

## Summary results (year 1-3)

Evaluation and accountability are key issues in ensuring quality provision for all (Eurydice, 2004). In Europe, the dominant arrangement for educational accountability is school inspections. Annually an average amount of 68.559.103 euros is spent on inspecting schools by the countries in this project. Inspectorates of Education assess the quality of education and hold schools accountable for a broad range of goals related to student achievement, teaching, organization and leadership in schools.

There is evidence to indicate that school inspections can be a key feature of school improvement but more recent studies point to unintended consequences such as excessive bureaucracy and teaching to the test. Good measures and methods of school inspections are therefore crucial in promoting quality within schools.

This study evaluated how school inspections in the Netherlands, England, Ireland, Sweden, Austria and the Czech Republic promote high educational quality and student achievement in schools. These countries represent different types of school inspections across Europe, ranging from school Inspectorates using a low stakes professional development approach, to test-based early warning inspections to control schools. These methods also range from very centralized to decentralized school inspections. The results of our study were used to answer the following research question:

*What aspects of school inspections (standards and thresholds, sanctions and rewards and, frequency of visits) contribute to effects (improvement of educational quality and student achievement) and unintended consequences (strategic behaviour) in schools?*

The theoretical framework of our study was informed by the assumptions of inspection officials and policy-makers on the causal mechanisms underlying intended effects of school inspections. In each country, an analysis of relevant documents (such as inspection frameworks, legislation and documents describing rationales for inspection methods) was used to reconstruct assumptions relating to the causal mechanisms underlying the intended effects of school inspections. Additional interviews with inspection officials and policy-makers were arranged in each country to validate and clarify the reconstructed assumptions. The program theories of all six countries were summarized in an overall theoretical framework to provide a description of common inspection methods, their intended effects and of the intermediate mechanisms explaining these effects across the six countries. This model was used to outline our comparative survey and additional data collection.

In each country, principals in primary and secondary education were asked to respond to an online survey during three consecutive years. The survey included questions relating to three sets of variables that were derived from our theoretical framework: background characteristics of schools, outcome variables, intermediate processes and inspection measures. In addition to the principal survey, additional student achievement data and a teacher survey was included in the Netherland and England to study the impact of school inspections.

The results were analyzed using a longitudinal comparative design in which the results of country-specific repeated measures ANOVA, longitudinal path models and t-tests were summarized, and structural equation models were used to analyse data across the six countries.

The results of this project include evidence of the measures, instruments and working methods of school Inspectorates contributing to improvement of schools and student achievement and to unintended consequences. Specifically the findings indicate:

*(Mechanisms of) effects of school inspections*

- School inspections seem to have an impact via inspection visits, as well as via other (more indirect) mechanisms of change.
- *Direct (short term) effect:* Inspection visits lead to change via stakeholder sensitivity and schools accepting feedback, which subsequently lead to improvements in the school's self-evaluation, which leads to changes in the school's capacity to improve, which then leads to improvement in the effectiveness of the school. This means that school inspection visits primarily drive change to improving the school's self-evaluation, which then leads to improvement in the schools innovation capacity and the effectiveness of the school.
- *Indirect (long term) effect:* changes in the schools' capacity to improve and the effectiveness of the school are motivated by the fact that school inspections set expectations on good education. This mechanism is not related to the timing of an inspection visit, but instead seems to occur in all schools, particularly in countries with differentiated high stakes inspections that focus on outcomes of schools.
- Multiple indicator and multiple cause modelling (using year 1 data) indicate that differences in impact are related to differences in inspection systems. Inspectorates of Education (such as in the Netherlands and England) that use a differentiated model where potentially failing schools are targeted for increased monitoring (in addition to regular visits to all schools), in which they evaluate both educational practices and outcomes of schools and publicly report the inspection findings of individual schools, are the most effective (but also have the most unintended consequences). Principals in these systems report the most changes in capacity-building and in improved school and teaching conditions; these changes seem to last for two years. There is little evidence of these changes also leading to improved student outcomes.
- Country-specific results (see for more detail below) also indicate:
  - Inspections have a short term impact through inspection visits, which seem to last two years; long term impact seems to particularly arise through the setting of expectations in systems that have been in place for a longer period of time (and use a differentiated, high stakes approach, focused on outcomes of schools).
  - Impact is dynamic and non-linear, and mediated by the inspection assessment of the school: schools that move from a positive assessment to a negative assessment become less open to inspection feedback; failing schools indicate little sensitivity of stakeholders to their inspection report as a driver for change.
  - Impact differs for teachers and principals, and between primary and secondary schools.
  - New inspection systems have an 'added' impact because of the introduction of new frameworks with which schools are familiarized during inspection visits.
  - Cultures of change in schools assessed to be failing seem to be different from cultures of change in schools with a positive inspection assessment: high pressure, lack of trust, little stakeholder involvement, little openness to inspection feedback and focused on narrowing/refocusing curricula and teaching, particularly in the first two years after an inspection visit, compared to change in positively assessed schools which seems to focus on self-evaluations, capacity-building and improvement of school effectiveness (but little evidence that this leads to improved student achievement).
- A longitudinal path model on all three years of data and the Multiple indicator and multiple cause modelling (using year 1 data) give further insight into the most common pathways and mechanisms of change resulting from school inspections. Inspections visits have an impact

