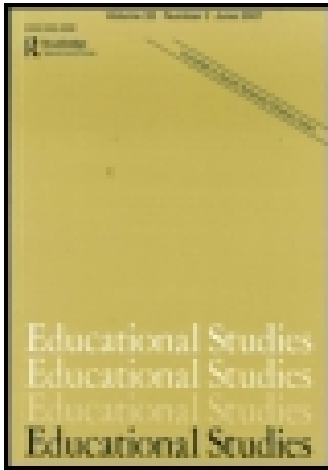


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Exploring and explaining the effects of being inspected

Maarten Penninckx^a, Jan Vanhoof^a, Sven De Maeyer^a & Peter Van Petegem^a

^a Research Unit Edubron, University of Antwerp, Antwerpen, Belgium

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Exploring and explaining the effects of being inspected

Maarten Penninckx*, Jan Vanhoof, Sven De Maeyer and Peter Van Petegem

Research Unit Edubron, University of Antwerp, Antwerpen, Belgium

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This study looks into the effects of school inspection in the context of Flemish education. Respondents in five primary case schools were interviewed before inspection, immediately after inspection and four months later (totalling 45 interviews with 15 respondents). Our results indicate that the inspection incites reflection amongst school staff on the quality of their education before the inspection takes place, but the inspection itself does not provide substantial new insights in the schools' strengths or weaknesses. The inspection judgement strongly affects the response of school towards the inspection. The case schools with a positive inspection report take practically no concrete action for improvement in the four months after inspection, while a more active response is seen in a school with a less favourable inspection report. The article also discusses the impact of some of the particularities of the Flemish education context on the effects of inspection.

Keywords: inspection; external evaluation; effect on schools; case studies; conceptual effects; instrumental effects

1. Introduction

The widespread recognition of the key role of (external) school evaluation arrangements in education is reflected in its increasing importance in national education agendas. Public demands for educational accountability intensified in most countries over the past decades (Faubert 2009; OECD 2013). The predominant arrangement for external school evaluation is school inspection (Eurydice 2004). A school inspection is a process of periodic, targeted scrutiny carried out to provide independent verification and to report on whether the quality of schools is meeting national and local standards (Janssens and Van Amelsvoort 2008, 15). School inspections mostly serve a dual purpose: the operating assumption is that inspection will hold schools accountable, but also that it will improve the quality of education in the inspected schools (Janssens and Van Amelsvoort 2008; OECD 2013). Many policy-makers tend to see school improvement as a natural corollary of inspection (Ehren et al. 2013; Eurydice 2004).

Researchers' attention has been drawn to the effects of school inspection in the 90s (after the establishment of the inspection agency OFSTED in the UK in 1992) resulting in ample evidence on the effects of school inspection in the UK context (Learmonth 2000). However, research interest dropped and only a few studies have been conducted in the last one and a half decade. In recent years, the increased role of accountability in education systems seems to have prompted researchers to

*Corresponding author. Email: Maarten.penninckx@uantwerp.be

re-intensify their interests regarding the effects of inspections. Nevertheless, the research evidence regarding this topic is largely inconsistent: while some studies found that inspection strongly impacts school improvement, other studies observed no or even negative effects (Chapman and Earley 2010; Ehren and Visscher 2006; Learmonth 2000). More – and more focused – research has been recommended by both researchers and policy-makers in order to describe and explain the effects of inspections (Ehren and Visscher 2006; Gray 2000; OECD 2013).

Apart from the lack of consistency in the research findings currently available, there are also a number of deficiencies in the current evidence base regarding the effects of inspections on schools. One of those deficiencies is that it is dominated by research in a few systems with long-established policies in school inspection. Research in more diverse contexts is imperative as it is currently yet unclear whether different inspection systems lead to different effects on schools (OECD 2013; de Wolf and Janssens 2007). In that perspective, as we will show further on, specific research on the effects of inspection in educational systems like Flanders is warranted.

