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Enquiry into the side effects of school inspection in a ‘low-stakes’ inspection context

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This article describes a qualitative study into the occurrence of the side effects of school inspection through in-depth interviews in five case schools. The study investigates the extent to which strategic activities, disturbing effects and emotional side effects occur in the case schools. The study also aims to understand features that may explain these side effects. Most research to date has been conducted in England, which is considered a ‘high-stakes’ inspection context whilst ‘low-stakes’ inspection contexts are generally regarded as causing fewer undesirable side effects. This hypothesis, however, is not confirmed by the results of this study. Although the Flemish education context provides a ‘low-stakes’ inspection context, schools in this study engage strongly in strategic activities to produce a better image of the school and school staff members suffer from severe emotional side effects due to the inspection. By contrast, only limited disturbing effects on normal school life were observed. These side effects are affected by principals’ attitude towards the inspection, by schools’ perception of inspectors’ behaviour and by the inspection judgement. The article includes a discussion of the impact on side effects of several particularities of the Flemish education context, such as the absence of central examinations.

Keywords: school inspection; side effects; qualitative study; principals; teachers; emotional impact

1. Introduction

Almost every education system includes a form of external school inspection. There is an increasing demand for school inspections to have an impact on schools through mechanisms of governance, including an appeal to professional standards and performance evaluation as a tool for quality improvement of schools (Landwehr 2011; Wilkins 2014). Indeed, school inspection has become one of the means considered most appropriate to govern education (Lawn and Grek 2012; Ehren, Perryman, and Shackleton 2014; Jones and Tymss 2014).

Many of these inspections aim to hold schools accountable for their actions and, at the same time, to contribute to school improvement (OECD 2013). Despite these justified goals, inspections are often questioned by practitioners and academics. Due to the existence of Inspectorates (next to other mechanisms for school accountability and educational governing), schools are put under pressure to integrate demands for compliance with regulations and external impulses, and sometimes rapidly changing

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and contradictory expectations, with their own pedagogical approach (Braun et al. 2011; Mackinnon 2011; Lindgren et al. 2012).

Next to the existence of Inspectorates in general, also the side effects of individual inspections for schools and their staff members are often contested, as inspections are said to incite ‘window dressing’ activities and to disturb normal activities, thereby negatively affecting the time teachers devote to their core educational tasks. Furthermore, controversy about inspections is often centred on the emotional side effects experienced by school staff (de Wolf and Janssens 2007).

The focus of the current study is on the side effects of inspections on schools that have recently been inspected, or that have received notification of an inspection for the near future. These latter side effects have been documented by several researchers, mainly in the decade following the establishment of the English inspection agency OFSTED in 1992 (Smith 2000). Such studies include those by Case, Case, and Catling (2000), Gray and Gardner (1999), and Thomas, Yee, and Lee (2000). However, academic interest in the issue gradually waned. Although the recent increased role of accountability seems to have prompted researchers to re-intensify their interests in the side effects of inspections (e.g. Brunsden, Davies, and Shevlin 2006; Perryman 2009), research on this topic remains rather scarce, especially in educational contexts outside England (de Wolf and Janssens 2007).

The English inspection is considered a ‘high-stakes inspection context’ for schools and for individual staff members (Allen and Burgess 2012; Bush 2013). There are no definitions of high-stakes inspection and low-stakes inspection, let alone a clear line between high-stakes inspection and low-stakes inspection. When scholars have discussed high-stakes inspection, this has been related to: (1) the (perception of) consequences for the viability of the school in case of a negative judgement – what is the risk that the school is closed or loses its accreditation, or that staff members lose their jobs when the school is judged to be failing? (Ferguson et al. 1999; Sinkinson and Jones 2001; Cale and Harris 2009); (2) the extent to which schools feel compelled or threatened to strictly comply with the inspection guidelines (Sinkinson 2004; Martin 2005; Janssens and van Amelsvoort 2008; Robinson 2011; Yeung 2012). High-stakes inspection contexts often go hand in hand with high-stakes national tests of students’ learning outcomes (Broadfoot and Black 2004; Looney 2009). A number of scholars have attributed the occurrence of side effects of inspections on the inspected schools and their staff members to the high stakes of the English inspection system; inspections in lower stakes contexts are generally considered to have fewer undesirable side effects (Scheerens, van Amelsvoort, and Donoughue 1999; Janssens and van Amelsvoort 2008; Gärtner, Hüsemann, and Pant 2009; Ehren and Swanborn 2012; Yeung 2012). However, this hypothesis is not corroborated by strong empirical data, as it remains unclear to what extent side effects occur in education systems with an inspection of a lower high-stakes nature. Using an international perspective, the Flemish inspection system can be regarded as relatively low-stakes because it is highly unlikely that a school will be closed down or that staff members will lose their jobs as an immediate result of an inspection (Van Bruggen 2010; OECD 2013). Therefore, the hypothesis built on the above assumptions is that the occurrence of side effects in this context will be rather limited compared to (earlier) studies in the English context.

Furthermore, one of the major shortfalls of the current evidence base is that key characteristics (of schools and of the inspection) that contribute to the occurrence of these side effects have only been minimally identified (de Wolf and Janssens 2007).

A better understanding of explanatory features would allow policy-makers to install measures which would ensure that side effects are maximally avoided. For this reason, explanatory-oriented research into this topic in different education contexts is imperative.

