceived as a threat—an unwelcome change to established practices and deeply ingrained beliefs, values, and perceptions. It appears as a catalyst for processes that deviate from the usual, the familiar, and the established interpretive frameworks for understanding the teaching profession and its implications. Evaluated individuals face a new reality that conflicts with long-standing professional norms, where evaluation previously existed only as a theoretical concept in legislative texts that remained inactive over the years.

Although Dounavis and Zmbainos (2020) attribute the lack of teacher evaluation implementation to an ‘absence of evaluative culture’ (p. 1), Koumentos (2021) warns that ‘changing teachers’ perceptions, attitudes, and practices is neither an ‘easy’ task, nor a ‘quick’ one, and certainly not ‘cost-free’ (p. 115). Scheerens (2004) highlights the crucial role of evaluators in ensuring the successful implementation of the evaluation process, which may mark the beginning of shifting attitudes and perceptions toward it. Specifically, he discusses ‘sensitive areas’ and ‘negative feedback loops’ that evaluators must manage appropriately at the onset of the evaluation process, with the clarification of the evaluation’s purpose being of paramount importance. Those being evaluated should not feel threatened, while at the same time, they must have full knowledge of the focal points of the process.

Additionally, Scheerens emphasizes the need to reduce the level of ambition regarding the linear and instrumental use of evaluation-derived information. Despite the significance of feedback with recommendations for improvement, the educational process is a field where immediate remedies and ‘recipe-like’ recommendations are unrealistic expectations. To address these challenges, he advocates for systematic efforts to eliminate ‘inhibitory loops’ by focusing on higher levels of reflection, as derived from meta-reflection and an in-depth analysis of the evaluation process.

The reflection on the evaluation process proposed by Scheerens can be linked to the concept of the ‘self-evaluative ethos,’ a term used by Koumentos (2021) to describe the involvement of students in the evaluation process to identify their own mistakes. However, the habit of self-evaluation should also characterize teachers, as it enables them to reshape their actions to achieve the best possible learning outcomes for their students. The ‘self-evaluative ethos’ also contributes to the gradual formation of a corresponding evaluation culture, centred on the continuous improvement of teaching practices and a lifelong commitment to self-improvement and professional development.

6. Concluding Remarks

Teacher evaluation remains an inherently complex and contested educational process that extends far beyond the technical assessment of teaching quality. As this article has argued, evaluation is embedded within broader political, institutional, and social structures that shape not only teachers’ professional practices but also their identities, autonomy, and everyday experiences. Viewed through a Foucauldian lens, evaluation emerges as a technology of disciplinary power in which

observation, visibility, normalization, and self-regulation become central mechanisms through which educational systems govern professional conduct.

The analysis has demonstrated that classroom observation is not merely a means of gathering evidence about instructional effectiveness but also a process that encourages teachers to internalize institutional expectations and align their pedagogical practices with predetermined evaluative criteria. Consequently, evaluation may generate performative behaviours, strategic compliance, and tensions between authentic teaching and externally defined standards of effectiveness. At the same time, following Foucault's conception of power, these disciplinary processes do not eliminate teachers' agency. Rather, they coexist with possibilities for resistance, negotiation, and the reinterpretation of evaluative demands within the realities of everyday classroom practice.

The discussion has also highlighted that the legitimacy and educational value of teacher evaluation depend substantially on the professional competence of evaluators and on the existence of an evaluative culture that is grounded in trust, collaboration, and continuous professional learning. Well-qualified evaluators, capable of providing constructive feedback and contextualized professional support, can contribute to evaluation processes that foster reflective practice rather than merely documenting compliance. Equally important is the gradual cultivation of an evaluative culture in which evaluation is perceived not as an instrument of surveillance or punishment but as an integral component of professional development and school improvement.

The Greek case illustrates the challenges of implementing teacher evaluation within a context characterized by longstanding political tensions, limited evaluative traditions, and concerns regarding accountability. These conditions underscore that the effectiveness of any evaluation system depends not only on legislative provisions or technical procedures but also on the relationships of trust, professional legitimacy, and shared educational values that support its implementation.

Ultimately, this article suggests that teacher evaluation should not be reduced to a bureaucratic mechanism for measuring performance. Instead, it should be understood as a multidimensional educational practice whose outcomes are shaped by the interaction between institutional power, professional expertise, interpretive judgment, and organizational culture. Recognizing these interrelated dimensions may contribute to the design of evaluation systems that balance accountability with professional autonomy and continuous improvement, thereby supporting both teachers' development and the broader goals of educational quality.

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