

School inspection of Czech schools: A critical reflection on intended effects and causal mechanisms

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Introduction

The external control of the schools has a long tradition in the Czech lands and was linked to the modern form of education organised during the second half of the 18th century, with the first centrally organised institution for the control of schools being founded in 1759. It was entitled the Court Educational Commission (Dvorská studijní komise) and its task was to provide uniform administration and control of the Austrian school system and to ensure its improvement and development. In 1869, the Austrian Education Act introduced a uniform system of state supervision over schools to replace the supervision formerly carried out by the Church. District school inspectors became the main inspection body with functions of control, consultancy and launching new initiatives. This inspection system remained even after Czechoslovakia gained independence in 1918.

In the communist era Inspection was mainly normatively oriented and it served primarily communist ideology. Inspection activities covered both administration and teaching and they concentrated primarily on ensuring that the educational process did not deviate from teaching documents which were largely binding both in terms of content and timing. The organisation and goals of school inspection and the rights and duties of school inspectors were laid down by a decree issued by the Ministry of Education of the Czech Socialist Republic in 1979. The evaluation of the education system as a whole was always a political matter and was carried out by highlevel authorities. Before 1989 these were primarily the bodies of the Communist Party or education bodies under the leadership of the party bodies. We shall bear in mind that in the era of communism, all schools were state run and were directed centrally. Schools were not legal entities and no autonomy was granted to them. The main task of inspection then was monitoring instead of evaluation, and inspection findings could not endanger a school's existence. The main focus of inspection was on individual teachers rather than institution focused inspection.

After 1989, with a significantly changed conception of school administration and increased autonomy of schools, a new concept of inspection was sought. The Česká školní inspekce (Czech School Inspectorate - hereinafter CSI) was transformed as a result of the Act on State Administration and Self-government in Education in 1991. This was an independent institution separated from the administration of education. The 1995 amendment to this law defined the role of the Inspectorate more precisely and introduced modifications to its operation reports. The Czech Republic was the first Eastern – European country that developed and installed an inspectorate that did “full inspections” of schools – already in 1994/1995. That Inspectorate also was one of the eight founders – inspectorates of SICI in 1995. As in more Eastern – European countries, the development in this area of school inspection was not linear – due to political changes and the complicated change – processes in schools and education. In the Education Act of 2005 and accompanying documents the tasks and responsibilities of the CSI are crystallized now in a clear and stable way. The core task is the evaluation of all schools, once in three years, against a broad set of quality indicators in a group of eight quality domains. The inspections are planned and done from the fourteen

regional offices of the CSI. Inspectors analyze school – documents, take interviews, and observe lessons. Self – evaluation by schools is obliged since 2005 and inspectors take the resulting documents as a starting point for their gathering of information. There is no type of risk – based inspection. And even though the report prepared by the CSI for the SICI states that “there is no proportionality with the intensity or coverage of the external inspections” (CSI 2009, p. 4), interview with a head of a regional inspectorate revealed that due to financial constraints and decreasing numbers of inspectors as well as the stress on quality of school inspection leads to more proportionality being used. Reflecting the size of the school and results of preparation phase of inspection process the size of the inspection team may differ as well as a time spent in school. School phase of inspection process thus usually takes between 2 to 5 days.

Inspection is part of the system in the Czech Republic for years, and it is constantly changing since 1990s’. To be able to fully understand the importance of the inspection of school in the Czech Republic we shall stress two important characteristics of the Czech education. Firstly, Czech Republic till now had no national assessment at any level of education system. In May 2011 it is the first year when state final upper-secondary leaving examination (maturita) is organized using nationally administered tests. However till now, upper secondary leaving examinations were main responsibility of individual schools with no use of national tests. At the lower levels of education there is no single national testing. In this context the CSI is the only external evaluation in Czech education system. One of the evaluation criteria for inspection are educational outcomes, however as revealed by the interview with inspector, the lack of national objective data on student results/achievement is seen by inspectors as a limit to effective school evaluation by inspection. In this days CSI is trying to overcome this shortcoming and they want to introduce national assessment at the end of primary (grade 5) and lower secondary (grade 9) education. Secondly, autonomy granted to schools in Czech Republic during the 1990s’ is seen as one of the largest in European context (Čerych 1997, Greger, Walterová 2007). The National programme for the development of the education in the Czech Republic from 2001 (White book – see MEYS 2001, p. 97) thus directly states that “the higher level of school autonomy in decision making has to be balanced by systematic evaluation of results to assure their quality and effectiveness”. White paper directly stressed the role of CSI to assure the quality of education and also proposed to introduce national assessment in grade 5 and 9 as well as national assessment at the end of upper-secondary school.