The present study aims to contribute to the existing evidence base by describing the side effects of inspections and by exploring explanatory features in the Flemish education context, based on two research questions: (1) what are the side effects of the inspection on schools? and (2) which characteristics of schools and which characteristics of the inspection explain differences between schools regarding the occurrence of side effects?

It is important to note that the present study will look into the side effects of single inspections and that it is not the aim of this research to investigate the side effects of a whole accountability policy including inspections (i.e. the side effects of the mere existence of an Inspectorate, as outlined above), such as *the loss of professional identity and the deterrent of individual initiatives and experimentation* (e.g. Jeffrey 2002; Ball 2003; Troman, Jeffrey, and Raggl 2007; Nicholl and McLellan 2008; Suspitsyna 2010; Angus 2012) or *isomorphism* (Hargreaves 1995; Leeuw 2002; de Wolf and Janssens 2007).

2. Research context

Given the context-inclusive nature of this study, we first provide a thumbnail sketch of the Flemish educational accountability context. As mentioned in the introduction, the Flemish inspection system is generally considered a relatively low-stakes inspection context (Van Bruggen 2010; OECD 2013). Every school is inspected at least once every 10 years, which counts as the sole accountability measure for schools; unlike many other countries, the Flemish education system has no central examinations (OECD 2013). Schools are notified of a planned inspection at the end of the school year and informed about the exact date six weeks before the inspection takes place. From an international perspective, this is a relatively lengthy notification period (Van Bruggen 2010). The inspection leads to two independent judgements that focus on educational matters and the school infrastructure, respectively. The judgements are either 'positive', 'restricted positive' or 'negative'. A 'positive' judgement is given when a school is considered to have the competencies to continue working in an optimal manner. A 'restricted positive' judgement denotes a second inspection is required three years after the initial inspection to ascertain whether certain deficiencies have been adequately addressed. Although entitled 'restricted positive', this judgement is often experienced by the schools as 'negative'. When a school shows structural deficiencies, it is given a 'negative' judgement, which implies the school needs to be monitored by an external agency. Between 2011 and 2013, 69.3, 29.1 and 1.6% of the 612 inspected primary schools received a 'positive', 'restricted positive' and 'negative' judgement for educational matters, respectively (Onderwijsinspectie 2012, 2013).

3. Conceptual framework

In this section, we first clarify the side effects that this study will examine. Next, we provide a general framework for the explanatory features of these side effects.

3.1. Side effects

Evidence of the side effects of accountability measures (including inspection) has been reviewed by De Wolf and Janssens (2007). Based on their identification of three types of undesirable side effects, this study sets out to investigate: (1) strategic activities by schools; (2) disturbing effects on normal school life; and (3) emotional side effects. These side effects are expected to emerge in accountability contexts that rely heavily on school inspections.

An activity by the school is labelled as a 'strategic activity' when it primarily intends to mislead the inspectors and is set up in the first place with the purpose of receiving a more favourable inspection judgement. Strategic activities are generally undesirable: they are harmful in itself (e.g. when policy documents are pushed through without any collegial consultation in advance), or they have negative consequences for the reliability of the inspection process (as inspectors fail to see the school 'as it really is' (de Wolf and Janssens 2007)). However, it needs to be mentioned that a strategic activity, notwithstanding its initial purpose, in the end may have a positive outcome (e.g. when misleading activities result in actual and lasting improvement). We further distinguish three kinds of strategic activities that Perryman (2009) terms: 'fabrication of stage' (the changing of the physical appearance of classrooms or the entire school); 'fabrication of documentation' (drafting new documents to provide a better image of the school); and 'playing the game', also known as 'window dressing'. Mainly the latter has been described: there is a tendency to engage in 'window dressing' activities at the school level (Brimblecombe and Ormston 1995; Jansen 2004; Plowright 2007; Perryman 2009) whilst evidence of whether individual teachers engage in 'window dressing' activities is incomplete. Some studies have found that teachers have prepared their lessons more carefully and more 'steering' learning activities were planned in order to keep control of the classroom during inspection visits (Case, Case, and Catling 2000; Perryman 2009; Hardy 2012), but other studies have concluded that the effect of inspection on teachers' lessons is fairly limited (Wilcox and Gray 1996; Chapman 2001). Only a limited number of studies have examined the occurrence of fabrication of stage and documentation (Fitz-Gibbon and Stephenson-Forster 1999; Perryman 2009).

Secondly, this study investigates the occurrence of *disturbing effects on normal school life* of the inspection in the Flemish education context. Also disturbing effects are considered as undesirable, as schools can engage in short-term quick-fixes for problems at the expense of more sustainable solutions, or they may delay or even dismiss their own priorities for school development. Schools can be distracted from normal activities in the period before the inspection and the accountability pressure may increase the likelihood of teachers and principals being less involved in their classroom practices (Stoll and Fink 1998; Gray and Gardner 1999; Cranston 2007).

Finally, earlier research indicates that inspection may lead to several *emotional side effects*, such as stress and anxiety before, during and after the inspection (e.g. Gray and Gardner 1999; Brunsdon, Davies, and Shevlin 2006). Not only is the occurrence of these emotional side effects during the inspection regarded as undesirable but it can also jeopardise the validity and reliability of the inspectors' evaluation of the school (de Wolf and Janssens 2007). To a lesser extent, positive emotional effects have been documented, such as an increase in staff morale following the inspection (McCrone et al. 2007).

