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School inspections of Swedish schools: A critical reflection on intended effects, causal mechanisms and methods

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Introduction

In October 2008, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate was established as a governmental body. The organization had a flying start in the sense that it took over inspection activities that were already going on within the National Agency for Education, and that had expanded greatly during the last couple of years. However, the establishment of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate was associated with a further increase of resources, and a more demanding assignment. During the years that the Swedish Schools Inspectorate has been in operation, new approaches to school inspection have been developed, and methods and procedures are still under development.

The main aim of this paper is to analyze the inspection methods currently used by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate using a program theory approach. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate is now a major component of the quality system of the Swedish educational system, so it is important to investigate its mode of operation, and the effects that it has. The fact that the system is still under development makes this somewhat more complicated than if the system had been stable, but it also implies that information about the workings of the system may have a greater chance of coming to use in further development of the system.

Below we first describe the background, development and current activities of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, along with a short description of changes in the Swedish school system.

Up until the early 1990s, the Swedish school system was highly centralized and regulated, and within such a system there was not much need for regular school inspections. However, since the beginning of the 1990s the main responsibility for operation of education activities has been decentralized to the municipalities and to authorities for independent schools. Within the objectives and framework established on

the national level by the Swedish Parliament and Government, the municipalities or the board of an independent school determine how the schools are to be run.

Steering documents were formulated at a high level of abstraction and were supposed to be elaborated in a concrete manner in municipalities and schools. Competition among schools and parents' free choice among a variety of schools with different pedagogies were thought to enhance the quality of education. Self-evaluation at the local level was expected to guarantee school development.

The decentralization of the Swedish school system also involved creation of new institutions at the national level. In 1989, the National Agency for Education was established under the Ministry for Education and Research and was mainly assigned tasks of formulating steering documents at national level and national follow-up and assessments.

During the early 1990s, school inspection was at a minimum and almost only occurred after complaints. However, from 1994 and onwards the government started to recognize the need for a more strict control of law-abidingness and quality. This marks the start of an era during which school inspections have grown tremendously in importance and scope in Sweden. In 1998, a special board for quality control was formed within the National Agency for Education, but large-scale school inspections were not started until 2003.

The type of school inspections that started at that time was very comprehensive and was labeled *full inspection*. All schools in all municipalities were to be inspected during a period of six years. Three broad areas were focused upon: results, standards of achievement, learning and teaching; and school management and internal audit.

The National Agency of Education commissioned the Swedish National Financial Management Authority ("Ekonomistyrningsverket", ESV) to conduct a formative evaluation in the beginning of the six-year inspection. ESV (2006) studied attitudes to school inspection in the 38 municipalities that were inspected in the first two years, 2003 and 2004. Questionnaires were distributed to politicians, civil servants, principals and teachers. The respondents were generally positive to the inspectors and how the inspection was conducted. It was also reported that teachers were less positive than politicians and principals. The majority of respondents considered the inspection to point out shortcomings that were already known. It was concluded that the main positive effect of inspection was that measures to be taken towards improvement were brought forward.

In a report from the Swedish Official Report Series (SOU, 2007), a program for enlarged inspection was outlined. One starting point of this program was that schools shall provide education of equal quality and that everyone has the right to receive good education. Another starting point was that it is necessary to take actions against the declining Swedish results reported in national evaluations and international comparative studies. The decentralized school system requires continuous efforts in order to secure and strengthen quality in schools. At the national level, the responsibilities are to effectively

follow up, evaluate and inspect that the results develop in the right direction. Openness, clarity and objectivity shall characterize the school inspection, and the report argued that previous school inspections suffered from limitations in these respects. They were criticized for being conducted in different ways and difficult to compare, and it was observed that the inspection reports seemed to be dependent on the values of the individual inspectors. Quality assurance of the model for inspection also was emphasized to be of great importance.

Based on this report the Swedish Schools Inspectorate was established in late 2008. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate was formed as a new government body at the same level as the National Agency for Education, and one reason for this was that the government considered it important to separate the tasks of steering and support from the tasks of evaluation and control. Another reason was that the government wanted to emphasize the importance of national inspection and to encourage a more forceful and rigorous inspection. Under the new division of responsibilities, the National Agency for Education was assigned responsibility for national goals and curricula, support of school development, national evaluation and continuous data collection for comparisons in different aspects. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate was assigned three main areas of responsibility: educational inspection, investigation of complaints and approval of applications to start independent schools. The National Agency for School Development was closed down.

