

From inspection to quality: Ways in which school inspection influences change in schools



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ABSTRACT

Inspection is employed by most European education systems as an instrument for controlling and promoting the quality of schools. Yet there is little research knowledge about how inspection drives the improvement of schools. The study reports on surveys to principals in primary and secondary education in six European countries to attempt to clarify how school inspection impacts on the improvement of schools. Based on an analysis of principals' perceptions the evidence suggests that inspection primarily drives change indirectly, through encouraging certain developmental processes, rather than through more direct coercive methods. Inspectorates that set clear expectations and standards have an impact on the increased utilization of self-evaluation and on developing the capacity of schools to improve in a variety of ways.

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1. Introduction

Evaluation and accountability are perceived as key elements in attempting to ensure quality educational provision for all (Eurydice, 2004). In most of Europe, an important instrument of educational evaluation and accountability is school inspection. Inspectorates assess the quality of education and hold schools accountable for a broad range of goals related to student achievement, teaching, organization and leadership. In most cases these judgements are made against criteria and standards and may involve sanctions for poor performance. Naturally the ultimate purpose of all this activity is to improve schools in terms of the experience and performance of learners. However it is not clear that inspection impacts directly on these outcomes or, if it does, whether different models of inspection may be more effective in achieving them.

A review by Nelson and Ehren (2014) found little empirical research which attempted to link inspection directly to pupil

achievement, and it was also observed that few studies took selection effects into account. Most studies showed slight or no effect of inspection on achievement (e.g., Hanushek & Raymond, 2005; Luginbuhl, Webbink, & De Wolf, 2009; Matthews & Sammons, 2004; Rosenthal, 2004). However, two recent studies with longitudinal design (Allen & Burgess, 2012; Hussain, 2012) do provide evidence of a link between the inspection findings and student achievement results, indicating that studies with strong design are needed to establish such effects.

As a first step to understanding the effects of school inspection on student achievement it is of great importance to gain more knowledge about the in-school processes which mediate between school inspection and the improvement of student performance (Husfeldt, 2011). The study presented in this paper intends to expand this knowledge base by identifying and empirically analysing the mechanisms which link school inspections to school improvement activities.

The research reported in this paper is designed to test a conceptual model (Ehren, Altrichter, McNamara & O'Hara, 2013) developed by closely examining the policy assumptions or 'programme theory' which underpins school inspection systems in six European countries. The synthesis of these six programme theories suggests that there are identifiable common methods or mechanisms of inspection through which inspection is expected to

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drive school improvement. These mechanisms which mediate between inspection and eventual impact were used to create a conceptual model. In the light of the conceptual model developed, the empirical and theoretical literature on the hypothesized mechanisms is reviewed. The paper then proceeds to analyze survey data from principals in six European countries, to investigate empirically their perceptions as to which mechanisms are most important in actually linking school inspections to improvement efforts in schools.

1.1. Previous research and theoretical framework

The conceptual framework builds from the programme theories of the Inspectorates of Education in six European countries (Austria (Styria), the Czech Republic, England, Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden, (see Ehren et al., 2013). These countries were chosen because of their significant differences in school inspection systems representing the varied models of inspection to be found across Europe. The variations range across a wide spectrum, from using a low stakes approach involving inspecting schools on a regular basis without sanctions or rewards (for example Ireland and Austria) to school inspectorates utilizing directive and focused, medium/high stakes early warning analysis and customized inspections (e.g., the Netherlands, England), and from a centralized to a decentralized level of operation. Including a broad range of different models in our study allows us to examine how a range of contrasting inspection approaches influences the way in which schools respond to external monitoring.

The programme theories were elaborated for each country from a study of the key policy documents governing inspection and from interviews with relevant officials. The individual programme theories were then brought together to create a common theoretical framework for all six countries, including a description of the mechanisms through which inspectorates aim to achieve school improvement. These mechanisms represent the ways in which

policy makers assume inspections will lead to the improvement of schools by acting, as it were, as the bridge between inspection and the ultimate objective of improved teaching and learning, hopefully leading to better learning outcomes.