Having in mind that Czech school inspectorate is the only form of external evaluation in Czech education system it is quite surprising that educational research has paid no attention to its functioning, its effects and possible side-effects till date. We could not find single research paper that would evaluate the work of inspection since 1990s’. The main aim of the present paper is thus to reconstruct and analyze the intended effects and possible side-effects based on analysis of methods currently used by CSI. For the analysis we have used program theory analysis based on legislation and other documents regulating/describing the work of CSI and its purposes as described by Ehren et al. 2005 and Ehren 2011.

Method

Taken from Ehren (2011), adjustments of text for the Czech case written in blue.

The first step is to reconstruct the assumptions that explain how inspection is supposed to work. This conglomerate of assumptions forms the program theory (Chen, 1990). Next, the

reconstruction of the program theory is validated to be certain of having a legitimate overview of the assumptions. The last phase consists of a critical evaluation.

Reconstruction

The reconstruction phase starts with a number of choices that have to be made. First of all, the aims of reconstructing the program theory have to be stated. According to Fleurke and Huizenga (1988), possible aims may be to describe, to explain, or to predict the (in)effectiveness of a program or to analyze the way policy is developed. The program theory in this study is part of a larger research project designed to measure the impact of school inspections on teaching and learning in the [Czech Republic](#). The aim of reconstructing the program theory is therefore to predict the (in)effectiveness of inspection by describing and evaluating how schools should be inspected, the effects such inspections should have, and how these effects should be realized.

Second, the method of gathering information about assumptions should be chosen. The (re)construction of the program theory should be explained, and the way in which assumptions are explained should be described. As the changes in inspection methodology are well outlined in numerous policy documents and inspection brochures, analyzing these documents is a logical starting point. Other possibilities are group discussions and interviews with relevant respondents. The advantage of documents in relation to interviews and discussions is, however, that expressions are often more consistent (Karstanje, 1996). [For gathering information on purposes and goals of inspection by CSI we have analyzed White paper on education from 2001, which set up the plan for reform of education in next years, then current Education Act from 2004, that defines and regulates the tasks and functioning of CSI and further the various documents and reports prepared directly by CSI, that characterize their work and outcomes. However above mentioned documents are often very short and formal and do not enable easily to draw up the purposes and supposed effects. Therefore we have collected data by interviewing 2 people from CSI – the head of regional school inspectorate and the deputy chief school inspector.](#)

Translating the information into assumptions can be done in a number of ways. Selection of one of these methods is the third choice to be made. Leeuw (2003, p.7) described a number of methods (that relate to the way information is gathered). We will use the policy scientific approach, which consists of the following steps:

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.

This example illustrates how the assumptions were reconstructed; in the description of the results we refer to the documents that include the statements we used for reconstructing these assumptions. Such detailed reference to underlying documents enables the reader to check our method of reconstruction.

Participant Check

After reconstructing the program theory, the reconstruction is validated, in the sense of being reviewed by relevant actors, to be sure that the assumptions actually represent the intentions of the current method of school inspections. This kind of participant check is often described as a criterion the reconstruction should meet. Performing it separately enables us, however, to be more specific about faulty interpretations during the reconstruction phase. The intermediate adjustments can be explained and accounted for.