Another shortfall of the current evidence base is that, although several studies are available on the effects of inspection, the key mechanisms (of schools and of inspections) that matter and that lead to these effects have only sparsely been identified (de Wolf and Janssens 2007). Finally, one more gap in the existing evidence base is the lack of studies that measure effects at different moments before and after the inspection process (Dedering and Müller 2011; de Wolf and Janssens 2007).

Given the above considerations, the present study contributes to the existing knowledge base by exploring and providing explanations for the effects of inspections on Flemish schools. The effects are seen through the eyes of staff members in schools: it concerns their perceptions of effects. The following two guiding research questions were set forward: (1 – descriptive-oriented): “what are the effects of being inspected on Flemish schools?” and (2 – explanation-oriented): “how can differences between schools regarding the effects of inspection be explained?”

2. Conceptual framework

Given the nature of the two research questions, this conceptual framework addresses a descriptive part – i.e. effects of inspections – and an explaining part that identifies characteristics of schools and of inspections that explain differences in these effects. Based on Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman (1999), we distinguish between a conceptual and an instrumental effect of inspection.

The *conceptual effect* of inspection is its influence on the understanding or reflection of principals and teachers in schools. The current empirical evidence predominantly shows that schools most often do not gain new insights into their own functioning as a result of the inspection (e.g. Chapman 2002; McCrone et al. 2007; Wilcox and Gray 1996). The research evidence is inconclusive when it comes to the question whether the inspection leads to increased reflection and discussion, both before the inspection (Brimblecombe, Shaw, and Ormston 1996; Chapman 2002) as well as after the inspection (Dedering and Müller 2011; Emmelot et al. 2004; Wurster and Gärtner 2011). Based on these findings, our hypothesis is that conceptual effects will also be rather limited in Flemish schools.

Instrumental effects are the decisions taken as a result of the inspection and the actions that are based upon these decisions. A great deal of the research base is

focused on instrumental effects in schools. It is widely acknowledged that inspection may lead schools to change policies and practices (e.g. Ehren 2010; Ehren et al. 2013; Lowe 1998), although a number of studies have concluded that the instrumental effects in schools are rather limited (Cromey-Hawke 1998; Ouston, Fidler, and Earley 1997). The best documented instrumental effect is the impact on the schools' monitoring, target-setting and self-evaluation mechanisms (e.g. Dederling and Müller 2011; Ehren, Perryman, and Shackleton 2013; McCrone et al. 2007), while the effect on teaching practices seems to be rather small (Brimblecombe, Shaw, and Ormston 1996; Chapman 2002). It is our hypothesis that, in line with earlier studies in different contexts, the instrumental effects of inspection in the Flemish context will mainly be focused at school policy level.

Only limited evidence is available regarding the second (explanation-oriented) research question. There are indications that the effects of inspection are affected by both school features and inspection features, and by the inspection judgement. However, most of the research until now have focused on establishing relationships, rather than investigating the causality of these relationships (de Wolf and Janssens 2007), and even less powerful evidence is available on how these causal relationships operate.

Amongst the few relevant school features that have been identified in other education contexts are the schools' innovative capacities (Ehren 2010; Gray and Wilcox 1995) and the principal's leadership qualities (Brimblecombe, Shaw, and Ormston 1996; Learmonth 2000). Relevant features of the inspection are – amongst others – perceived quality of the inspection process (Ehren 2010; McCrone et al. 2007; Ouston, Fidler, and Earley 1997), quality of the oral and written feedback (Matthews and Sammons 2004; McCrone et al. 2007), inspector's behaviour towards the school (Brimblecombe, Shaw, and Ormston 1996; Kogan and Maden 1999; Lowe 1998) and credibility of the inspectors (Brimblecombe, Shaw, and Ormston 1996; Cuckle and Broadhead 1999; McCrone et al. 2007). Also the inspectors' judgement of the school influences the effects on the school (Cuckle and Broadhead 1999; McCrone et al. 2007). Evidence regarding the effect of the acceptance of the inspection judgement by the school is not unanimous. Most studies on this topic conclude that the acceptance is paramount for school improvement (Chapman 2001; McCrone et al. 2007). Another recent study, however, has downplayed the importance of the school's acceptance of inspection feedback (Ehren, Perryman, and Shackleton 2013). But as has been argued before, the causality and the nature of these relationships between inspection or school features and effects of inspection, still needs to be clearly established.