The evidence discussed in this section is strongly concentrated on the English education context. In line with the first research question, this study aims to investigate to what extent these effects occur in a lower stakes inspection context.

3.2. Explanatory features

The extent to which the inspection leads to side effects is influenced by the characteristics of the school and the inspection (Ehren and Visscher 2006). The inspection judgement may also affect the occurrence of side effects after the inspection (Scanlon 1999). There is some evidence available concerning the explanatory features of the extent to which the intended effects of inspection occur. However, despite the fact that research into this topic has been strongly advocated (de Wolf and Janssens 2007), the evidence base regarding the explanatory features of side effects of the inspection is rather limited. The small number of characteristics that have been identified as potentially relevant are the perception of the inspection quality (McCrone et al. 2007), the perception of the inspector's behaviour (Kelchtermans 2007), the transparency of the inspection process for the staff members in the inspected schools (Brimblecombe and Ormston 1995; Wilcox and Gray 1996), the mechanisms of support between colleagues (Scanlon 1999) and the principal's (or management team) attitude towards the inspection (Brimblecombe and Ormston 1995; Sandbrook 1996; Perryman 2005). Because of the small evidence base, we take an explorative approach rather than a confirmatory approach towards the second research question. In order not to overlook features that are deemed important in the Flemish education context, this study will not utilise predefined conceptualisations of relevant explanatory characteristics.

4. Research design

We opted to use the methodology of intensive case studies. The case-study approach is appropriate as the complexity of the side effects of inspection and their explanatory features require a profound understanding of the individual cases (Yin 1989; Miles and Huberman 1994; Scholz and Tietje 2002). Five cases were chosen to facilitate an in-depth investigation, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the side effects of inspection that occurred in these schools. Including five cases in the study enables us to distinguish between school-related and general features of an evaluation of schools (Braster 2000). The five schools were selected at random out of 64 primary schools that were inspected during a predefined period in 2012.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews to provide a thorough understanding of the perceptions, opinions and views of respondents (Mason 2002). In order to observe the full range of side effects throughout the entire inspection process, three research periods were defined: just before the inspection, immediately after the inspection and a follow-up four months later. Each of the interviews took place in one school year (2012–2013). Interviews were conducted with the principal, a seventh-grade teacher and the pupil care coordinator, who acts as a second-line policy-support staff member. In total, 45 interviews were administered (five schools × three respondents × three periods). Each of the interviews took place at the schools and lasted 56 min on average. Interview data were enriched by document analysis (the school websites and inspection reports).

The research aim was to investigate whether pre-defined side effects observed in other contexts could also occur in Flemish schools and to identify the explanatory features of these effects. Therefore, we adopted a deductive approach of analysis known as the ‘framework approach’ (Ritchie and Spencer 1993). This approach allows the researchers to look for patterns in interviews supported by theory (i.e. the effects distinguished in the conceptual framework) on the one hand and by the input of respondents on the other. In order to find patterns that occur in different cases, results were generated across different case schools (Miles and Huberman 1994). The interview guideline was based on the side effects defined in the conceptual framework (see Section 3.1.). Additionally, the interview guideline intended to gain information about features from the school as well as experiences from the inspection, in order to make an empirical connection between these variables and the observed side effects. Furthermore, the interview guideline for the second and third research period was adaptive to the responses obtained from the respondent, as well as from other respondents within the same school, during the earlier interviews. This allowed to deepen and evaluate earlier responses, as well as to triangulate information at school level obtained from one respondent by including other sources within the same school. The transcript of each interview was uploaded in NVIVO10, in order to facilitate computer-assisted data analysis. For the coding process, general codes such as ‘strategic activities’ were distracted from the theoretical framework and were specified through several subcodes, such as ‘fabrication of stage’ or ‘fabrication of documentation’. Related to the second research question, open questions intended to grasp the underlying mechanisms that caused certain side effects. Only three general codes (‘school features’, ‘inspection features’ and ‘individual characteristics’) were set as starting point. Subcodes within these general codes, but also next to these original codes, were generated while processing the interview data, in line with the ‘framework approach’ (Ritchie and Spencer 1993).

‘Investor triangulation’ was applied to increase the reliability of the analysis (Denzin 1989). The first author initially coded the interviews and a second researcher subsequently independently read and coded a significant section of the interviews. A ‘code list’ was developed for this purpose based on the conceptual framework outlined above, identifying and clearly marking out each of the codes used during analysis. Any differences in coding were resolved through discussion until an appropriate level of consensus between the coding of both researchers was reached: the inter-rater reliability (Miles and Huberman 1994) – the ratio of the total amount of agreement in the coding and the total amount of coded text excerpts – was 90.6%.

5. Results

This section provides a descriptive overview of the side effects of the inspection in the five case schools (research question 1). The section is subdivided following the three types of side effects distinguished in the conceptual framework. We deliberately chose to integrate the findings concerning research question 2 in this section, which allows us to link explanatory features to the side effects to which they apply.

Table 1 is built on the document analysis and documents the context of the five cases. Three schools (schools A, B and E) received the most favourable judgement (‘positive’) for both educational matters and infrastructure. In school B, the inspectors also gave the judgement ‘positive’ despite ruling that the practices regarding

Table 1. Context data about the five case schools.