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate thus is a central governmental agency under the Ministry of Education and Research. The Government decides on objectives, guidelines and allocation of resources to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. However, the Government does not control the application of laws or the inspectorate's decisions on specific matters concerning the exercise of official authority towards local authorities and individuals. The inspectorate has the right to inspect whenever and however it decides, within the framework of its given mandate. Currently the Swedish Schools Inspectorate does not have the right to lift sanctions against municipal school but it has the right to withdraw approvals and public funding for independent schools that do not fulfill their obligations in accordance with rules and regulations. However, the new Education Act that is implemented from July 2011 gives the inspectorate the right to lift sanctions against municipal schools as well.

Method

The main methodological approach is to make a program theoretic analysis of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. Donaldson (2007, p. 22) defines program theory as follows: *“The process through which program components are presumed to affect outcomes and the conditions under which these are believed to operate.”* The program theory of school inspection thus expresses what the concern is assumed to be, what are assumed to be the causes of the problem, how these can be remedied, and the conditions under which that can be done.

Assumptions about causes are not always explicitly stated in, for example, policy documents, guidelines and laws but can be inferred from what is described as the

necessary actions. Thus, expected causal mechanisms can be identified and critically examined. The purpose of such a procedure is to evaluate the empirical base or realism of the assumptions, the consistency of these assumptions and the probability that the actions suggested lead to intended effects.

In educational settings, a large amount of causal mechanisms interact in complex manners. There are numerous actors involved and any attempt to control processes and outcomes is likely to be affected by unobserved causal mechanisms. Therefore, the analysis of any specific program theory includes a theoretically informed discussion and an estimation of which actions that are the most powerful predictors of success. The causal mechanisms involved, have to be judged and valued in relation to one another.

In the first step, the assumptions that explain how inspection is supposed to work are inferred or reconstructed from documents, and these assumptions form the Swedish Schools Inspectorate program theory. In the second step, this reconstruction of the program theory is checked and validated by representatives of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, and in the last step a critical evaluation is made.

Reconstruction

The aim of reconstructing the Swedish Schools Inspectorate program theory is to predict effects of school inspections by describing and evaluating how schools should be inspected, the effects such inspections should have, and how these effects should be realized. This study is part of a larger research project designed to measure the impact of school inspections on teaching and learning in several European countries (Ehren, 2011).

The development and changes in the Swedish Schools Inspectorate inspection methodology have been described in several government reports and Swedish Schools Inspectorate policy documents, so these documents provide a useful starting point for gathering information about assumptions. As was suggested by Ehren (2011), the policy scientific approach is well suited for transforming the information in these documents into assumptions. This approach includes the following steps (Leeuw, 2003; Ehren, 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 performance will not improve next year” follows from “the performance of this organization has not improved during the past 5 years” because of the principle that past performance is the best predictor of future performance. The “because” part of such an argument is often left implicit, with the consequence that warrants must be inferred by the person performing the analysis.
5. Reformulate these warrants in terms of conditional “if-then” (or similar) propositions and draw a chart of the (mostly causal) links.
6. Evaluate the validity of the propositions by looking into: The logical consistency of the set of propositions; their empirical content, that is, the extent to which the theory and in particular the assumed impact on the behavioral mechanisms correspond with the state of the art within the social/behavioral/economic sciences on these mechanisms and the extent to which the theory focuses on variables that can be “manipulated” or “steered” through policy programs.

Participant Check

The reconstruction of the assumptions forming the Swedish Schools Inspectorate program theory assumptions was checked by interviewing employees of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, who were asked to indicate whether the assumptions fit the intention of the current inspection methods.

This participant check led to some changes of the originally proposed program theory. Thus, a mechanism of general influence on all schools of a regular system of inspections was added, and initially proposed positive effects of differentiated inspections on strong schools were removed. Initial formulations on the research base of thematic quality evaluations were also revised.

Evaluation

In the last phase of the study a critical evaluation of the program theory is made, through analyzing how consistent, complete, and realistic the assumptions are. By doing so, the potential effects and side effects of the inspections can be predicted.