Furthermore, the Flemish inspection context provides a number of distinctive features (as will be discussed in the next section). It may well be expected that at least some of these features have an impact on the extent to which conceptual and instrumental effects occur in schools.

3. Research context

In Flanders, at least once every 10 years the Inspectorate controls to what extent schools have made informed choices to ensure that pupils reach the "attainment targets". The inspection adopts a "differentiated approach" which implies that it does not carry out "full inspections". Instead two or three education areas (e.g. mathematics, environmental education) and a number of process indicators (e.g. pupil

evaluation, human resource policy) that are seen as “most pertinent to the particular school” are selected as inspection focus. Only the education quality in the selected areas and related to the selected process indicators are enquired by the inspectors. Furthermore, the inspection controls whether the “habitability, safety and hygiene” of the school infrastructure meets the legal requirements. The inspectors make two judgements, on educational matters and on school infrastructure, respectively. The judgements are either “positive”, “restricted positive” or “negative”. The judgement “positive” means that a school is considered to have the competencies to continue working in an optimal manner. No follow-up needs to be scheduled. The judgement “restricted positive” denotes a second inspection is required three years after the initial inspection to control whether the identified shortfalls have been adequately addressed. Although entitled “restricted positive”, this judgement is often experienced as “negative” by the schools. When schools show structural deficiencies, it is given the judgement “negative” which comes down to the school being obliged to set up an improvement plan and to have itself monitored by an external agency. In the school years 2011–2012 and 2012–2013, 69.2% of the primary schools received a “positive” judgement for educational matters and 29.1% received a “restricted positive” judgement. The remaining 1.6% of the primary schools were given a “negative” judgement (Onderwijsinspectie 2013). The large majority of other schools thus are not committed to respond to the inspection report or to draft an action plan, a situation which is very different from many other education systems (Van Bruggen 2010).

The inspection only judges at school level; teachers are only seldom and strictly anonymously mentioned in the inspection report. “Teacher evaluation” is the exclusive responsibility of school boards and principals.

Unlike many other countries, the Flemish education system has no central examinations. The absence of central tests implies that schools lack a solid basis to benchmark their results (in view of quality assurance and improvement), but also that inspection is challenged to assess the quality of schools without school performance data related to pupils’ learning output (Van Bruggen 2010). As no reliable output indicators are available, the inspection is constrained to focus on school processes.

Another notable feature of the Flemish education context is that the Inspectorate officially does not have the legal right to give advice to schools. Flemish legislation makes a strict distinction between inspection (for control) and school counsellors (for advice). Inspectors have to analyse and report on school strengths and weaknesses, but need to refrain from recommendations on how schools can address those weaknesses. Nevertheless, the Flemish Inspectorate has explicitly set out on both accountability- and improvement-oriented aims. Its ambition is to control and at the same time to be conducive for the quality of education provided by schools (Michielsens 2008; Onderwijsinspectie 2013).

4. Research design

We opted for a qualitative approach and more in particular for the methodology of *case studies*. The case study approach is appropriate as the explorative nature of this study did not require a decomposed, quantitative approach, but depended largely on the individual case and its understanding. Furthermore, our aim to establish not only clear causal relationships between school/inspection features and their effects, but also to understand the nature of these relationships implied that in-depth data had to

be collected to gain a deeper understanding of these processes (Scholz and Tietje 2002; Yin 1989).

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and through document analysis on the school website and the final inspection report.