The assumptions were checked by interviewing employees of the Inspectorate of Education. They were asked to indicate whether the assumptions (translated into statements) fit the intention of the current inspection method. If not, interviewees were asked why, in their view, this was not the case.

This participant check led to:

The results section shows the assumptions that correspond to the intentions and assumptions of those involved in creating the act.

Evaluation

A critical evaluation of the program theory is the last phase of the study. Results of prior research are used to analyze how consistent, complete, and realistic the assumptions are. By doing so, the potential effects (and side effects) of the act can be predicted.

Results

Before we proceed to present the results of program theory, we would like to stress the different tasks for CSI that forms the structure of this part. The role of inspection is divided to evaluation – institutional inspection activities - and checking – state checks and public-legal

audits. There are two distinct outcomes of each task – inspection reports for evaluation and protocols for checks. In the paper we consider only evaluative task of inspection that is realized as “full inspection of schools” and inspection of particular themes of quality that we refer to as “thematic inspections”.

The work of CSI is described and regulated in several documents:

- The Education Act No. 561 from 2004, Sections 12, 173 – 176, and 182a on Czech School Inspectorate
- White book on education that was approved by the government in 2001 - *National Programme for the Development of Education in the Czech Republic. White Paper.*
- And various documents prepared by the CSI: Annual Reports of the Czech School Inspectorate; annual Plans of Principal Assignments for CSI; yearly published Criteria for evaluation; and The Blue Book of CSI from 2009.

We use these documents to reconstruct a program theory and also we add the findings from the interviews with two people from the CSI in subsequent parts of the paper.

Before going into details of school inspection let's stress the main aim of inspection as is specified in Education Act from 2004, Section 174:6

The new Education Act stipulates “basic principles and objectives of education where the fundamental criterion is, in particular, effective support for the development of the personality of the child, pupil and student as well as achievement of educational aims in specific schools and school facilities.”

In cases where schools are running serious risks the Chief School Inspector is entitled to submit a proposal for removal of the school from the Register of Educational Facilities

Full inspection of schools

From the documents mentioned above the most general is the White book from 2001 that has been a basis for formulating the Education Act in 2004 that codified some of the ideas formulated more vaguely in White book. In contrast to mainly control function over schools that has been the main driving force in the past, the White book specifies the need for more advisory role of CSI to schools and its potential for school improvement. It is formulated at several parts of the document, most strongly stated in following words:

“The Czech School Inspectorate, as the body responsible for external evaluation of schools, is expected to take a significant part in the preparation, development and verification of evaluation procedures and instruments, including setting standards, criteria and methodology for internal evaluation. Its present prevalently controlling activities will be supplemented by *guidance and consulting work* aimed to help schools with their internal evaluation and to introduce a new evaluation culture ... The *Czech School Inspectorate is expected* not only to ascertain the state of education activity in schools and the conditions in which education is taking place, and to identify shortcomings but also *to motivate school heads and teachers to work towards improvements. This means not only indicating areas in which schools are not making full use of their opportunities, but also informing them about positive examples and models.*” (MEYS 2001, p. 41 - emphasis added)

First, it is important to emphasize, that this is the only official document that directly states the improvement of schools as a goal for inspection. In the Education Act we would not find

such statement of purpose. Also in the Blue Book (CSI 2009, p. 16) the goal of improving schools is clearly stated as:

“Inspection evaluation outcomes shall generally contribute to the improvement in the quality of education, and to eliminate problems, which schools/school facilities deal with in their routine.”

In the education act we can find that CSI provides evaluation of schools, but there is no direct statement on school improvement as a goal of inspection. More often rather the monitoring function of the quality of education at system level is stated. Also two interviews have confirmed that the school improvement is the aim of school inspections. Inspector was even using the concept of “value added” as the main outcome of the school inspection.