Results

In the evaluation of the model of school inspections used by the National Agency for Education that was conducted by the Swedish National Financial Management Authority

(ESV, 2006) an analysis of a program theory for school inspection is presented, and there is reason to present this as a starting point.

The ESV analysis describes the inspection process as a series of activities, each of which requires certain prerequisites. The first activity is the inspection, which requires prerequisites in the form of competence, time and other resources. The inspection identifies areas that need to be improved, but for improvements to take place, it is necessary that the problems are documented and accepted as problems, that resources and knowledge are available to solve the identified problems, and so on. Given the prerequisite that the measures taken are relevant and sufficient to solve the problems, the students will reach the goals.

This analysis is, however, formulated in general terms, and it has more the character of a program theory that is applicable to all kinds of school inspections, than the program theory of the inspections of the National Agency for Education. It thus is necessary to carry out the analysis at a more concrete level.

The activities of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate are regulated and described in several documents: The report from the Swedish Official Report Series (SOU, 2007) that preceded the establishment of the independent Swedish Schools Inspectorate, outlines a program for enlarged inspection. The Swedish Educational Act (Svensk Författningssamling, 2010) regulates the legal aspects of school inspection. The Swedish Parliament recently decided on a new Educational Act, which comes into force July 1, 2011, even though it will be implemented in a stepwise manner. At a more specific level the government has issued an instruction (Svensk Författningssamling, 2009) for the Swedish Schools Inspectorate and as for all governmental bodies there also are annual "Letters of Regulation" ("Regleringsbrev") which describe general and specific assignments, and resources available. The official descriptions of the work of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen, 2009, 2010, 2011) explain working procedures and expected effects of school inspection.

According to the policy documents of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate the main aim of all inspection activities shall be to ensure the right of all children and students to a good education in a safe environment. It is also stated that the Swedish Schools Inspectorate through the use of different inspection tools shall influence each inspected school to improve, but the Swedish Schools Inspectorate also has the task of contributing to improvement of the whole educational system.

As has already been mentioned the Swedish Schools Inspectorate relies on four main tools of inspection. The first is the regular supervision, which covers all schools according to a schedule which runs over a period of four to five years, and which mainly focuses on issues of legality and equality of education. The second is thematic quality evaluations, which focus on quality issues in particular school subjects or special functions. The third is investigation of complaints from individual students or their parents. While the starting point is the individual child, the investigations may also attend to different systems and functions within the school. The fourth tool of the inspectorate is

scrutiny of applications to start independent schools, and inspection visits to newly established independent schools.

While all of these tools are important, the regular supervision and the thematic quality evaluations have the greatest relevance for the quality aspects of the regular operation of the schools. In the analysis of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate program theory, we therefore put most emphasis on these.

Regular supervision

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate completed the previously established six-year program of full inspections in 2009, and in 2010, a new round of regular inspections was started. In this round, schools are inspected according to a pre-determined schedule, but which now runs on a four and a half year cycle. During 2010, a system of differentiated inspections also was introduced (Skolinspektionen, 2011). A so called “basic inspection” is done in schools which on the basis of the initially available knowledge are judged to be well-functioning. For schools where there are uncertainties if this is the case, a so called “widened inspection” is made. Out of the 918 grade 1-9 schools inspected during 2010, 65 % had a widened inspection, while 32 % had a basic inspection. The selection of schools for widened inspection is based on grades and results on national tests, observations made in previous inspections, complaints, and questionnaire responses from students, parents and teachers. The differentiated model also takes into account a number of factors that according to research characterizes successful schools. School leadership which gives priority to educational achievement, high expectations on the students, and common social norms are examples of such factors.

The regular inspections focus on fulfillment of national objectives, students’ achievement levels, safety, orderly classrooms, equal access to education for all students and legal rights of the individual. Prior to a regular supervision, a survey is completed by the individual schools and by the responsible authority, which may be a municipality or the board of an independent school. Existing materials, in the form of statistics, quality reports, previous supervisory decisions, and reports from quality inspections, are relied upon during this process. The aim is to get an overview of the responsible authority’s activities and identify any shortcomings.

When inspecting a municipality within the regular supervision, all schools are visited. School leaders, teachers, and school nurses are interviewed, as are pupils and the politicians in charge. The aim is to have the activities of the school described from several perspectives. When observing the school environment, lessons or other activities involving children, pupils, or students, close attention is paid to how the work is carried out in relation to the regulations. Thus, both legal aspects and quality aspects are attended to.

