Watching me, Watching you: The Effects of CCTV on the School Population

Lisa Kelly

Master of Education
Dublin City University (DCU)

Lisa has recently completed a Master of Education degree at DCU. She has taught across various grades at primary level, as both a class teacher and in learning support roles. Her areas of interest include geography and math education. She is committed to ongoing professional development and has a keen interest in research that centres

KEYWORDS: CCTV, surveillance, privacy, GDPR, school security, CCTV effects framework

INTRODUCTION

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) and surveillance in general have become ubiquitous in modern life. Schools are adopting surveillance technology at an alarming rate, despite the tension with privacy or potential effects on the school population arising from the use of CCTV by school management. This article is based on a post-graduate dissertation that researched why CCTV is installed in schools and what behavioural, social, and cognitive effects the school population may experience as a consequence of the technology. Although CCTV has its origins in the criminal justice sector, it has been installed in more than 90% of schools in the UK (Hope, 2015). Irish data on this topic is sparse. The lack of Irish research on CCTV in education prompted this research, which is part of a broader dissertation study. This research adopted a meta-ethnography of global data on the topic of CCTV in schools, in addition to a small-scale Irish survey. The dissertation put forward two main findings, one of which will be discussed in this article.
CONTEXT

Schools may represent a new and lucrative market for CCTV technology despite or because of the claim that CCTV may only be successful in car parks (Piza, Welsh, Farrington, & Thomas, 2019). The literature points to crime deterrence as the main reason for installing CCTV, both in the wider community (Caplan, Kennedy, & Petrossian, 2011) and in schools (Taylor, 2010). In reality, the reasons are multi-layered and tend to ‘creep’ towards teacher and/or pupil surveillance, a practice known as function creep (Taylor, 2011).

Originally in schools, CCTV was installed to protect the perimeter of the site. There was a clear philosophy to catch the criminals trying to damage school property or harm the school population. This ideology accentuated a clear distinction between ‘them’ the criminals and ‘us’ the good citizens (Taylor, 2011). The narrative shifted, with CCTV moving inside the school building to monitor interior corridors, playgrounds, classrooms, common areas, and in some cases, toilets (Hope, 2010).

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) regulates the use of CCTV in the European Union (EU). The GDPR was devised to compel institutions to understand what personal data they have access to, what happens to the data and how secure it is (Doe, 2018). The GDPR is applicable to schools that install CCTV and is enforced by the Data Protection Commissioner (DPC) in Ireland. The DPC acknowledges that CCTV may be beneficial around the perimeter of schools, but unambiguously states that CCTV should not be used to monitor staff or students, and should not be installed in classrooms, offices or any area where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy (DPC, 2020). In the EU, CCTV concern is one of the most frequent complaints the European Commission receives since the GDPR came into force (Breitbarth, 2019).

School killings, such as Dunblane, Scotland in 1996 and Columbine school, United States (US) in 1999 (Deakin, Taylor, & Kupchik, 2018), create a disproportionate amount of fear in society and may have assisted CCTV in gaining additional market-share in schools. School management have little choice but to install surveillance cameras in light of increasing anxiety in society (Nemorin, 2017). Schools install CCTV to say that they are doing something in terms of security, even if that something is not proven to be effective (Nemorin, 2017). Furthermore, the choice not to install surveillance cameras may be perceived as complacent.

In litigious societies such as the US, UK, and Israel, teachers accept CCTV as a means of protection against accusations in which it is a pupil’s word against theirs (Nemorin, 2017). However, the mere presence of cameras may convey that misbehaviour is expected, and older pupils in particular may live up to this in the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Working-class pupils
tend to be more at risk in this respect (McCahill & Finn, 2010). Where teachers accept CCTV for their protection, they inadvertently provide permission for their teaching to be watched anytime. The implication that teachers should have nothing to worry about if they are doing a good job may exert pressure on them to accept surveillance despite privacy concerns (Taylor, 2012). Surveillance may also represent an opportunity for validation with ‘good’ teachers willingly submitting to surveillance to demonstrate loyalty and competency to school management or to get ahead (Skerritt, 2020).