“” HERE ADD DIRECT QUOTATION FROM THE INTERVIEW

Regular institutional evaluation of a school in a three-year cycle enables to report results of school in relation to its previous evaluation and thus to stress the “value added” as a progress made by school within a period from last inspection visit. Since the school year 2005/06 the inspection cycle has been set by the Chief School Inspector as a three-year cycle, i.e. in each school (registered in the Register of Educational Facilities) in the Czech Republic an institutional inspection takes place at least once in three years (in numbers it is about 4,000 visited schools per year). Taken that the time between to inspection is not too distant, the idea of looking at school progress is being formulated and as our interviewee said, “added value” shall be the emphasis of the final evaluation in the inspection report. From the stressed importance on regular evaluation in relatively short period we could formulate a statement.

1. If the CSI evaluates the schools regularly in a 3-year cycle, it will improve the quality of inspected schools.
 - a. The schools are motivated to improve their education and getting the external feedback on the way stimulates further the improvement.
 - b. The CSI possesses the ability to analyze the progress made by school from last visit.
 - c. The CSI gives a high quality feedback to school about its improvement based on last visit.

Nevertheless, the idea of added value is not directly stated in any of the analyzed documents. The importance of regular inspection of all schools in a relatively short 3-year cycle also leads to other even more basic statement about the aims of regular inspection of all schools (opposed to risk-based inspection) in which the main aim is to eliminate deficiencies in the system.

2. If the Czech School Inspectorate uses regular supervision to identify deviations from rules and regulations in the activities of schools, then schools will improve if these deviations are corrected. This is because:
 - a. The rules and regulations have been decided upon because they concern aspects of school’s activities which are important for the achievement and safety of the students; therefore identification and correction of deviations from them will lead to better education.

- b. The Czech School 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.
- c. Regular inspection of all schools enables us to find reveal all deficiencies. Any schools with deficiencies will be detected within the 3 years.

If we come back to White book quotation we could see there idea about the means for schools' improvement. It was the schools' self-evaluation that will lead schools to improve. The role of CSI is thus to reflect on school self-evaluation and give the schools the feedback on its quality. The idea of White Book on the use of self-evaluation as an arriving point for inspection was also codified in the Education Act that states in Section 12:1 „Evaluation of schools shall be carried out through self-evaluation of the relevant school and observations of the Czech School Inspectorate.”

12:2 „Self-evaluations of schools shall become the basis for drawing up the annual report on the activities of the school and one of the documents to be used for observations made by the Czech School Inspectorate. The Ministry shall lay down in an implementing legal regulation a framework structure, rules and deadlines for self-evaluations carried out by schools.”

The areas for self-evaluation has been stated in Section 8 of the Decree No. 15/2005 and this areas served also as a basis for formulation of criteria for evaluations prepared by CSI. These criteria are grouped into the areas that correspond to the areas of school self-evaluation reports. In this way, the link of self-evaluation and external evaluation by the CSI is assured. We could thus summarize idea as follows: Schools have to prepare its self-evaluations that shall lead schools to reflection of their work and further improvements. CSI is able to evaluate the quality of schools self-evaluation and give the school feedback for further improvements. From this we formulate the following statements:

3. If the CSI analyzes schools' self-evaluations it will improve the quality of inspected schools.
 - a. It is known from research that high quality self evaluation is critical element of school further improvement therefore identification and correction of problems in school self-evaluations will lead to improving schools quality.
 - b. The CSI possesses the ability to analyze quality of school self-evaluations and identify its drawbacks.
 - c. The CSI gives a high quality feedback to school about its self-evaluations what leads to improvements in quality of future self-evaluations and from here to school improvement.