Two inspectors participate in the school visit, which lasts one, or two days, but occasionally longer. After a visit to a school within a regular supervision, the inspectors give oral feedback directly to the head teacher. A couple of weeks later, the results are

published in a report for the inspected schools and the municipality. The responsible authority and the head teachers are given the opportunity to make comments on the inspectors' preliminary written report. Then a formal decision is made, which is aimed at the responsible organization. If the operation does not meet the requirements, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate demands that the responsible organization takes action to rectify these shortcomings.

As has already been pointed out the basic form of regular supervision, which is done according to the same principles for all schools, is being developed into a differentiated model, in which weak schools are allocated more inspection resources, while the strong schools are allocated less inspection resources. The program theories underlying these two forms of regular supervision are discussed below.

Basic regular supervision

One main assumption underlying the basic regular supervision is that deviations from rules and regulations in a school's activities cause negative effects on the learning or on the safety of the students. Given that the rules set down by the government and other authorities in the form of legislation, ordinances or curricula are founded upon knowledge that does connect them to outcomes, identification and ensuing correction of deviations from the rules may be expected to positively affect outcomes.

However, only little of the activities of a school are governed by rules from which deviations are easy to identify. Furthermore, a main prerequisite of the basic regular supervision is that the inspectors can make judgments about whether the work is carried out in agreement with the regulations or not when they are observing the activities of the school.

These assumptions may be summarized as follows:

1. If the Swedish Schools Inspectorate uses regular supervision to identify deviations from rules and regulations in the activities of schools, then schools will improve.
 - 1.1 If the Swedish Schools Inspectorate identify deviations these are corrected by the schools, which leads to improvement.

Because: the Swedish Schools Inspectorate gives detailed instructions to the schools to correct deviations from rules and regulations within a specified time frame, and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate also follows up implementation of the corrections.

Because: The rules and regulations that have been decided upon concern aspects of school's activities which are important for the achievement and safety of the students; therefore correction of deviations will lead to better education.

Because: Deviations from rules and regulations are indicative of poorly working processes at the school, therefore correction of deviations will improve the processes, which will lead to better education
 - 1.2 If the Swedish Schools Inspectorate uses regular inspection then all schools will improve.

Because: The regularly recurring inspection activities will exert pressure on all schools not to deviate from rules and regulations, which will lead to improvement compared to if inspections were not made.

One prerequisite for this chain of causal relations is that the Swedish Schools Inspectorate possesses the ability to infer from observations of school activities, documents and interviews whether the work is in agreement with the regulations or not.

Differentiated regular supervision

As was mentioned above, during 2010 the Swedish Schools Inspectorate has introduced a system of inspection that differentiates the type of inspections over schools. The purpose is to increase school inspections of weak schools and to decrease inspections of strong schools. This is assumed to benefit the weak schools.

The strong schools have a track record of delivering good education, so they can be trusted to be able to do so in the future as well. The inspection resources that are freed up through the differentiated system can be allocated to the weak schools, which in turn may be expected to cause them to improve. This is because the more intensified inspection allows the school inspections to identify specific quality problems, which the schools can be advised to amend. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate can also follow up these amendments. Furthermore, if the intensified inspection of poor schools leads to early identification of schools which risk a negative development, interventions may prevent this from happening.

These assumptions may be summarized as follows:

1. If the Swedish Schools Inspectorate uses differentiated school inspections, then schools will offer better education.

1.1 If the Swedish Schools Inspectorate uses differentiated school inspections, then strong schools will be inspected less intensely, whereas weak schools are inspected more intensely.

1.2 If strong schools are inspected less intensely they can be assumed to continue being strong.

Because: Schools have autonomy to make decisions on how to organize their education, using their own professional insights. Strong schools have demonstrated their competence to achieve good results under this autonomy, so they can be trusted to do that in the future as well.

2.1 If the Swedish Schools Inspectorate uses differentiated school inspections, then weak schools are inspected more intensely.

2.2 If weak schools are inspected more intensely, then they will improve more quickly.

Because: the system of differentiated school inspections allows more resources to be allocated to identify deviations from rules and regulations in weak schools.