School	No. of pupils	No. of staff members	Judgement for 'education'	Judgement for 'infrastructure'
A	489	42	Positive	Positive
B	430	42	Positive, in spite of deficiencies for 'arts education'	Positive
C	255	30	Positive	'Restricted positive' because there are too few restrooms on the school grounds
D	51	6	'Restricted positive' due to deficiencies in 'environmental education'	'Restricted positive' due to the need for many repairs
E	473	45	Positive	Positive

'arts education' in the school were insufficient, as the inspectors were convinced the school held sufficient 'vision' and 'policy power' to adequately address this problem without further inspection. School C received the judgement 'positive' for educational matters and 'restricted positive' for infrastructure.

School D received the judgement 'restricted positive' for educational matters, as well as for infrastructure.

5.1. Strategic activities by schools

In each of the five schools, strategic activities took place before and during the inspection. In line with the conceptual framework, we discuss the 'fabrication of stage', the 'fabrication of documentation' and 'playing the game'.

5.1.1. Fabrication of stage

In every school, the appearance of several classrooms was adapted in the weeks before the inspection. Teachers updated materials on the classroom walls, generally on their own initiative or as a reaction to other colleagues. In school C, however, changes to the classroom environment were predominantly the result of pressure by the principal on the teachers to increase coherence in the use of materials throughout different classrooms. This principal also recommended that teachers decorate their classrooms during the inspection week with several plants.

... cutting and pasting and putting up new timelines, updating maps and pictograms, freshening up, laminating, if only to make it look better. (Pupil care coordinator's impression of teachers' preparation, School A)

Examples of the fabrication of stage at the school level included, amongst others, the changing of coat racks to safer models in school D and the painting of school A's temporary classrooms. In both schools A and C, management requested that the teaching team ensure high levels of tidiness in the school during the inspection.

5.1.2. Fabrication of documentation

In every school except school C, several *school policy documents* requested by the inspection were updated or even created for the forthcoming inspection. The

documents concerned mostly education-related plans such as the school mission, a ‘plan for language policy’ and a ‘plan for extracurricular activities’, as well as documents related to the safety and hygiene of the school infrastructure. In school B, an extra fire evacuation drill was organised in order to align with the safety requirements demanded by the inspection. The fabrication of documentation was the main activity focused on during preparation in school D, where the principal – who had only recently been appointed – discovered that his predecessor had neglected to follow up on many policy documents. Our respondents generally did not perceive the fabrication of documentation as a contribution to school quality but merely an administrative burden.

We have the feeling that the inspection is mostly concerned with the paperwork. So we wrote down on paper everything we do in our school. But that does not change a lot to the way the school is functioning. (Pupil care coordinator, School B)

Along with the documents demanded by the inspection, other documents were also created through the school’s own initiative, such as a brochure for newly hired teachers in school B and a guideline for the organisation of excursions in school E.

In school C, all required documents were readily available and up to date when the inspection was announced, so the fabrication of documentation (at the school level) was very limited.

At the *classroom level*, teachers in all five schools engaged in the fabrication of documentation during the weeks before the inspection; however, in every school, some teachers did participate in this practice and others did not. Teachers started developing or updating ‘learning pathways’ in order to ensure coherence through different grades (schools A, B, C and E) and overviews of concordance between lesson activities and attainment targets (every school). Furthermore, many documents were standardised. In school C, both the teacher and the pupil care coordinator confirmed that the fabrication of documentation at the classroom level was incited predominantly through the pressure of the principal, rather than because of the inspection.

Fabrication of documentation usually resulted from the firm belief that it could affect the inspection judgement. This belief is not necessarily incorrect, as shown by the following example: the principal of school B decided to quickly draft a ‘plan for professional development of staff’ in the week before the inspection visit and immediately disseminated it – without any advance discussion – to the staff members. The inspection report explicitly praised professional development in the school.

The professional development plan shows vision and demonstrates how the professional development of both individual teachers and the entire school can be promoted. (Inspection report, School B)

5.1.3. *Playing the game*

Prior to the inspection, none of the respondents anticipated that they would adapt their regular behaviour during the inspection week. Indeed, immediately after the inspection most respondents reported that they had been honest with the inspectors. Nevertheless, several activities differed from regular practice during the inspection week. The common practice in school B to start every Monday morning with the payment of the pupils’ school fees (a practice instituted due to problematic

non-payment) was omitted as the principal believed the practice would be disliked by the inspectors. In school C, the principal requested that the number of supervisors during pupils' playtime be increased for the inspection week. The pupil care coordinator and the interviewed teacher both reported that some of the teachers in their school had 'played the game well' as they had succeeded in presenting themselves as more innovative and pupil-oriented than they actually are. The principal of school C had, in particular, asked the staff to be loyal and not use the inspection to criticise the school policy. In spite of tensions, each of the respondents confirmed the team had indeed been very loyal, leading to the statement in the inspection report that the principal adopts a participative leadership style (a statement that was later strongly refuted by staff members in the interviews).

The lessons observed by the inspectors were meticulously prepared because teachers wanted to show their best practices, but also to reduce their experience of stress. The interviewed teacher in school A adapted the group composition for the observed lesson and had software installed to run a specific application on the smart-board. By contrast, each of the other interviewed teachers claimed that they did not change their regular practice, apart from some minor adaptations.

I acted just like I always do, because there is a pitfall when you start to do things you are not used to do, you might embarrass yourself. I had a closer look to the lesson plan, but I did not act differently. (Teacher school C)

In sum, we observed strategic activities in every school – mainly fabrication of stage and fabrication of documentation – whilst 'playing the game' occurred to a lesser extent. We found in the discussion of each of these kinds of strategic activities that a principal's attitude towards the inspection is one of the key features in explaining the extent to which these side effects occur.

