

Effects and side effects of school inspections: A general framework



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ABSTRACT

Apart from its role to ensure school accountability, most Inspectorates pursue development-oriented goals. This introduction article will first provide a theoretical background for the assumed effects and side effects of school inspections, as well as an overview of the current knowledge base, based on an elaborate literature study. It is clear that a framework is needed in order to offer a coherent and well-documented picture of the effects of inspection and of their explanatory features. Furthermore an intensive scan of each of the previous publications of Studies in Educational Evaluation was conducted in order to determine a selection of nine highly relevant articles. In the final section of this introduction, a short review of the articles included in this special issue is presented.

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1. Introduction

Almost every education system has arranged for some kind of external school evaluation through inspections of primary and secondary schools (Eurydice, 2004; OECD, 2013). The importance of inspection has intensified during the last two decades. In many countries there has been a trend to grant schools more autonomy with regard to their processes, while at the same time there are greater demands to hold schools accountable for these devolved responsibilities (Faubert, 2009; OECD, 2013).

Apart from its role to ensure school accountability, most Inspectorates pursue development-oriented goals (Ehren & Visscher, 2006; OECD, 2013). Many policy-makers tend to see school development as a natural corollary of inspection (Ehren, Altrichter, McNamara, & O'Hara, 2013; Eurydice, 2004). Despite this ambitious dual goal, inspections are often contested by practitioners and academics due to strong beliefs concerning their side effects on schools and on staff (e.g. Ball, 2003; Barber, 2004).

This special issue provides an insight into the literature regarding inspections in primary and secondary education. It collects the articles published in Studies of Educational Evaluation with regard to the effects of school inspections in different educational contexts.

In this introduction article, we will first provide a theoretical background for the assumed effects and side effects of school inspections, as well as an overview of the current knowledge base. It is clear that a framework is needed in order to offer a coherent and well-documented picture of the effects of inspection and of their explanatory features. Ehren and Visscher (2006, p. 53) stated that "An important prerequisite for expanding our knowledge in this

area is the development of a theoretical framework on the effects of school inspections including the relevant factors and their interrelationships as an empirical test basis".

Based on an intensive scan of each of the previous publications of Studies in Educational Evaluation, a selection of nine highly relevant articles was determined. In the final section of this introduction, a short review of the articles included in this special issue is presented.

2. Literature study: method

In order to provide the essential framework for this special issue, an extensive literature search was conducted. The literature study adopts an explorative approach to a wide and open topic: its purpose is to inform the central guidelines of this special issue. The purpose of this literature study is to identify both empirical and theoretical or policy-oriented works. Therefore, the scope of this study is broader than the evidence provided in a traditional (and more systematic) review study. The elaborate extent to which this literature study has been conducted ensures that the most prominent potential drawback of non-systematical literature studies (namely that a skewed image may be obtained (Glass, McGaw, & Smith, 1981), is adequately addressed.

The literature study started with a search of the ERIC and the Web of Science databases. Keywords were "school" AND "inspection". The literature study was first conducted in the first six months of 2012 and repeated five times (with intervals of six months) in order to capture new publications. Furthermore, the following journals were systematically screened for publications regarding school inspections: British Educational Research Journal,

Cambridge Journal of Education, Educational Assessment Evaluation and Accountability, Educational Management Administration & Leadership, Journal of Education Policy, Oxford Review of Education, School Leadership & Management, and Studies in Educational Evaluation. Finally, specific searches were conducted in order to elaborate certain parts of the conceptual framework (e.g. to illuminate the concepts of 'self-efficacy' and 'collective efficacy').

Each of the articles was assessed on relevance by (1) screening the title of the publication, (2) screening the abstract of the publication, and (3) a careful reading of the publication. Furthermore, we adopted the 'snowball method' by looking for more studies in the reference lists of already selected publications.

As the focus for our purpose was not limited to only peer-reviewed publications or empirical studies, soon ample literature was collected. Therefore, we prioritised empirical and peer-reviewed evidence from 2000 onwards. Each publication that met these additional criteria is included in this introduction. With regard to the other publications, we included each of them until a point of saturation was reached where no more new information was added. Overall, 91 publications were included in the results section of this literature study.