Because: the Swedish Schools Inspectorate gives detailed instructions to the schools to correct deviations from rules and regulations within a specified time frame, and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate also follows up the implementation of the corrections.

Because: the rules and regulations that have been decided upon concern aspects of school's activities which are important for the achievement and safety of the students; therefore correction of deviations will lead to better education.

Thematic quality evaluations

The thematic quality evaluations focus on quality aspects of a particular area, such as teaching of different subject matters, or a particular aspect, such as quality of grading or the teaching of Swedish to immigrant students. The thematic quality evaluations are based on interpretations of the steering documents, such as the national curriculum, which interpretations are supported by research- and experience-based knowledge of relevance to the area. Each year a set of areas is selected based on evaluations of risk and relevance.

Each thematic quality evaluation is conducted in project form according to a basic process model which was developed during 2009, and which has successively been developed after that. The model puts emphasis on use of systematic and tested work procedures, and also on the importance of careful preparations and continuous evaluations. For thematic quality evaluations, a reference-group of researchers who are active in the area is formed, and the reference group can also include other persons with relevant expertise.

Before a thematic quality evaluation starts, a literature review of relevant research and development is conducted. The inspectors collect as much academic experience, knowledge and information as possible from different kinds of studies. The purpose is to ensure that the evaluations meet the demands generally placed on evaluation and research studies; that they are reliable, objective, include the essential questions and are based on facts.

Within a thematic quality evaluation a selection of authorities and schools – municipal and independent – are visited. The authorities and schools are chosen from certain perspectives that differ according to the topic of the evaluation. Previously, both strong and weak schools have been selected in order to support those in need as well as to spread best practice. From 2011, random samples of schools have been drawn in order to ensure variation. The principles for selection of schools are, however, objects of discussion and may come to be further developed in coming years.

The categories that are interviewed also vary between different thematic quality evaluations. Within thematic quality evaluations, and particularly those that investigate subject-matter teaching, focus is on what is going on in the classroom and the role of teacher is essential. To find out about how schools meet the quality demands the inspectors follow specific supporting documentation for reviewing and assessing the areas within the evaluation. The support material is elaborated specifically for each thematic quality evaluation. Normally two inspectors visit a school. The duration of the visit varies in relation to the topic and the actual situation in the school.

The information is documented and collated. The inspection team analyses the knowledge it gains from document analyses, statistics, structured interviews, informal conversations and observations of activities and work. All results are triangulated from various sources. The interpretation of the gathered information is also carried out jointly within the team, against a background of professional expertise and the national steering documents. Before the final report is published, the reference group of researchers scrutinizes the results and offers suggestions for improvement. The reporting to participating schools is done in the same way as the reporting of regular inspections, but for thematic quality evaluations, a general report summarizing the main findings also is published. The results also are disseminated through media, and via conferences and seminars.

In 2009, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate completed six thematic quality evaluations, and the year after 17 thematic quality evaluations were completed. In addition 11 new evaluation projects were started, which will be reported in spring 2011. In the spring of 2011 yet another 13 thematic quality evaluations were launched. Some of the new projects are repeats or deepened versions of previous thematic quality evaluations. Among the projects completed in 2010, seven focused on subject matter teaching (e.g., modern languages in compulsory school, English in compulsory school, physics in compulsory school, Swedish in upper secondary school, mathematics in upper secondary school), and 10 focused on particular aspects (e.g., ways of dealing with harassments and bullying, quality of leisure-time centers, the school situation of students with disabilities in upper secondary school, grading in upper secondary school, and the school leadership of the principal).

The approach of the thematic quality evaluations may be described as a combination of theory-based evaluation (see, e.g., Donaldsson, 2007), and inspection focusing on a set of specific schools. Such theory-based school inspections are in many ways similar to the quality inspections that are a part of the regular supervision. However, one main difference is that the thematic quality evaluations have a higher level of ambition when it comes to specificity and precision because of the focus on a particular subject matter area or aspect. The thematic quality evaluations also aim to establish a knowledge basis which supports improvement of the quality not only of the schools that are included in the inspection, but also of all schools in Sweden.

