



# Risk-based school inspections in the Netherlands: A critical reflection on intended effects and causal mechanisms

M.C.M. Ehren<sup>a,\*</sup>, M.E. Honingh<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Twente, Faculty of Behavioral Sciences, P.O. Box 217, 7500 AE Enschede, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, Nijmegen School of Management, P.O. Box 9108, 6500 HK Nijmegen, The Netherlands

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 1 May 2011

Received in revised form 20 December 2011

Accepted 17 February 2012

Available online 28 March 2012

### Keywords:

Accountability  
School inspections  
External evaluation  
Good governance

## ABSTRACT

This paper compares and contrasts the program theory of the reenacted Supervision Act to the Supervision Act of 2003. We describe how the expectations about how schools should be inspected, the effect such inspections are expected to have, and how these effects should be realized have changed over the past years as a result of changing paradigms of governance and the supervision of schools. An ex ante evaluation of the program theory shows that the changed inspection methods are likely to be less effective compared to the previous paradigm.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## Introduction

Many countries across the world arrange for external evaluation of their schools in order to inspect and improve the quality of education. In Europe, the dominant arrangement for external evaluations is school inspection. Inspectorates of Education assess the quality of education in schools, using standards and procedures to evaluate a broad range of goals related to student achievement, teaching, the school organization and leadership (e.g. [McNamara & O'Hara, 2008](#)). They set expectations for performance of schools, they produce evidence as to whether these expectations have been met and expect this evidence to stimulate and orient school improvement.

The Dutch Inspectorate of Education, established in 1801, is one of the oldest operating Inspectorates in Europe. Its working methods, like those of other inspectorates, have evolved greatly over time, particularly in the last decade ([de Wolf, 2007](#); [Kerseboom et al., 2007](#)). Neither the Netherlands nor the field of education is alone in this trend as many inspectorates in a number of countries face comparable challenges that stem from current policy directions ([Black & Baldwin, 2010](#)).

One of the historical hallmarks of the Dutch Education Inspectorate, and the starting point of our analysis, is the implementation of the Dutch Educational Supervision Act in 2003. This Act specified the framework for inspection and the

standards the Inspectorate should use in the evaluation of schools (e.g. pedagogical climate and number of lesson hours). The act was implemented to give the Inspectorate of Education a stronger legal foundation for their work in schools and to increase the transparency of their work in an era of increased autonomy of schools.

Moreover, the act revealed that the task of the education inspectorate was at least twofold. The inspectorate had to guarantee that schools comply with legal requirements to ensure the legitimacy of the received state funding. Secondly, the inspectorate had to stimulate and challenge schools to provide a satisfactory level of educational quality and to increase their added value in terms of student achievement. Consequently, the inspectorate had to combine a compliance approach rooted in legal requirements with an approach rooted in stimulating and challenging schools to improve.

Since the Educational Supervision Act came into force in 2003, the political and economic situation as well as expectations toward external inspectorates, control and accountability have changed dramatically. [Helderman and Honingh \(2009\)](#) analyzed Dutch whitepapers on regulation that had been published since 1998 and noticed a stronger emphasis on effectiveness that could be understood as an element of a government-wide drive to reduce the overall administrative burden. One of the attempts to reduce the inspection burden, which could already be found in the Educational Supervision Act, is the notion of proportional inspection that implies a linkage between internal and external control and quality assurance systems. If external supervisors could make use of internal assurance systems such as certification,

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [m.c.m.ehren@utwente.nl](mailto:m.c.m.ehren@utwente.nl) (M.C.M. Ehren).

quality contracts and benchmarks, they would be able to arrange for meta-supervision, auditing or other distant forms of inspections (Ambtelijke Commissie Toezicht II, 2005). In line with this reasoning, inspectorates were encouraged and expected to apply methods that were considered more cost efficient such as risk-analysis and risk-calculation. After the government agreed on the use of risk-analysis in 2007 the Inspectorate of Education no longer has to provide for full regular inspections of all schools. Instead, the role of the Inspectorate becomes more complementary to the mechanisms and processes the school board is required to have in place to monitor and improve the education in their schools (e.g. Janssens & de Wolf, 2009). As the new inspection methods should be aligned to the explicit responsibility of school boards for the quality of education and compliance to the legislation in their schools (where the principal is responsible for the daily operation of the school within the framework set by the school board), the communication between the Inspectorate and the school is with the school board instead of with the principal.