on stakeholders' sensitivity (and potential use of inspection reports) and on schools' accepting inspection feedback. Principals in schools that have been inspected in the previous year indicate that their stakeholders are more aware of inspection findings and these principals also report more acceptance and use of inspection feedback compared to non-inspected schools. These two variables (stakeholders' sensitivity and acceptance of inspection feedback) have, according to principals, a positive impact on the schools' capacity to improve and subsequently on the effectiveness of the school.

#### *(Mechanisms of) unintended consequences*

- Schools in all countries generally report of relatively little unintended consequences of school inspections.
- Unintended consequences related to the curriculum and instruction, such as a *narrowing* of the curriculum and instructional strategies in the school and discouraging teachers to experiment with new teaching methods are the highest in England and the Netherlands and lowest in Austria, while unintended consequences related to the preparation of the visit (e.g. misrepresentation of the school in the data sent to the inspectorate) are also high in the Czech Republic and Austria.
- Interestingly, the most effective inspections systems that use a differentiated model, in which they evaluate both educational practices and outcomes of schools and publicly report the inspection findings of individual schools, also have the most unintended consequences. The fact that these models set strong expectations on good education and motivate stakeholders to use inspection findings, seems to *reduce* the likelihood that principals pay attention to the inspection feedback and derive action strategies for school improvement based on this feedback.
- Additional analyses indicated that it's particularly the perceived pressure of inspections and the high stakes nature of inspections (which is highest in England, followed by the Netherlands) that explains both the level of improvement, but also the level of unintended consequences reported by principals, particularly unintended consequences related to curriculum and instruction. Pressure does not seem to be related to the prevalence of misrepresentation of data, formalisation and proceduralisation (excessive focus on records) and ossification (fear of experimentation in teaching).
- Unintended consequences seem to be related to being assessed as failing and to the threat of being visited. Inspection visits may neutralize some unintended consequences of narrowing curriculum and teaching when implemented in a high trust, non-pressurized manner, while on the other hand motivating other side effects such as manipulating data and documents prepared for the inspection visit.

#### *Country-specific findings*

Country-specific analyses provide further insight into the specific elements of school inspections and mechanisms of change:

- Austria: inspections were recently introduced in Austria (Styria) and schools in our study were only visited once or never during the course of our study. Inspections were again abolished in the final year of our study. Findings indicate that the introduction of inspections and visits to schools in Austria had an impact on setting expectations and acceptance of feedback. This is different from inspection systems that have been in place for a number of years (e.g. England and the Netherlands) where individual inspections visits don't seem to set expectations anymore, but where this mechanism seems to occur in all schools as they have grown accustomed to inspections and are familiar with inspection frameworks and standards and know where to find information on how and when they will be inspected and what is expected of them.

- Findings from the Netherlands included responses of both teachers and principals and a comparison of both responses indicate that both groups respond differently to school inspections. Teachers report significantly higher scores for accepting feedback and stakeholders' sensitivity to reports. Principals on the other hand report significantly higher scores for the school's capacity and some unintended consequences of school inspections. In the Netherlands, differences were also found between primary and secondary schools. Principals and teachers in primary schools generally report of a higher impact of school inspections, despite the fact that they are inspected in the same way as secondary schools. The differences in school size (primary schools being smaller and perhaps more responsive to school inspections) may explain these differences, although response rates to the survey may also explain differences as these varied substantially across both types of schools. Findings from the Netherlands also suggest that the impact of school inspections is dynamic and non-linear, and mediated by the inspection assessment category a school is placed in; responses of schools to inspections change when they move from the basic to the weak inspection category and the other way around. Principals of schools which change from inspection category "Basic" in year 2 to inspection category "weak/very weak" in year 3 for example have a significant reduction in their accepting feedback scores between year 2 and year 3