In this research, the effects of CCTV on the school population were considered under behavioural, social, and cognitive headings. Behavioural effects encompass the behavioural reactions of individuals as a direct consequence of CCTV. Criminals deploy multiple strategies to subvert cameras, such as avoidance (hiding one’s face from the camera), repositioning the lens of the camera so that it cannot detect the crime, and displacement (moving the crime to a place without cameras) (Taylor, 2011). These are similar to tactics employed by pupils, in particular post-primary pupils, who wish to evade cameras and/or protect their privacy at school (Hope, 2010, Taylor, 2010).

The social effects of CCTV centre around mistrust, suspicion, and criminalisation. Pupils may be criminalised at school on account of their lesser status as youth, and have no choice but to accept CCTV surveillance. This is reflective of Bentham’s (1791) Panopticon experiment, in which prisoners’ cells were placed in a semi-circle around a central watchtower. Prisoners had no idea if or when they were being watched and therefore had to assume they always were, with the ultimate aim being docility. CCTV in schools may have the same effect, whereby teachers and/or pupils may not be aware if or when they are being watched and must therefore assume they always are. This may be inherently damaging and furthermore impact the basic functions of privacy (Westin, 1967), such as personal autonomy (the right to be oneself), emotional release (by enforcing a double mask, one for the pupils and one for the surveillers), and self-evaluation (affected if one’s expertise is continually being assessed) (Taylor, 2010). Some researchers believe the panopticon is no longer relevant in school surveillance, and refer to a post-panopticon, in which the watchtower is no longer static and the surveillers may also be surveilled (Nemorin, 2017) or in which teachers are fully cognisant of who is watching them and when (Skerritt, 2020).

Children and adolescents are less well able to decipher the costs and benefits of their behaviour. Their pre-frontal cortexes; the area of the brain dealing with planning and impulse-control, is not fully developed (Welch & Payne, 2018). Some pupils may not be mature enough to make desired choices, and CCTV may result in harsher discipline with more serious outcomes
as a result of more behaviours being deemed ‘bad’ and the ability to catch ‘perpetrators’ more easily (Carlile, 2018). Zero-tolerance policies have resulted in the US and UK in particular, and harsher discipline is both a trigger for these tough policies and an effect of them, generating increased exclusions from school (Welch & Payne, 2018). Minorities and vulnerable groups are disproportionately affected in this regard (Kupchik & Catlaw, 2015).

The majority of pupils and teachers accept that CCTV has a place in modern society and that a balance can be achieved between surveillance and privacy. It appears to be dependent on the location of the cameras, the rationale for installing them and whether or not cameras are monitored continuously (McCahill & Finn, 2010, Taylor, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

This research comprised two separate methodologies; a meta-ethnography and a small-scale survey with principals in Ireland. A meta-ethnography allowed the researcher to interpret and analyse existing data on CCTV in schools in order to offer insight into the research question; why do schools install CCTV and what might the effects be on the school population? Qualitative methods were deemed most suitable, as they set out to understand the meanings individuals construct from their social worlds (Cohen, Morrison, & Manion, 2011). Seven qualitative studies met the research criteria and were analysed in an attempt to understand perceptions, attitudes, and feelings, which were crucial in answering the research question.