5.2. *Disturbing effects on normal school life*

The additional tasks during the notification period (caused mainly by the strategic activities discussed above) were added onto the normal workload. Almost all of the other planned activities took place as scheduled, so few disturbing effects were reported. Each of the respondents was well aware of the need to keep the school running smoothly during the notification period of six weeks before the inspection. Amongst the few examples of disturbing effects were the postponement of the planned evaluation of the method used for mathematics education (and the cancelling of this evaluation after the inspection because of a lack of enthusiasm), the delayed constitution of the pupil council (school A), delays in the operations of several working groups (school B) and the postponed adaptation of the curriculum for a pupil with learning difficulties (school D). Each of those issues was regarded as low-priority or too time demanding to be addressed before the inspection. In schools A and C, staff complained that the preparation for the inspection demanded much of the time during the staff meetings held in the notification period.

We still feel the consequences of the inspection [four months later], that no clear arrangements have been made at the start of the school year, that all of those staff meetings were dedicated to the inspection. And now we face the consequences of bad communication at the start of the school year, like lacking agreements about which pupils can be at what playground or about regulations for lunch, all kinds of practical things. (Teacher, School A)

Disturbing effects were also rather scarce after the inspection. Each of the schools quickly returned to ‘business as usual’ but it should be noted that there was increased absence due to illness and a decreased enthusiasm to engage in new activities (as will be discussed in the paragraph on emotional side effects below). In the four schools that received a positive judgement, the management teams were not eager to swap their earlier determined priorities in favour of the inspectors’ critiques. In school D, which received a ‘restricted positive’ judgement, the mandatory changes to current practices were added to the school’s own priorities.

In sum, only few disturbing effects were observed. There are indications that when disturbing effects occurred, this was mainly due to the nature of the delayed or omitted action (it required too much time or carried too little importance).

5.3. Emotional side effects

The inspection triggered strong emotional responses that lasted from its announcement until at least four months following the inspection. Below, we analyse the emotional side effects felt by those interviewed before, during and after the inspection.

5.3.1. Before the inspection

The period between notification and inspection was characterised by a substantial rise in *stress* and *anxiety* levels in every school. Two weeks before the inspection, five (out of fifteen) respondents from three different schools complained of headaches and sleeplessness due to the long period of stress. School A’s pupil care coordinator was even diagnosed with a stomach ulcer, probably due to severe stress. Nevertheless, in general, there was only limited absenteeism through illness.

I feel stressed since the moment we knew when ‘they’ would come. And anxious? Yes, anxious as well, because we are not so self-assured. I think everyone in the school, apart from some exceptions, is currently very stressed [two weeks prior to the inspection]. (Pupil coordinator, School E)

The main reason for increased stress levels reported by principals was the *additional workload*. The same holds for the pupil care coordinators and, to a lesser extent, the teachers. *Uncertainty* (the lack of knowledge of what is to come) was mainly a source of stress and anxiety for teachers. School staff have only limited experience with inspection (and with being evaluated in general) and uncertainty prevailed about what the inspectors would ‘want to see and hear’. The interviewed teachers of schools A, B, D and E were particularly anxious about the ‘multitude and difficulty’ of the questions that they would be required to answer. As a consequence of the staff’s lack of experience with inspection, knowledge about the inspection in these four schools depended largely on stories they heard from other schools; such information consisted mainly of excessive and ‘wild stories’ about unfair or disrespectful treatment by the inspectors.

I already felt stressed two weeks before the inspection but when the inspection approached, it only got worse. Several nights I just woke up in the middle of the night and started doubting: ‘How will it be? What should I expect?’ Fear for the unknown. (Teacher, School E)

In every school, respondents mentioned the *fear of a negative assessment*. This was particularly the case for the principal of school C, who thought that there was still much to be done in order to be granted a ‘positive’ judgement. But even staff members who were convinced their school was doing well reported a certain fear that the inspection would not result in a ‘positive’ judgement as they raised anticipatory *doubts about the fairness of the assessment*. In schools A, B, D and E, there was a commonly shared anxiety that the inspectors would not see the true nature of the school and they would, instead, focus on paperwork or details with only limited relevance to teaching and learning practices.

Four out of the five principals attributed some of their stress to the idea that the inspection to some degree implied a *personal evaluation of their work as a principal*. The only exception was the principal of school D, who had only recently been appointed and thus felt he could not be held personally accountable for the state of affairs in the school. By contrast, the teachers in school D felt the inspection carried a personal evaluation; due to the delegating and neglectful leadership style of the previous principal, they had taken over many responsibilities at the school (policy) level.

In schools D and E, the principal reassured staff that they were doing well and, as such, tempered the stress experienced by teachers. In school A, the principal noted that he had acted as a psychologist and one of his major tasks in the weeks before the inspection had been to ‘make sure everyone remains calm’. Yet he was unaware that several of his initiatives had the opposite effect.

At the staff meeting right before the inspection everyone got a file with a new school development plan, instructions on which documents need to be in what place, which documents you should read ... They [the management team] tried not to put pressure on us but in fact it inflicted stress. ‘Do I know all of this? Do we think the same about that? Will we tell the same things when the inspectors question us about the school policy?’ (Teacher, School A)

Teachers in school C generally remained fairly untroubled following the announcement of the inspection, as they had been inspected several times in previous years. However, the principal of this school suffered enormous stress. She raised the stakes for herself: she noted during the first interview her firm intention to resign if the judgement was not ‘positive’. The principal’s stressed behaviour was easily noticeable by the staff. Teachers’ stress was induced by their desire to comply with the principal’s demands, rather than by the approaching inspection.