The first part of the theoretical framework (see Ehren et al., 2013) includes descriptions of different aspects of school inspections in the countries involved including: the frequency of inspection visits, the use of regular cycles of full inspections or a differentiated approach to target potentially failing schools, the setting of standards and thresholds, the consequences of failure, and the feedback given during and after inspection. The second part elaborates hypotheses concerning three common mechanisms identified across the various systems through which school inspection is generally expected to drive change (Ehren et al., 2013, p. 14). Fig. 1 summarizes these mechanisms and presents the conceptual framework of the study. Below the hypothesized mediating mechanisms are discussed at greater length, and the available empirical research investigating the mechanisms is reviewed. It should be noted, though, that little empirical research has been conducted on the impact of inspection, and that the largest number of studies is from England (Nelson & Ehren, 2014).

1.1.1. Mechanisms linking the impact of school inspections to outcomes

The first common mechanism to link school inspections and their intended outcome is inspection frameworks setting expectations, norms and standards. These frameworks define expectations of quality for schools and their stakeholders. Schools are expected to attend to the requirements included in inspection standards and procedures and adapt their goals and ways of working to come into line with the normative image of high quality schools demanded by the inspectorate. These inspection frameworks are designed to inform and drive school policy, planning and practices.

Three types of standards were identified by Ehren et al. (2013): legal standards, standards relating to the context and process

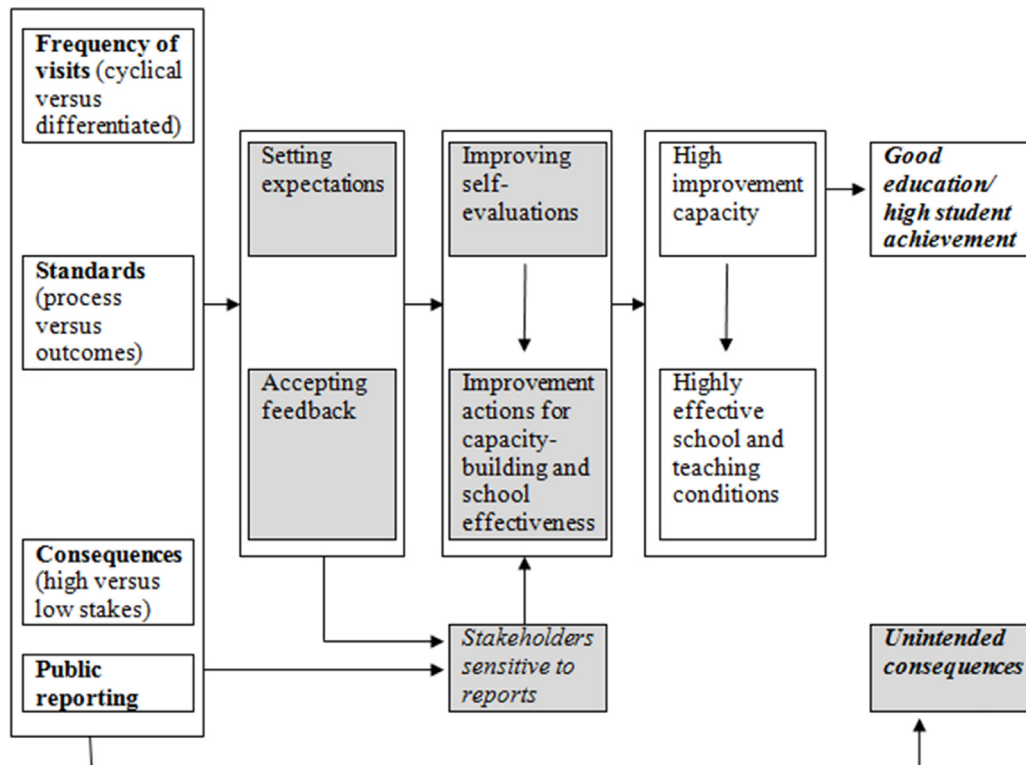


Fig. 1. Intended effects of school inspections-proposed conceptual model.

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