For the meta-ethnography, the researcher adopted a constructivist-interpretive approach to attempt to offer a new perspective from existing data. The findings from the selected studies that met the research criteria were translated into similar language via coding, in order to compare and contrast the data across studies. Codes included crime deterrence (CD), pressure on management (PM), protection from accusations (A), monitoring behaviour (MB), imagined law (IL) etc. Each study was assigned a colour in order to remember its origins but to allow it to sit alongside data with identical coding from other studies. When the findings did not align, as was the case with effects of CCTV on teachers in Israel and the UK, the reasons for these differences became important to the research.
A small-scale survey was devised to provide insight into the Irish situation. Although questionnaires are typically quantitative instruments, quantitative analysis was dismissed due to the sample size. Phenomenology was the chosen approach to try to understand the meaning participants attached to their experiences. While the population of principals (primary and post-primary) in Ireland is large (3832), recruitment coincided with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and had to be abandoned. As a result, the sample included nine participants and reliability must be flagged. The survey comprised an online questionnaire, which was mostly multiple-choice to decrease the burden on participants. It was answered anonymously. The survey answers were coded in the same manner as the meta-ethnography, which allowed the researcher to view the data altogether to decipher if findings were consistent.

As this research comprised only seven studies in the meta-ethnography and nine participants in the survey, it represents a small research platform, indicating that it may not be generalisable to other contexts. Each of the participant groups; teachers, primary-level pupils and post-primary pupils are under-represented, as each group only featured in one or two studies.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Principals in both the meta-ethnography and the Irish survey asserted that crime deterrence was the main reason for the installation of CCTV. This research found that despite these claims, the reasons were in-fact multi-layered and may ‘creep’ towards pupil and/or teacher surveillance. Potential effects of this surveillance were analysed under behavioural, social, and cognitive effects individuals may experience.

British teachers felt largely immune to the presence of CCTV. “I don’t really take heed of them now. They’re just there…I don’t worry about them…” (Taylor, 2011, p.308). In contrast, Israeli teachers may be quite conscious of CCTV cameras and either hide from cameras or play up to them. “I used to give a show in front of the cameras so as not to invite discussion [if I
watched the students well)...so that there won’t be any question if I was or wasn’t there (Perry-Hazan & Birnhack, 2019, p.198). British teachers report that their head-teachers may not use CCTV to hold them accountable. Thus, British teachers may feel able to ignore CCTV cameras and forget their presence. It should be noted that the British studies in the meta-ethnography are somewhat dated and newer research has indicated that teachers in the UK may be fully cognisant of surveillance and moreover feel threatened by it (Skerritt, 2020). This newer work centres on teachers who taught in Academies in Britain and may indicate an adjustment in some British teachers’ perceptions towards surveillance, in line with Israeli teachers who reported feeling continually threatened as a result of CCTV. The homogeneity of British teachers in comparison to Israeli teachers, who may have grown up amidst Arab-Jewish tensions in Israel, may be an important factor as to why the two teacher groups feel, or used to feel, so differently. Furthermore, Israeli teachers may not enjoy an equivalent social status to British teachers, exacerbating negative effects from CCTV.

Similarly to Israeli teachers, post-primary pupils conveyed an acute awareness of the cameras. School level emerged as noteworthy in relation to CCTV. The level of a school, and thus the age of the pupils, may be indicative of differences in relation to how CCTV is used and the effects that may ensue. Unlike teachers, the Israeli research reported similar findings to the UK in terms of effects on pupils. In the Irish survey, all of the post-primary principals cited prevention of bullying and/or surveillance of behaviour as additional reasons for installing CCTV. As pupils’ opinions and perceptions did not form part of the survey, it is impossible to report if pupils in these Irish schools may feel comparable to pupils in the meta-ethnography.

Social class also emerged as relevant. Pupils at disadvantaged schools may feel more criminalised as a result of CCTV at school. The high-security regimes existing in schools that teach predominantly working-class pupils, may indicate an inherent lack of trust for these pupils. City Comprehensive, for example, had 80 cameras in addition to a full-time staff member to monitor them continually (Taylor, 2011). At Council Estate Comprehensive, a function of CCTV was to keep the pupils in the school. This was achieved by gated entrances, CCTV and the “manipulation of space” (McCahill & Finn, 2010, p.274). Pupils were not permitted to move freely around the school. Conversely, a pupil at a private school commented, “I think there’s a lot of trust here, because you could easily just walk out the gates at the front, but no one does.” (McCahill & Finn, 2010, p.277).