As some of these changes in working methods since 2003 did not fit the 2003 Supervision Act anymore, the law was amended in 2011. This change in legislation calls for a renewed description and reevaluation of the functions and methods of the Dutch Inspectorate of Education. Taking the reconstructed program theory of the 2003 Dutch Supervision Act by Ehren et al. (2005) as our starting point we will compare and contrast the then valid assumptions of how school inspections were supposed to work and the effects they were expected to have with the current assumptions. For the sake of consistency we will build on methods applied by Ehren et al. (2005) to reconstruct the program theory and to analyze how this renewed program theory is different from the former one. Previous work of Janssens and de Wolf (2009) and de Wolf and Verkroost (2010), who have reconstructed assumptions of changes in policy on the governance and control of schools by the Department of Education in general, will inform our analysis in so far as they address how inspection methods (within that context) area expected to lead to school improvement. Available research on effects of school inspections will be used to discuss the validity and realism of the renewed program theory in comparison to the former one. The comparative take will help to answer the following questions:

- How are school inspections currently expected to lead to good education?
- How are these assumptions different from the assumptions that were stated in 2003 and what shift in inspection paradigm can be found?
- How are the old and new inspection paradigms different and which paradigm is expected to be most realistic in promoting good education?

The next section outlines the method to reconstruct and evaluate the program theory.

## Method

In this paper we will reconstruct the program theory of the reenacted Supervision Act of 2011. A program theory is 'an explicit theory or model of how a program causes the intended or observed outcomes' (Rogers et al., 2000, p. 5). Identifying and explicating a program theory enables us to evaluate the validity of the assumptions and expose potential implementation and theory failures. Implementation failures arise when intended activities are not put into operation (Weiss, 1997); they can be identified in an ex post evaluation when the actual implementation of the program is evaluated in comparison to its intended implementation. In this

paper we will focus on potential theory failures and use the reconstruction of the renewed Supervision Act as an ex ante evaluation. Such an ex ante evaluation discusses the validity and coherence of the assumptions and builds on previous research findings to discuss the realism of the propositions. An ex ante evaluation enables us to point out the potential impoverished nature of the theory that underlies the current approach of school inspections and the rationale for changing this approach.

As we will compare and contrast the program theory of the reenacted Supervision Act of 2011 to the Supervision Act of 2003, we will lean on the choices Ehren et al. (2005) made in the reconstruction of the 2003 Supervision Act. Ehren et al. (2005) chose a policy scientific approach to reconstruct their program theory. A policy scientific approach is described by Leeuw (2003) as one that is strongly linked to mainstream evaluation methods and uses interviews, documents to reconstruct the assumptions underlying a program; an argumentative analysis is used to distinguish relevant statements from these documents and interviews and rephrase them into assumptions describing causal mechanisms. The benefit of this approach is the use of evidence to reconstruct a consistent program theory (Karstanje, 1996). Other methods, such as a strategic assessment approach which includes group dynamics and dialog to empower stakeholders to share knowledge and perspectives, or the elicitation methodology where mental models and cognitive maps of members of organizations are extracted to explain and predict organizational outcomes, run the risk of negotiating the informative and empirical content of the program theory or including ideological or politically correct statements about the content of the program theory (Leeuw, 2003). Ehren et al. (2005, p. 61) outline the steps that are taken when using a policy scientific approach to reconstruct a program theory. These steps will also be taken to analyze documents to reconstruct the program theory of the reenacted Supervision Act of 2011:

1. Identify the social and behavioral mechanisms that are expected to solve the problem; search formal and informal documents for statements indicating the necessity of solving the social, organizational, or policy problem in question, the goals of the proposed policy or program, and how they are to be achieved. These latter statements refer to mechanisms (or "engines") that drive the policies or programs and are believed to make them effective. Examples are manifold. They include determinants of innovation diffusion, mechanisms underlying Prisoner's Dilemma games, processes producing social capital, cognitive dissonance, different types of learning behavior, and many more. Statements having the following form are especially relevant for detecting these mechanisms:
  - It is evident that *x* will work.
  - In our opinion, the best way to address this problem is to.
  - The only way to solve this problem is to.
  - Our institution's *x* years of experience tell us that.
2. Compile a survey of these statements and link the mechanisms to the goals of the program under review.
3. Reformulate the statements into conditional "if-then" propositions or propositions of a similar structure (e.g., "the more *x*, the less *y*").
4. Search for warrants that will identify disconnects in or among different propositions using argumentation analysis. Founded in part on Toulmin's (1964) *The Use of Argument*, argumentation analysis refers to a model for analyzing chains of arguments and helps to reconstruct and "fill in" argumentations. A central concept is the warrant, which, according to Toulmin (1958) and Mason and Mitroff (1981), is the "because" part of an argument. A warrant says that B follows from A because of a (generally) accepted principle. For example, "the organization's

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/372727>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/372727>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)