The central mechanism of improvement of school effectiveness and capacity building through improvement of self-evaluations in schools (which was found in the analyses of the comparative data for all countries) was also found in the Netherlands. As the dataset in the Netherlands also included student achievement data of (only) secondary schools, the impact of school inspections on actual achievement of students and output of schools could be analysed. These analyses indicate no differential changes in Maths A and B, geography, chemistry, Biology, Economics grades on school or on central exams over time by inspection category. However, pupils in schools in inspection category 'weak/very weak' in the havo track initially have lower scores on the central exam than pupils in schools in the basis inspection category (which explains why the school is in the weak/very weak category). However between year 1 and year 2 this changes and pupils in schools in inspection category 'weak/very weak' have higher scores. By year 3 there is however again little discernible difference between schools in the different inspection categories.

- In England, a comparison between schools which are regularly inspected and schools receiving additionally monitoring visits revealed differences in the level of improvements between these schools. Additional monitoring seems to have an impact on the amount of improvement activities in schools; these activities increase significantly in the first two years after an inspection (with the highest impact in the second year), but levels of in the third year with no significant differences between the two types of schools anymore. Frequency of inspection visits therefore seem to have a (short) term impact on development activities in schools.

Interestingly, findings also indicate that the schools in the highest ('outstanding') inspection assessment category (who are unlikely to have received additional monitoring) are the most open to inspection feedback and report of their stakeholders being most sensitive to the inspection report. These schools implement less improvements in response to school inspections but seem more open to it compared to schools with lower inspection grades. It therefore seems that the impact of monitoring visits primarily results from the pressure and potential consequences of these visits instead of the school's internally motivated acceptance of feedback and cooperation with stakeholders to improve. The fact that change in the monitored schools seems to last two years and seems to be implemented in a high pressure/low trust environment raises the question of whether these changes are long-lasting and sustainable.

- Sweden introduced school inspections in 2008 and changed their model in 2010 to be more differentiated according to student achievement results, potential complaints about a school and results of questionnaires to students, parents and teachers. Findings from Sweden indicate that primary schools tend to have somewhat higher responses to school inspections compared to secondary schools, but differences are very small and not significant. Schools that were inspected in the year prior to the survey score higher on 'accepting feedback' and 'stakeholder sensitivity to inspection reports'. Interestingly, principals who have been inspected report of less unintended consequences compared to those who have not been inspected, except for manipulation of documentation and data in preparation of inspection visits. These findings seem to suggest that the threat of a visit causes unintended consequences which particularly include the strategic preparation for a visit. Results additionally showed that inspection visits affect 'stakeholder sensitivity to reports' and 'accepting feedback' and that these variables affected 'capacity building' both directly and indirectly via 'improving self-evaluations'. 'School effectiveness' was in turn strongly affected by the 'capacity building' variable.
- Responses of Irish principals reflect the previous inspection regime which included regular visits of all schools. Principals report strong support for school inspections; the majority of principals are of the view that the recommendations outlined by the inspectorate in reports are fair and reasonable based on the present availability of school resources. Furthermore, principals are very positive about external recommendations clearly believing that they result in a faster pace of educational change. The majority of principals in the surveys seem convinced that inspection results in better management, teaching and learning and that inspection has had an impact on the quality of teaching, learning and management in their schools, in particular where adherence to management and teaching standards is required. In addition, as a result of inspection, principals were also of the view that there was an accelerated rate of change in certain elements of practice. Responses of inspected versus non inspected schools only differ in the second year of the study; principals in inspected schools scored significantly higher on capacity building, accepting feedback and setting of expectations. Interestingly, inspected schools (similar to Sweden) also score lower on some of the unintended consequences, such as refocusing curriculum and teaching/learning strategies, but higher on unintended consequences that occur in preparation for the visit (manipulating documents and data)
- Unintended consequences seem most prominent in the Czech Republic and seem to coincide with an overall lack of impact of school inspections. Qualitative findings suggest that the focus of school inspections on checking schools' compliance to legislation is the main reason for this conclusion. Principals report that preparation for school inspections is primarily about putting protocols and procedures in writing and indicate that inspections provide little insight into the weaknesses of the school. These responses did not differ significantly for inspected versus not inspected schools.