While both the regular supervisions and the thematic quality evaluations rely on formulations in legislation, ordinances and curricula, the thematic quality evaluations are supported by an analysis of what is known about how different aspects of teaching relate to outcomes. Thus, when a thematic quality evaluation is conducted, a specific program theory is developed that specifies how different aspects of teaching and other school activities relate to outcomes. This program theory then guides the design of the inspection and the analysis of data.

A program theory for the thematic quality evaluations thus takes the form of a meta-theory that specifies the assumptions of the specific program theories constructed for

each thematic quality evaluation. In very brief outline, such a meta-theory would be based on the following main ideas:

- There exists knowledge generated in research and other systematic forms of knowledge production concerning what characterizes good teaching in different areas. This knowledge can be used to focus the inspection activities on important aspects, and to express general statements in curricula and syllabi in more precise terms.
- It is possible to develop instruments that can be used in school inspections to describe to what extent the teaching activities at a school have these characteristics, and to what extent they are lacking them.
- Through presenting the inspected school with these descriptions, and clarifying in what ways the teaching can be improved, the school's teaching and other inspected activities will improve in quality.
- Through presenting the results in a general form, the generalized results of the thematic quality evaluations will support improvement of the quality of teaching in other schools in Sweden. Furthermore, the more precise explication of the curricula and syllabi which is a part of the thematic quality evaluation supports school development, as does concrete examples of success factors and best practice.

This may be summarized as follows:

1. If the Swedish Schools Inspectorate uses thematic quality evaluations to identify quality problems in different aspects of the teaching of different subject matters or in themes of activity this will improve the outcomes of the inspected schools.
Because: the Swedish Schools Inspectorate gives detailed instructions to the schools to correct the quality problems within a specified time frame, and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate also follows up implementation of the corrections.
Because: It is known from research and experience that the inspected aspects are related to outcomes; therefore identification and correction of quality problems in the school will lead to better education.
Because: The thematic quality inspection offers a more concrete and precise interpretation of the general quality aspects formulated in curricula and syllabi, which provides support to the inspected schools in their work to improve education.
Because: Schools can learn from good practices used by others
2. If the Swedish Schools Inspectorate uses thematic quality evaluations to identify quality problems in different aspects of the teaching of different subject matters or in themes of activity, this will improve the outcomes of all schools in Sweden.
Because: It is known from research and experience that the inspected aspects are related to outcomes; therefore identification and correction of quality problems by the schools themselves will lead to better education.
Because: The thematic quality inspection offers a more concrete and precise interpretation of the general quality aspects formulated in curricula and syllabi, which provides support to the schools in their work to improve education.
Because: Schools may learn from the practices used by strong schools.

Because: It is known from research that the inspected aspects are related to outcomes; the government and other agencies can therefore take general measures to correct the quality problems, which will cause all schools to improve their education.

One prerequisite is that the Swedish Schools Inspectorate possesses the ability to infer from observations of school activities, documents and interviews general knowledge about the nature of the quality problems in Swedish schools and how these can be amended.

Evaluation

The program theory described for the Swedish Schools Inspectorate has as its main aim to lead to improvement in the quality of education. We now turn to an evaluation of the extent to which the program theory assumptions are valid, using criteria described by Leeuw (2003) which refer to the consistency, precision of definitions and empirical value of the assumptions in the program theory. This evaluation may suggest possible flaws in the program theory that arise when assumptions are incorrect or when the desired effects are not obtained.

Precision of definitions

The first question is whether the definitions in the program theory are precise and clear. There are several central terms, such as ‘regular supervision’, ‘differentiated school inspections’, thematic quality evaluation’, ‘good education’, and ‘improvement’.

One general problem with the definition of terms, is that there is no single document that regulates and codifies the operations of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. Another problem is that the inspection procedures and activities have been developed successively, and that they still are under development. In this situation, it is also natural that the documentation of procedures lags behind. The definition of terms thus often is implicit, and the interpretations made in the analysis of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate’s program theory may be different than those intended.

However, there are differences in the precision and clarity of the definitions of different terms. Thus, the term ‘regular inspection’ is quite clearly defined, which probably is because the activity to which it refers has a rather long history. However, the separation between inspection of legal aspects and quality aspects needs further clarification.