Whilst strong cooperation and the feeling of *supportive relationships between colleagues* allayed stress for several teachers in schools A, B, D and E, in some cases teachers unwillingly reinforced each other’s stress; for instance, when they saw each other engage in strategic activities such as drafting documents and decorating classrooms.

5.3.2. *During the inspection*

Staff members in each school felt very connected to each other during the inspection week. They indicated that they had experienced strong support from the solidarity amongst colleagues. Nevertheless, staff members experienced severe stress and anxiety and, in some cases, frustration, disappointment and anger during the inspection week. The respondents in schools A, B and E reported that they felt the need to

remain vigilant during the entire week and felt as if they had to be prepared to respond to unforeseen issues at all times. These negative emotions partially depended on the same features as during the pre-inspection period. Some respondents reported they were mainly stressed because of the *tense atmosphere* in the school during the inspection week.

For me, it was stressful during that week but it was not because of the inspection itself but really stressful because of the general stress inside the school. People make each other stressed. It was merely because I had to work in a stressed environment. The first day I came in unperturbed but by the second day I totally didn't feel at ease anymore, which had everything to do with that tense atmosphere. (Teacher, School B)

The inspection itself also affected the extent to which these emotional side effects occurred, particularly the perception of the *inspectors' behaviour*. In schools C and E, everyone agreed that the inspectors treated the school in a friendly and benign manner, which tempered their experience of stress. In school E, stress even dropped completely when the inspectors not only gave a positive appraisal of the teachers' work but also informally shared several constructive ideas on how they could make further improvements in the school.

A more mixed picture was observed in school B, where at first anxiety grew due to the inspectors' questioning techniques but then gradually declined because the staff perceived the inspectors to be sensible and respectful.

At first I was really overwhelmed by the barrage of questions, it was just like a police interrogation. Beforehand I was relatively at ease but that first conversation made me very nervous. (Pupil care coordinator, School B)

Nevertheless, everyone in school B noted the anger and frustration expressed by one teacher who felt that the inspector had treated her in a disrespectful way and had failed to 'really listen to her as a teacher'. In school A, the inspectors' initial behaviour confirmed the anticipatory idea that the inspection would focus on insignificant details (e.g. an inspector measured by stopwatch the time it took pupils to leave the playground after the bell for the start of lessons, and he tested whether a teacher's guitar (that was not used during the observed lesson) was correctly tuned). In this case, the inspectors' behaviour led to frustration and anxiety about what was to be expected for the rest of the week and anticipatory doubts about the fairness and the validity of the inspection judgement increased.

Each of the respondents in school D was frustrated and deeply dissatisfied with the inspectors' condescending attitude towards the school. The strong emotional impact on the school staff of the inspectors' patronising behaviour included anger, frustration, indignation and disappointment.

For instance I had cleared this room for them [the principal's own office]. They sighted 'Oh, do we really have to sit here? I guess there is no other option?' Or: 'I'd like a glass of water at room temperature – if you have that in your school?' And there are dozens of such remarks. At noon 'I guess there is nothing to eat in this neighbourhood?' It was really condescending, way beyond acceptable. (Principal, School D)

The anticipatory anxiety towards the inspection interviews was strongly reduced in the teachers at schools A, B, C and E when they were told they would be *interviewed per grade*, meaning there would be support from one or two colleagues teaching the same grade. This was not possible in the smaller school D, as teachers were solely responsible for one (or even two) grade(s).

The announcement of the judgement at the end of the inspection was an emotional moment in every school. Schools A, B, C and E received a ‘positive’ judgement. In schools A, B and E, there was a general sense of relief: the inspection had seen that the school was functioning well. The principal of school C – who had put her fate into the hands of the inspection – used superlatives to describe her feelings of happiness, in sharp contrast to the school staff, many of whom reacted relieved but in a rather superficial and sometimes even cynical way.

How did I feel? What can I say? ‘Mission accomplished’ for her [the principal]. If I am feeling relieved, it is because they [the inspectors] won’t be coming back in the next few years. (Teacher, School C)

In school D, which received ‘restricted positive’ for education, the judgement was unexpected and was considered a harsh and unfair verdict. There was a strong emotional reaction. The advice came as a shock and two teachers immediately burst into tears.

5.3.3. *After the inspection*

The increased stress and anxiety disappeared immediately after the inspection in the four schools that received a ‘positive’ judgement. Four months after the inspection there was a *commonly shared positive feeling* in schools A and E that the inspection had confirmed the quality of their school whilst in schools B and C, only some staff members felt their school had been endorsed (because of the critical remarks in the inspection report in school B and because of disagreements with some findings in school C). There was, however, no ‘moral boost’ in these four schools – the fact that they were confirmed as ‘good schools’ was regarded as normal.