We studied each of the cases over the entire inspection process period. Three research periods were defined: just before the inspection, immediately after the inspection and a follow-up four months later. Each of the interview periods took place in the same school year (2012–2013). This design made it possible to collect data (almost) parallel in time with the inspection, as well as to follow up on developments in the school in order to explore possible long-term effects.

Five cases were selected in view of in-depth investigation. Our aim was to gain a better understanding of the school's reaction on inspection and the effects resulting from their reaction. Including five schools in the study enabled to distinguish between school-related and general features of school evaluations (Braster 2000).

The five schools were selected at random out of 64 primary schools (with primary and nursery education department) that were inspected during a predefined period in 2012. During all three selected periods interviews were taken from the principal, the pupil care coordinator and a teacher of grade 7. Pupil care coordinators are mostly part of the school management team and generally act as a second-line professional that supports teachers. In total, 45 interviews have been administered (5 schools \times 3 respondents \times 3 periods). The interview questions were open-ended and were derived from the conceptual framework discussed above.

In the conceptual framework, we distinguished conceptual and instrumental effects in order to investigate whether these effects were observed in Flemish schools and which features of inspections and schools could explain the occurrence of these effects. Therefore, we adopted a deductive approach of analysis known as the “framework approach” (Ritchie and Spencer 1993). This approach allows to look for patterns in interviews supported by theory on the one hand and by input of respondents on the other hand. In order to find patterns, results are generated across different cases (Miles and Huberman 1994).

In order to increase reliability of the analysis, “investigator triangulation” was applied (Denzin 1989). The first author initially coded the interviews, while a second researcher subsequently – and independently – read and coded a significant part of the interviews. A “code list” was developed for this purpose, identifying and clearly marking out each of the codes used during analysis. Any differences in coding were resolved through discussion until a sufficient level of consensus was reached.

5. Results

In this section, we give a descriptive overview of the effects of inspection in the schools (research question 1). The section is subdivided following the two types of effects identified in the conceptual framework. Our findings regarding explaining features of the reported effects (research question 2) are integrated in this section, which enables to link them immediately to the effects they apply to. Given the context-inclusive nature of this study, we start off with a brief introduction in the school context of the cases (see Table 1). This is needed to understand profoundly the effects that are reported. Three schools (school A, B and E) received the most favourable judgement (“positive”) for both educational matters and infrastructure. In school B, the inspectors made this judgement despite ruling that the practice

Table 1. Horizontal analysis of the schools.

School	Number of pupils	Location	Judgement "education"	Judgement "infrastructure"	Context
A	489	Inner city	Positive	Positive	School A was praised by the inspection report. The inspection found that the education area "Dutch" was sufficient, while the area "arts education" was insufficient. Nevertheless, the school received the judgement "positive" for education because the inspectors ruled "there is sufficient sense of responsibility, competence and expertise in the school to address the shortfall vigorously on a short notice". The school received a positive inspection report regarding education, in spite of some general critiques. The school needs to address the infrastructural problems in a period of three years time.
B	430	Outskirts of a provincial town	Positive	Positive	
C	255	Centre of a small town	Positive	"Restricted positive" because there are too few restrooms on the school compound	This small school has only 6 staff members, including the principal who also serves as pupil care coordinator. The principal was appointed only two months before the inspection. The inspection report was exceptionally commending on the education and on the school policy of school E.
D	51	Sparsely populated area	"Restricted positive" due to deficiencies in "environmental education"	"Restricted positive" because of the old and poor school building in need of many repairs	
E	473	Commune centre	Positive	Positive	

regarding “arts education” was insufficient. School C received a positive judgement for education and a restricted positive judgement for infrastructure. School D received a “restricted positive” judgement for both education and infrastructure. Three months after the inspection, the school board decided not to follow up on the instruction to carry out infrastructural improvements but instead to close the school at the end of the school year.

5.1. *Conceptual effects of school inspection*

In this section, we distinguish between “direct” conceptual effects that are the immediate result of inspectors actions, and “indirect” conceptual effects which result from the announcement of inspection or from actions taken by staff members in the school to prepare for or act on the inspection.