The newly introduced ‘differentiated school inspection’ is briefly characterized by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2011), but for the distinctions between ‘basic’, ‘widened’, and ‘deepened’ school inspections clear descriptions and definitions have not yet been offered. Particularly in comparison with the description of the Dutch risk-based system with explicitly defined procedures and criteria for identifying potentially failing schools (see Ehren, 2011), the lack of precision is striking. The definition of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ schools also lacks in precision for the same reason.

The main aim of achieving ‘good education’ is defined in terms of all students reaching the educational goals. However, while this definition is clear it can also be argued that this is a narrow definition of good education, because within the current educational system this is the same as saying that all students should reach the level of ‘Pass’ in the criterion-referenced grading system. Many students have, however, the potential of reaching higher than the level of Pass, and it could be argued that a ‘good education’ should not impose a ceiling on the development of students. In this context it can also be observed that the term ‘improvement’ can be interpreted in the same narrow sense as the term ‘good education’ and that it can also be given a more general, but imprecise meaning.

The description of the quite new thematic quality evaluation inspections also is done at a rather general level, which may have to do with the fact that different types of inspections are subsumed under this label. The complexity of the thematic quality evaluations may also be a reason for the lack of precision in the descriptions offered.

Furthermore, each thematic quality evaluation involves definition of the terms that are relevant for the particular subject matter area or aspect under investigation. These definitions are based on reviews of current research concerning the area or theme. However, given the complexity of the issues under investigation (e.g., teaching of mathematics in comprehensive school) and the enormous amount of research available, it is a difficult task to arrive at precise, research-based, definitions of all pertinent concepts. The fact that there practically always exist several different research positions also implies great difficulties in arriving at unequivocal definitions of the key concepts.

Consistency

The second question is whether the assumptions are consistent. One assumption describes the relation between differentiated school inspections, less inspection activities in well-developed schools, and unchanged quality of education in these schools. Another assumption refers to the relation between differentiated school inspections, increased inspection activities and interventions in weak schools to create good education. The first assumption thus states that good schools can use their freedom to maintain a good education, while poor schools need increased inspection activities to improve their education.

The thematic quality evaluations also imply that the Swedish Schools Inspectorate suggests improvements of the activities of the schools based on the results of the theory-based school inspections. If the school does not agree with the theory, or the interpretation of results of the inspection, this may conflict with the freedom of decision making which is granted to the schools. It may be noted, however, that the function of the thematic quality evaluations to generate more general knowledge about different aspects of quality and their effects on educational outcomes that can be used by schools and other stake holders is not inconsistent with local freedom of decision making.

Empirical value

The third question concerns whether the assumptions of the program theory align with results from previous research. One fundamental assumption is that increased inspection activities and amendments of identified legal and quality shortcomings will lead to improved performance. There is no Swedish research that addresses whether that is the case or not. In a study conducted in the Netherlands, Luginbuhl et al. (2009) found that test scores of pupils in primary education improved slightly in the two years following an inspection visit. In contrast, studies conducted in England by Rosenthal (2004) and Shaw et al. (2003) demonstrated weak negative effects of school inspections in comprehensive schools. Shaw et al. (2003) did, however, find positive effects of school inspections in schools with a selective intake. These results indicate that effects of school inspections cannot easily be generalized across school systems and types of inspections. It is reasonable to expect that reactions and adaptations by the schools to the inspections and their results influence the outcome. The possibilities for a school to improve also are likely to be dependent both on factors internal to the school and on contextual factors, such as the level of support offered by the school authority and parents. Such factors are not part of the program theory, but as was made clear in the ESV (2006) analysis, prerequisites for intended effects to be achieved need also to be taken into account.

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate model of school inspections is based on several other assumptions which may, or may not, be supported by research. This is, for example, the case in the model for deciding on which type of inspection to be used for a particular school in the differentiated model for school inspections. The criteria used for this decision are factors which according to previous research have been shown to be related to successful development. One of the factors emphasized by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate is school leadership (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2009, 2010), and it is argued that this is a well established research finding. However, some researchers argue that the support for this theory is limited and that its empirical value may be questioned. The primary basis for this is recent research, which has demonstrated that school variation is small compared to variation between classes. Nye, Konstantopoulos and Hedges (2004) reported such findings and they observed that “If teacher effects are larger than school effects, then policies focusing teacher effects as a larger source of variation in achievement may be more promising than policies focusing on school effects.” (p. 254)