For the analysis of the data we adopted a deductive analytical approach known as the 'framework approach' (Ritchie & Spencer, 1993). This approach allows to look for patterns in collected data supported by the analytical framework on the one hand, and by the input of the data on the other. The analytical framework we started from was based on the categories of effects defined by Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman (1999) and the categories of undesirable side effects defined by De Wolf and Janssens (2007). However, during the analysis additional categories were added as data could not be included in the initial framework.

As there is no framework available for features that might help explain differences between the extent to which effects and side effects occur, we adopted an inductive approach. Based on the literature, general nodes were created that functioned as an 'umbrella' under which several possible explaining features could be stored. When necessary, subnodes were created. The open coding was followed by a phase in which (partially) overlapping or related nodes were consolidated into one node (Gibbs, 2002).

3. Defining inspection

As different countries have different mechanisms to ensure school accountability (Van Bruggen, 2010), it is essential that we first clearly define what is understood as an 'inspection'.

In the research and policy literature, several terms have been used to describe external monitoring of schools, such as 'supervision', 'inspection' and 'appraisal' (Macnab, 2004). Building on a literature search into earlier definitions, we have defined a school inspection as "... an evaluation of the quality of schools including minimally a site visit leading to a judgement on whether the quality of schools is meeting the expected standards, by persons with specific expertise who are not directly or indirectly involved in the school" (Penninckx, Vanhoof, De Maeyer, & Van Petegem, 2015c, p. 1). This definition excludes test-based accountability measures that don't include a site visit, which explains why most of the literature regarding the effects of accountability measures in the US context is excluded from the overview below.

4. Effects, side effects and their explanatory characteristics

Fig. 1 presents an overview of five assumed effects of inspections, three assumed side effects, and four categories of features that might explain the extent to which these (side) effects occur.

4.1. Effects and side effects

An inspection is assumed to provide feedback to the authorities, to stakeholders, but also the school about the quality of provision of education in the school. The inspectors' judgement on the schools, and the communication about the results of the inspection to the schools, can be regarded as a feedback system for the schools (Ehren et al., 2013; Klerks, 2012). Therefore, the inventory of effects of inspection starts from a distinction between different types of feedback use made by Rossi et al. (1999), namely (a) *conceptual*, (b) *instrumental* and (c) *symbolic* effects. Based on our literature search, we added two more kinds of effects: the impact of inspection on (d) *personal and collective self-efficacy*, and on (f) *pupils' learning outcomes*.

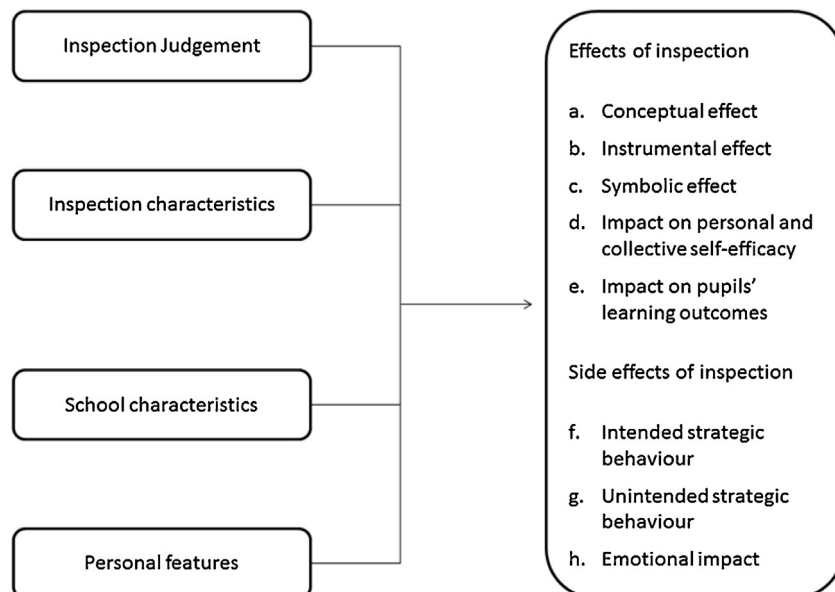


Fig. 1. Overview of assumed effects and side effects of inspection, and their assumed explanatory characteristics.

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