The principals of schools B, C, D and E reported a positive effect on their personal feeling of self-efficacy; for the principals of schools D and E, it was particularly important that teachers had endorsed their leadership style in their interviews with the inspectors. For school C’s principal, it felt like a victory that the school staff had supported school policy. The fact that the inspection report praised a recent reform – imposed by the principal – also had a strong positive effect on her morale. Apart from these four principals, none of the other respondents reported a positive effect on their professional enthusiasm. The principal of school A did not feel confirmed, mainly because he questioned the reliability and validity of the inspection. Apart from several teachers in school E – the school that had received individual constructive advice from the inspector – teachers and pupil care coordinators did not feel personally endorsed due to the lack of individual oral feedback and classroom-related feedback in the inspection report.

Four months after the inspection, a *general tiredness* in the team and a decreased enthusiasm to engage in new activities emerged in schools A and B as a result of the stressful period of intensive preparation in the first months of the school year. In school B, the inspection resulted in lower professional enthusiasm and a substantial increase in absence through illness in the four months following the inspection.

[Four months after the inspection] I got the feeling that teachers are more eager to say, “We’re over ‘it’, I don’t feel that well and I’ve already done enough this school year, I will call in sick”. My entire budget for replacement teachers is already exhausted [three months before the end of the school year]. (Principal, School B)

In school A, *frustration* and *disappointment* prevailed until at least four months after the inspection. The frustration centred on the idea that the inspectors had failed to see the real challenges the school faced (such as the altering pupil intake and the enormous workload) and the inspection had only confirmed the problems that the school was already well aware of. The inspection report strengthened the school's idea that the inspectors have no understanding of the realities of today's education system.

The principal of school B was also left with feelings of disappointment; not towards the inspectors but towards his team. He had hoped the teachers would respond to the critical inspection report by developing new activities and by showing a stronger involvement in school policy. The teachers, however, took a very passive stance towards the inspection report and waited for the principal to design policies for improvement.

In the first two weeks, after the inspection strong feelings of disappointment, disillusion and dismay prevailed in school D. Teachers reported feeling shocked and completely beaten by the inspection's approach and judgement. A strong sense of demotivation was also reported immediately after the inspection and lasted for about a month. The school staff felt they had been treated in an unfair and disrespectful manner and questioned the validity of the inspection. Another cause of frustration was the sudden awareness that all the preparatory efforts had been in vain.

I can't cope with it. They haven't seen the true nature of our school. They have been blinded by paperwork. What we told them about our work didn't matter. They listened but in the end only the documents counted. I have the feeling that they didn't watch or that they did not sufficiently see what we are actually doing in our classrooms. (Teacher, school D)

In sum, the emotional impact on staff members of the inspected schools was severe. Before the inspection, the strong increase in stress and anxiety can be explained by the additional workload, the staff's uncertainty about the process of the inspection, fear of a negative assessment and anticipatory doubts about the fairness of the inspection, as well as to the stance of the principal, the position of the staff member (principals vs. teachers) and the relationships between teachers. The same features explain the occurrence of emotional side effects during the inspection, albeit that they were strongly dependent on inspectors' behaviour. After the inspection, certain negative feelings regarding the inspection remained, caused by the perceived quality of the inspection and (for one school) by the inspection judgement, amongst others.

6. Discussion

The present study investigated the side effects of being inspected in five primary schools in Flanders. The side effects of individual inspections on the inspected schools and their staff members have not yet been investigated in-depth in an inspection context marked as 'low-stakes' (in contrast to the existence of low-stakes accountability mechanisms on all schools, regardless of them being inspected, as we will discuss further in this section). It had been assumed that the Flemish low-stakes context would lead to a lower extent of side effects. However, our results are not in line with this hypothesis. Although not every side effect was as pronounced as has been observed in other (higher-stakes) inspection contexts, we conclude that the

Flemish inspection has a strong undesirable impact on schools before, during and after the inspection.

6.1. Descriptive evidence

Regarding the first research question, our results are in line with earlier studies in England (Fitz-Gibbon and Stephenson-Forster 1999; Perryman 2009) which conclude that schools engage in the fabrication of stage and the fabrication of documents. We found, to a limited extent, indications of schools ‘playing the game’ (‘window dressing’); for example, several activities were deliberately changed in order to present a better image of the school or to hide certain unconventional habits. However, in general, staff members indicated they did not alter their behaviour during the inspection. In contrast to earlier findings in England (Stoll and Fink 1998; e.g. Gray and Gardner 1999; Cranston 2007), the disturbing effects on normal school life were by and large rather small. Stronger evidence was found for the occurrence of emotional side effects. The notification of inspection leads to a severe rise in stress and anxiety levels, gradually increasing until the first day of inspection (in line with, amongst others, Brimblecombe and Ormston 1995; Brunsden, Davies, and Shevlin 2006; Perryman 2007). We also observed strong emotional responses during the inspection, although in some schools stress decreased or even disappeared during the inspection visit. Regarding the emotional side effects following the inspection, we observed large differences between schools. We found the intensiveness of the notification period and the inspection visit had an effect until at least four months after the inspection in terms of lower levels of enthusiasm and increased absence through illness in two of the four schools with a positive inspection report, which supports findings from earlier studies that discuss ‘post-inspection blues’ (Ferguson et al. 1999; Scanlon 1999). Feelings of frustration and disappointment about the inspection were also observed. The positive judgement leads to a strengthened self-efficacy for three out of four principals but not for other school staff members. Staff members in the school with a less favourable inspection judgement were left with feelings of disappointment, disillusion, dismay and frustration.

6.2. Explanatory evidence

Regarding the second research question, we found that the stance of the principal regarding the inspection was a key for explaining the occurrence of strategic activities in the schools.