5.1.1. *Direct conceptual effects as a result of the inspection findings*

In general, none of the investigated schools reported that the inspection did result directly in significant new insights in the school’s own functioning. Principals and other school staff indicate they were already aware of the strengths and weaknesses identified by the inspectors. That almost no new insights are reported is explained by the reflective culture in the school or by the rather obvious (and in some cases wrong) inspection feedback. In schools A, B, C and E, the inspection results mainly confirmed the idea of the principal – and to a lesser extent of other school staff – and thus did not provide new ideas. Nevertheless, this confirmation was positively valued by the principals of school B, C and E. This was only to a lesser extent the case for the principal of school A, as he got frustrated that the inspection did not provide solutions for “challenges we already know for a long time” and as he questioned the reliability and validity of the inspection process.

They revealed our weaknesses, which we were already familiar with. But then I think: Yes, but how [can we do something about it]? (Principal school A)

In schools C, D and E, we found at least some proof of the school gaining insight into their own functioning, mostly related to strengths or weaknesses of certain teachers. The principal of school C acknowledged she was not aware of the practice of one young teacher who consciously did not conform her lessons to agreements made at school level. Both in school C and school E, the interviewed teachers said they had developed a better understanding of the strengths of the teachers in the school’s nursery department. The recently appointed principal of school D indicated the inspection showed him both (directly) the value of his teachers as well as (indirectly) their (emotional) weaknesses.

We have very competent professionals in our nursery school department. It is only through the inspection that I am aware of that. (Teacher school C)

Teachers in school B and in school D stated that they did not learn anything from the inspection as they disagreed with their critiques. Only in school E teachers gained new ideas for their lessons directly from the inspectors, who gave a number of practical tips to strengthen the classroom practice, a kind of feedback that inspectors are in fact not entitled to provide in the Flemish education system (see “Research context”).

Our data suggest that whether the inspection report leads teachers to reflect on the outcomes of the inspection, depends on the inspection judgement. Only in school D (given the less favourable judgement “restricted positive”) teachers actively reflected on the inspection report. In contrast, in schools A, B, C and E which received a positive judgement for education, the inspection critiques are discussed by the school management team, but hardly any reflection was reported at teacher level. The absence of direct conceptual effects amongst teachers in those schools is explained by the positive judgement which implies that the school is not obliged to change its practice or policy, but also by the staff’s disagreement with some of the inspection critiques.

Maybe somehow it did affect our reflection about teaching practices but I wouldn’t know how. Generally speaking, we still look at the school with different glasses than the inspectors did (...). Amongst colleagues, it was always concluded that “in fact we think that we are doing this very well [in spite of the inspectors critiques]”. (Teacher school B)

Especially the principal of school B – who expected the inspection report’s comprehensive reading during a staff meeting would incite reflection – expressed disappointment about school staff resignating (even laughing off) the inspector’s critiques.

5.1.2. *Indirect conceptual effects as a result of the inspection process*

Notwithstanding the lack of direct conceptual effects after the inspection, in each school indirect conceptual effects were reported as a result of the inspection announcement. Already before the inspection actually took place, there was an increase in the number of professional *discussions between teachers*, and in teachers’ eagerness to share experiences and practices with each other. Especially in schools A, B and E, the inspection announcement led to *increased teacher reflection on lesson practices* and on how to meet the standards set by the attainment targets.

If you wander around in the school these days [before the inspection], you will notice that there are many informal meetings going on. For instance the preparation of the project week goes one step beyond what they usually do, they make sure that it is all linked to the attainment targets. (Pupil care coordinator school A)

In school B. it was also reported that although they knew beforehand art education was not their strongest point, it is only through preparing for the inspection they realised that the attainment targets of that subject are not being reached.

