



Effects of feedback on process features of school quality: A longitudinal study on teachers' reception of school inspection of Swiss compulsory schools



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ABSTRACT

The longitudinal study investigates teachers' views on the inspection of compulsory schools in four Swiss cantons. Functions and features of school inspection in Switzerland are sketched and the theoretical basis of the study in research on feedback and self-efficacy outlined. Survey data from participating teachers ($n = 477$ at (t1), $n = 383$ at (t2)) is analyzed using structural equation modelling. The results show that *Acquired Knowledge* is a strong predictor for planning school improvement. While the step from knowledge to action is indeed mediated by teachers' collective efficacy beliefs, the impact of this mediation is not as strong as theoretical considerations suggest. The implications of these findings are discussed, emphasizing the features of an inspection policy that strongly focuses on process qualities such as leadership, quality management, cooperation, school climate and parental involvement.

School inspections in Switzerland focus on process features such as leadership, cooperation, climate, and classroom management, which can be regarded as effectiveness-enhancing factors of school quality. Important topics for inspectors are: leadership, quality management, cooperation, school climate and parental involvement. As in other countries, schools in Switzerland are held accountable to standards of professional management and should therefore receive substantial feedback regarding school improvement. Thus, school inspection serves to deliver a diagnosis on administrative and social aspects of schooling that can be used to monitor and organize development. This article takes a longitudinal perspective on how teachers receive the results of inspections that focus on process features. Taking advantage of social learning theory (Bandura, 1997), the study addresses the question: How do inspection *Feedback*, *Acquired Knowledge*, and *Teachers' Collective Efficacy* influence *School Improvement Activities*?

The paper comprises four sections. The first section covers the theoretical framework. The second section presents the research design, and the third reports the findings. The results are discussed in the fourth section, followed by a short conclusion.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Objectives of school inspection

During the last few decades, in many countries the autonomy granted to schools has increased the importance of school inspections. At the same time, traditional inspectorates who focused on document analysis and school visits have been reorganized on the lines of more scientifically-based observation. Such scientific observation entails the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods that together provide a systematic and profound account of school quality. These observations should, in turn, provide insights for evidence-based decision-making (Ehren & Pietsch, 2016; Gray, 2014).

Landwehr (2011) defines four interacting objectives of school inspection: setting expectations, advancing accountability, enhancing knowledge for the schools and improving schools. Political expectations as well as the fact that schools are held accountable may initiate school improvement efforts already in advance of the actual school inspection (Ehren, Perryman, & Shackleton, 2015). These pre-inspection efforts

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can be corroborated by enhanced knowledge that inspection teams provide and also prompt with their feedback.

Tension often exists in school inspection policies between some of these objectives, in particular between accountability and school improvement. (Ehren & Visscher, 2006; Landwehr, 2011). On the one hand, emphasis on accountability demands that schools comply with existing standards. This may suffocate impulses to search for innovative solutions. On the other hand, emphasis on school improvement demands that schools be encouraged to experiment and develop unique profiles. This makes them less comparable. Thus, policies have to deal with a trade-off between the controlling and the supporting functions of school inspection. Different authors indicate that it is indeed difficult to strike a balance between these goals (Altrichter, Moosbrugger, & Zuber, 2016; De Grauwe, 2009; Ehren & Pietsch, 2016; Klieme, 2005). However, school inspection policies and reports should strive to both enhance existing knowledge regarding strengths and weaknesses, and also offer insights that make it possible to compare the current state with internally or externally defined targets. This learning process can be either an accountability-driven or an improvement-driven learning cycle. To prompt a learning process that grows knowledge, feedback on school quality is essential.

1.2. Feedback matters

Studies on the effectiveness of school inspection report heterogeneous findings (for a review see Husfeldt, 2011; de Wolf & Janssens, 2007). They all agree, however that feedback matters and that the better the feedback the more positive its impact (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Visscher & Coe, 2003).

Feedback is essential in both the accountability-driven and the improvement-driven learning cycles. According to Kluger and DeNisi (1996), school inspection can be regarded as a feedback intervention that shifts recipients' attention. On the individual level, effective feedback is relevant, clear, constructive and specific (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), and the same holds true for the organizational level of school inspections (Altrichter & Kemethofer, 2016; Bosker, Branderhorst, & Visscher, 2007; Ehren, Altrichter, McNamara, & O'Hara, 2013; Visscher & Coe, 2003). Feedback on its own does not, however, automatically lead to positive outcomes, as actors have to be motivated to and capable of bridging the gap between "is" and "ought". Unintended consequences, such as the rejection of results or the ritualistic implementation of measures, will occur when principals and teachers are unwilling to engage in substantial discussions on the findings and recommendations of inspection reports (Ehren & Visscher, 2006).