The few examples of disturbing effects occurred when staff believed the delayed or omitted action was low priority or would require too much time.

Emotional effects before the inspection are triggered by the increased workload, uncertainty as to what will happen during the inspection, fear of a negative assessment, the attitude of the principal and the relationships between colleagues. The experience of the inspection as a personal evaluation also explains some of the increased levels of stress for principals. During the inspection, the (perception of) inspectors’ behaviour was paramount. This perception determined whether school staff’s stress and anxiety levels further increased or whether they were allayed or even faded away completely. As mentioned above, the inspection judgement is important for understanding the emotional effects felt by staff after the inspection

but the extent to which the inspection was perceived as a fair and reliable process also strongly matters.

The above results confirm the key role of the principal in the occurrence of side effects, as suggested by several earlier studies (e.g. Brimblecombe and Ormston 1995; Troman 1997; Macbeath 2008). This study adds that the impact of the principal's actions is not always in line with his/her intentions and that the principal's attitude is strongly influenced by the fact that he/she may experience the inspection judgement as a personal evaluation of his/her functioning as a principal.

6.3. Governance in low-stakes inspection contexts

As mentioned above, there has been some research in the field of inspections in low-stakes inspections that has resulted in evidence about undesirable side effects for schools and their staff members. It does, however, concern studies with a different focus, as predominantly the effects of governance mechanisms (e.g. the regulative, inquisitive and meditative governance mechanisms described by Jacobsson (2006)) within education systems (e.g. the mere existence and the role of Inspectors) have been investigated (e.g. the work by Buisson-Fenet and Pons (2011), Grek et al. (2013), and Huber (2011)).

6.4. Features of the Flemish inspection context

Our case studies clearly illustrate that inspection in the Flemish context in general leads to substantial side effects in schools. In this sense, the study clearly informs both academics and policy-makers in their attempts to shape school inspections to produce minimal side effects for schools. Even though the Flemish inspection is considered as relatively low stakes (Van Bruggen 2010; OECD 2013), our results show that several side effects are comparable to those observed in other education contexts. Above all, these results make us question whether the Flemish inspection can rightfully be considered a low-stakes context. It seems that the limited experience of Flemish schools with accountability measures (no central examinations, small frequency of inspection) makes the schools perceive the stakes to be higher than they actually are. We found that much of the stress and anxiety, as well as the strategic activities, were inflicted through a lack of experience in being evaluated and by uncertainty about what to expect from the impending inspection. The initial, rather calm stance of teachers in one school was explained by the fact that this school had been inspected several times in the previous years. Moreover, one could question whether low-stakes inspections can even truly exist; for a professionally devoted staff member every activity that carries some form of judgement about his/her work may be experienced as high-stakes, a fortiori when it includes being observed in their daily teaching and management tasks (Wilcox 2000).

Several other distinctive features of the Flemish inspection context deserve attention, as they also account for some of the side effects observed in this study. For instance, in the Flemish education context, inspectors are not required to provide constructive advice for schools on how they can address weaknesses. The legislation makes a strict distinction between inspectors (for control) and school counsellors (for advice). However, our data provide empirical confirmation that supports several scholars' theories (Woods and Jeffrey 1998; Gray and Gardner 1999; Nevo 2001); namely, that the absence of this kind of feedback increases uncertainty and stress

amongst school staff and leads to frustration for principals. Furthermore, the inspection is also not allowed to provide individual feedback to teachers after they have been observed or interviewed, as inspectors only make assessments at the school level. However, our study confirms earlier results (Brimblecombe and Ormston 1995; Wilcox and Gray 1996; Gray and Gardner 1999) in that the absence of individual feedback can increase stress and lead to frustration and disappointment.

Another issue that deserves particular attention is the length of the notification period. This study showed that the relatively long notification period in the Flemish education context is characterised by strong negative emotional effects and allows for several strategic activities to mislead the inspectors. Responding to these concerns, the English inspection agency OFSTED decided to dramatically decrease the length of the notification period, sometimes even to one day before the inspection takes place (Ofsted 2012). Similar to several other countries (e.g. the Netherlands and Ireland), unannounced inspections are also allowed (Van Bruggen 2010). To our knowledge, the impact of the different arrangements of notification periods in different countries has not yet been investigated.

6.5. Methodological considerations

This study provides insight into the side effects of Flemish inspection of schools. The aim of this study was not to formulate generalisations but rather to describe the side effects of inspections and explore explanatory features in a specific context. It thereby responds to the need expressed by several academics to investigate these effects in diverse contexts (de Wolf and Janssens 2007). As a consequence, one can argue that the validity of our findings might be restricted to the Flemish context. Further international comparative studies using a common framework for data gathering and analyses are needed to address this issue. Another limitation concerns the explanatory features of the side effects. In this qualitative study, we aimed to understand the reality of the impact of inspection whilst remaining aware of the complex realities that are involved in the study domain.

This study contributes to a broad and profound understanding of the side effects of inspection processes and results. It may add to the discussion at policy level in Flanders but also in other education contexts concerning the role and occurrence of these side effects. We think it should not be accepted that these side effects are considered ‘collateral damage’ of an intrinsic feature of the quality care frameworks in many educational systems but, instead, there should be further exploration as to how these damaging effects can be avoided whilst still ensuring that schools deliver quality education. This study adds to these discussions and initiatives related to the future development in which intended effects are strengthened and side effects reduced to a minimum.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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