The empirical value of the thematic quality evaluations cannot be determined at a general level, but must be evaluated from case to case. It can be noted, however, that thematic quality evaluations represent a combination of two different kinds of activities, namely research and school inspections. It includes elements of research in that the thematic quality evaluations take the starting point in an analysis of existing knowledge, and that it aims to create knowledge that is applicable beyond the schools included in the inspection. However, the methods used are those employed in school inspections, even though sampling of schools is done in such a way as to represent variation in quality. Furthermore, even though there is a summary report which presents and discusses the results, the analysis and reporting has a low level of ambition, without inferences about theoretical implications of the findings. In contrast to research, there is no process of peer review, and there is no feedback of results to the research community.

Given the short period of time the thematic quality evaluations have been in operation, it is not yet clear how these inspections can manage the dual tasks of both inspecting schools for quality and creating more generally applicable knowledge.

Discussion and Conclusions

During the 1990s the Swedish school system was transformed from one of the most centralized and regulated systems in the world, to one of the most decentralized and deregulated systems in the world. The transformation was based on the belief that the authorities, schools and teachers were to use their autonomy and freedom to make decisions to improve their education. In the early 2000s, it was informally observed that the results were declining and that for some schools there were problems with adherence to rules and regulations. This has led to introduction of a powerful system for school inspections. However, given that the Swedish Schools Inspectorate was established in late 2008, the system has only been operational for little more than two years, during which time there has been continuous development of policies and procedures.

This change illustrates a conflict between two basic assumptions that have accompanied the transformation and deregulation of the Swedish school system. One assumption concerns the expected benefits of the shift from detailed regulations about how to organize and execute education to enlarged freedom for municipalities and schools to develop working methods according to local contexts. The other assumption concerns accountability, the demand for efficient use of resources and a growing consciousness among representatives of the government of declining results and growing inequalities. The paradox thus is that the increased freedom demands more rigorous control in order to prevent unwanted consequences from the decentralized system.

When the Swedish Schools Inspectorate was founded, one explicit goal was to separate steering and support from evaluation and control. Nevertheless, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate has come to fill both functions. As the Swedish Schools Inspectorate has the power to close down independent schools and to place public critique and sanctions on municipal schools, the potential threat from Swedish Schools Inspectorate against all schools' activities is substantial. These contradictory purposes are likely to affect the intended quality work.

In this paper, the assumptions underlying the newly developed inspection methods were reconstructed to describe how they are expected to lead to improved education, and we evaluated the extent to which these assumptions are consistent, precisely defined and realistic.

The analysis showed that differentiated school inspections are expected to lead to reduction of inspection activities in strong schools, whereas weak schools receive an increase in inspection activities. The former category of schools is expected to continue their good work. The latter category of schools is expected to take advantage of the

criticism and suggestions by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate to implement changes, which will improve education.

The evaluation showed that definitions of some of the basic concepts were lacking in preciseness and clarity. This concerned, for example, the different types of differentiated inspections, and characterizations such as ‘freedom of decision making’, ‘improvement’ and ‘good education. A clear and precise description of these definitions is however necessary to determine if school inspections have the intended outcomes.

Some of the imprecision can be brought back to the tension between freedom and control described above. While local freedom of decision making is a basic principle of the decentralized and deregulated Swedish school system, it conflicts with the focus on good outcomes and improved levels of achievement, with the consequence that poor schools suffer from restrictions on their freedom. A related inconsistency concerns what characterizes good education, and to what extent this should be determined by the indicators relied upon by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, or by the schools themselves.

The program theory assumptions were also evaluated against the criterion of empirical value, in the sense that they are supported by research results. Some evidence suggests that school inspections may lead to improvement of poor schools, but results do not necessarily generalize from one school system or type of school inspection to another.

The inspection activities of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate are to a large extent based on research. In the regular inspections much of the development of policies and procedures are based on research findings, and in the thematic quality evaluations, this is even more pronounced. However, research findings are constantly challenged, and results are rarely unequivocal. One example of this is research on educational leadership, on which the Swedish Schools Inspectorate relies to formulate indicators for the differentiated inspection. It is observed, however, that some recent research challenges the empirical basis for the conclusions about educational leadership, and rather identifies the teachers as the important source of variance. This suggests that there is a need to adapt the policies and procedures of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate to an evolving body of research.

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