Most studies regarding feedback in schools focus on student achievement rather than process features of school quality (Geijsel, Krüger, & Slegers, 2010; Hellrung & Hartig, 2013; Maier, 2009a; Maier, 2009b; Vanhoof, Verhaeghe, Verhaeghe, Valcke, & Van Petegem, 2010; Verhaeghe, Vanhoof, Valcke, & Van Petegem, 2010). This focus notwithstanding, Verhaeghe et al. (2010) state that feedback on student performance helps detect organizational and instructional strengths and weaknesses, which may lead to school improvement. Altrichter et al. (2016), furthermore, point out that it is difficult for teachers and principals to translate performance data into action plans, which may explain why systematic and collaborative use of these data can seldom be observed (Hellrung & Hartig, 2013; Schildkamp & Kuiper, 2010; Schildkamp & Teddlie, 2008).

Other factors that influence the impact of school inspection on change in schools include: the frequency of visits, the standards applied during the visits, and sanctions and rewards that result (Ehren et al., 2013; Ehren, Gustafsson et al., 2015). One type of sanction and reward that can reinforce these visits is if test results are used as an indicator for school quality. This is the case in the United Kingdom, where Ofsted school inspections results can be linked to school league tables that indicate success and failure in national assessments and examinations. This may also happen in the Netherlands, where school performance

indicators are also made public (Janssens, 2011). In both countries, attention is on failing schools. The upshot of such publication may include blacklisting and a strong pressure to improve. Such a narrow focus, may, however have unintended consequence, such as paralysis (Ehren & Visscher, 2006).

To avoid such paralyzing effects of testing, school inspection in Switzerland excludes student achievement data. Instead, feedback in Switzerland specifically and intentionally centers on process qualities of schooling. The underlying assumption is that the successful transition of students to apprenticeship training and higher education suffice as indicators for the effectiveness of the education system. It is, furthermore, argued that school quality embraces important aspects that cannot be reduced to measurable test scores. Instead, the interactions amongst students, teachers and principals are considered aspects of quality of schooling that deserve a high level of attention. In accordance with various studies, these process qualities are considered important school effectiveness enhancing factors (Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; Scheerens, 2014; Schildkamp & Kuiper, 2010; Schildkamp, 2007; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013).

Considering these findings, the analysis of factors that enhance the likelihood of effective feedback use and thus of a learning process for schools appears essential. The effectiveness of school inspection depends on the quality of the generated knowledge (Lambrecht & Rürup, 2012). Until now, schools' knowledge acquisition seems to be underestimated as a significant predictor of school improvement.

1.3. School inspection in Switzerland

In the Swiss federal system, school inspection is a cantonal responsibility. Since the late 1990s, cantons have been implementing reforms centered on professionalizing school leadership and on school-based quality management (Huber, 2011). These reforms have been accompanied by changes in school inspections, with many cantons re-defining inspectorates as professional agencies that aim at the external evaluation of school quality. The criteria of these inspections include (Mahler & Quesel, 2015):

1. School climate
2. Classroom climate
3. Instruction and classroom management
4. Working climate and cooperation
5. Leadership and quality management
6. School improvement activities
7. Parental involvement

Although different cantons have different tests, school inspectors across Switzerland do not consider student achievement data at all. There is a broad consensus that these tests should deliver diagnostic information for teachers and support instructional development. But student achievement data should not be used to apply pressure on schools through politically defined achievement targets. Thus, there is no ranking of either students or schools based on cantonal tests. Since student outcomes are excluded, cantonal school inspections focus on the process dimension of school quality. Stressing the importance of social and administrative aspects of schooling, these inspections can be regarded as an element of soft education governance (Bieber & Martens, 2011) in which the performance of schools is not measured by quantitative indicators relating to student achievement. The strategy of "governing by numbers" (Grek & Ozga, 2008) is limited to climate data that are used as a reference to compare local schools with the cantonal average. Values that are considerably below the average are taken to indicate a need for action; but in most cases it is up to the local authorities to discuss possible consequences with principals. It is only in extreme cases that cantonal authorities intervene, and even in these cases a strategy of dialogue prevails. Thus, even in a time of crisis, school improvement measures are not simply imposed from above

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