Trust and status may underpin both the decision to install CCTV and how CCTV manifests in behavioural, social, and cognitive effects. Trust and status were both regular themes separately in the meta-ethnography, however this research intersects trust with status and
argues that effects from CCTV may depend on one’s status and trustworthiness within an environment. The research implies that where trust and status are high, the effects of CCTV may be minimal and the individual barely aware of the technology. Conversely, where trust and status are lacking, individuals may feel vulnerable as a result of surveillance. A CCTV effects framework (Figure 1) was devised from this research to illustrate this intersectionality of trust and status and to portray how effects of CCTV surveillance may manifest in a school population. High levels of trust, combined with a position of status, may protect individuals from effects from CCTV. However, those who enjoy less trust and/or status, may experience larger negative effects. In essence, how CCTV is used and whether discipline arises from its use based on an individual’s lower status, may determine whether an individual suffers negative effects from CCTV.

Teachers in Israel revealed a tension with status when they claimed they were not trusted to do their job unsurveilled. “This feeling that you’re not trusted...to know that you’re constantly under inspection is uncomfortable” (Perry-Hazan & Birnhack, 2019, p.199). A lack of trust may be very
personal and was cited as the reason for numerous behavioural and social effects, such as disillusionment or tampering with cameras. Interestingly, teachers in the British studies did not perceive similar levels of mistrust, and effects from CCTV were mainly absent from their perspective. The majority of participants equated their negative feelings with mistrust. However, trust alone without status may not be enough to negate the negative effects. The best protection from effects of CCTV surveillance may come from enjoying high status and high trust. One pupil commented “I think it is an invasion of privacy. I think if you want pupils to act responsibly then you need to show them that they are trusted. You need to treat them like adults...” (Taylor, 2010, p.391).

Of note, principals in the Irish survey felt that pupils always forget about the cameras and wouldn’t resort to behavioural effects such as tampering/hiding nor feel criminalised. Principals themselves may be in the high status/high trust quadrant of the CCTV effects Framework. Thus, principals may be projecting this attitude onto their pupils in suggesting that pupils always forget about the cameras. Their pupils may tell a different story based on their experiences of being in a different quadrant to their principals. Taylor (2011) confirms that “the perception of pupils is often voiced for them” (p.397).

**CONCLUSION**

This research carried out a meta-ethnography and a small-scale survey in Ireland to answer the research question – why do schools install CCTV and what may the effects be on the school population? The meta-ethnography collated seven studies on CCTV that originated in the UK or Israel. The main theme to arise from the research relates to the influence of trust and status on how the effects of CCTV surveillance may manifest. This research put forward the CCTV effects framework (Figure 1), in which members of the school community may be placed to assist with determination of the effects of CCTV. Thus, trust, status and how CCTV is used may foreshadow an individual’s reaction to CCTV. This framework has not featured in prior research on CCTV in schools. The implication of this research is that school management may wish to consider how status and trust co-exist in the various members of the school population when making decisions regarding the installation of CCTV and how it is to be used thereafter.

There has not been a prior meta-ethnography carried out on CCTV in schools that the researcher is aware of. As such, this research may be of use as a basic platform for further research into CCTV in Irish schools specifically, given the dearth of data on the topic. The main recommendation is that primary Irish data is required. It would be beneficial to gain insight into the attitudes and perceptions of both pupils and teachers on CCTV in schools. Irish schools may
be making decisions to install CCTV in the absence of relevant research. The researcher would also recommend that policy makers in the departments of Justice and Education should consult stakeholders on the purposes of CCTV in schools, bearing in mind that functions may ‘creep’. Clear guidelines for principals and a discussion about best practice is required in addition to the widespread inclusion of children in CCTV discussions, all of which form part of the GDPR recommendations, but which may not be adhered to.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Reverend Professor Anne Lodge, for her superb guidance and timely advice at each stage of this research. I would also like to thank the participants in the survey. I am very grateful for their time and expertise in helping to further research in an under-researched topic.

REFERENCES