Quotation of the White book given in the beginning of this paper specifies the role of inspection as an advisor to school, that is to balance mostly controlling approach taken by the inspection in the past. However emphasis on the advisory role is not translated into any other document - be it the Education Act or various analyzed documents prepared by the CSI. Contrary, in the Blue book (CSI 2009, p. 34) it is stated that “the law does not stipulate any advisory role for the CSI.” Document still leaves some room for advisory function, when it says that “the final oral discussion of the Inspection Report in a school/school facility may be considered as a certain form of “hidden advisory” ”. We could thus see some oscillation on the way from pure control to advisory role in schools. As a dual paradox it wa seven formulated by one interviewee when said:

“” HERE ADD DIRECT QUOTATION FROM THE INTERVIEW

In the functioning of the school inspection we can however see some moves in that direction. As was specified in White book “... *to motivate school heads and teachers to work towards improvements. This means not only indicating areas in which schools are not making full use of their opportunities, but also informing them about positive examples and models.*” In this direction also the scale for evaluating schools has widened from three-level to four-level scale. The traditional three levels have been described presented as 1: below standard, 2. Standard (average) and 3 Above-average, with example of good practice and N – Given area could not be evaluated. And it was replaced from 2009/2010 school year with four-level scale: A, B, C, D where the levels are defined as follows:

A: Situation displays high risks which can lead to the removal of a school from the Register of Schools pursuant to the provisions of Sec. 150 of the Education Act.

B: A school entity does not achieve a prescribed standard; identified risks can be corrected within the given deadline.

C: A school entity achieves, within the given criterion, a typical regional or national standard prescribed for the same type of school and school facility.

D: Activities of a school entity are in some areas above the standard or they are evaluated as an example of good practice (the scheme prepared by the Research Education Institute for examples of good practice was used).

The level 3, or level D in new four-level scale indicates an example of good practice. This could be other way of advises, to direct schools with deficiencies in one particular area their functioning revealed by inspection to schools, where the good practice was identified. In the interview it was stated as an advantage of all-school-inspection compared to risk-based school inspection, where the inspectors are “only” confronted with school in troubles. On the other hand, the question is whether the inspectors really use that advice and direction to other schools and whether the successful schools will be motivated to share their experiences. (THIS PROBABLY SHALL BE IN EVALUATION PART AND NOT HERE?)

Thematic inspections

Second type of inspection is thematic inspection. The themes for each school year are specified in the Plan of Principal Assignments of the Czech School Inspectorate that is approved by the Minister of Education, Youth and Sports on the basis of a proposal submitted by the Chief School Inspector. Their main purpose is the monitoring of education system in chosen topics and areas that shall be used to improve the quality of education in the country. For the thematic inspections the sample of schools is selected to form a picture of the state of the assessed topic. However the data for thematic inspections may also be collected during the full inspection and then the focus is not only on given criteria, but emphasis on a given topic is added. From this perspective than it could be used to give a feedback to school on development in the assessed are (e.g. mathematics literacy and its development). Therefore we could formulate also statement related to thematic inspections:

4. If the CSI uses thematic inspections to identify quality problems in different aspects of the teaching of different subject matters or in themes of activity (thematic inspections) this will improve the outcomes of the inspected schools This is because:

- a. It is known from research that the inspected aspects are related to outcomes; therefore identification and correction of quality problems in the school will lead to better education.
- b. The CSI possesses the ability to infer from observations of school activities, documents and interviews whether there are quality problems or not.

Results of the thematic inspection are published in thematic reports and are made available to general public on the CSI website.

In the school year 2009/2010 the CSI published the following thematic reports and summarised information:

1. Thematic report: The level of ICT in basic schools in the Czech Republic.
2. Thematic report: Summarised findings on support and development of foreign language instruction in pre-school, basic and secondary education between 2006 and 2009.
3. Thematic report: Summarised findings arising from inspection activities carried out in former special schools.
4. Information: The rate of injuries of children, pupils and students in schools and school facilities from 1 September 2009 to 31 March 2010.
5. Information: Summarised findings arising from inspections concerning occupational health
6. Thematic report: Inspection evaluation of school education programmes.

And in 2011 the Thematic report on mathematics literacy was published.

Evaluation

Precision of definitions

Consistency

Empirical value

Discussion and conclusions

Resources:

CSI (2009) The Blue Book - The Czech school inspectorate (Czech Republic) – prepared for SICI.

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MEYS - Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (2001). *National Programme for the Development of Education in the Czech Republic. White Paper*. Prague: Tauris.