I think the teachers are reflecting more on their practice; they are not just following text books anymore but they are realizing that there is more than just Dutch language, mathematics and “environmental education”, that there are cross-curricular attainment targets, that there are attainment targets for “arts education” ... I think that teachers are more aware of these attainment targets, that they are reflecting more on the goal of what they are doing. (Principal school B)

This increased reflection before the inspection resulted in new *ideas to improve the lessons* in schools A and B and (in school B) to the conclusion that they needed stronger commonly shared guidelines to strengthen the alignment of their education practices.

In the two schools where a smaller extent of increased teacher reflection during the notification period was reported, different school features are mentioned to explain this smaller increase: in school C, staff remained rather calm in the run-up

to inspection (due to earlier experiences with inspection), while in school D, staff already disposed of a strong reflective attitude.

Another indirect conceptual effect is that teachers gained *awareness about their school policy*. In school A and school E, it is reported that school policy documents were pulled out of the bottom drawer, and teachers read and analysed those documents.

The school's mission, that is one of the first things the inspectors will ask questions about. These are the kind of things where certain teachers never reflected about, but with the inspection coming they will now at least read those documents. And then maybe also think about what our strengths and weaknesses are. (Principal school E)

The principal of school D, who had only recently been appointed, learned that almost no policy documents were available in the school and that those existing had never been discussed with the school staff.

In school C, the increased reflection and cooperation resulted in a deeper *understanding of their colleagues and of their job content*. For instance, several teachers reported having a better idea about the job of the pupil care coordinator and about how they can make use of his expertise. In school C and D there was a conceptual effect regarding *teacher's professional attitude*. The inspection positively affected the awareness of the importance of their job (and the need to behave in a professional manner) for a number of rather inert teachers in school C. In school D, a number of very enthusiastic teachers started to think differently about the balance between work and other activities as they had learned from the unfavourable inspection that not all of their efforts were valued or regarded as effectively leading to better lessons.

Finally, principals in three schools gained expertise in the *legislative requirements regarding the school infrastructure* through their preparation (school B, D and E) or through inspector feedback (school D).

In sum, in the four schools with a positive inspection report only limited direct conceptual effects of the inspection are observed, while the stronger direct conceptual effect in school D is (partially) explained by the less favourable inspection judgement. In contrast, the announcement of inspection had already spurred teachers' reflection on lesson practices in most schools, although some school features (calm stance towards the approaching inspection, reflective attitude during non-inspection period) in two schools explained why this indirect conceptual effect was smaller in these cases.

To summarise this section, we found conceptual effects from the school inspection in each of the five case schools. However, this effect is only in some particular cases directly resulting from inspection findings. More often conceptual effects arise from a reaction of the schools on the announcement of inspection or due to a concurrence of circumstances ("indirect" effects).

5.2. Instrumental effects of school inspection

Immediately after inspection, there is a general agreement in each school that weaknesses identified by the inspection need to be addressed. Nevertheless, four months after inspection, relatively little actions are to be observed. Generally, teachers seem to wait for initiatives to be taken by the management team. Especially for teachers in school A, B and C, four months later the inspection is "something from the past" that does not occupy them very much. They report being returned to "business as usual" without being affected by the inspection.

The inspection is now completely over and it does not concern us anymore. No one is occupied with the curriculum issues at the moment. No, now there are different, more usual day-to-day worries again, concerning pupils and parents (...). Amongst the teachers, the inspection is a closed issue. (Teacher school B)

The principals of these three schools are considering ways to make more instrumental use out of the inspection, but seem to wait for a more steady period in the school before engaging in actions.

Hereunder, we discern between school A, C and E with hardly any instrumental effect, school D which shows the strongest instrumental effect, and the intermediate case school B.

5.2.1. Limited instrumental effects in schools A, C and E

School A, C and E all received a positive inspection report for educational matters. Neither of them shows substantial instrumental effects. This is often explained by the fact that not much new had been brought up by the inspectors (small direct conceptual effect).

We know that we have to improve these things and that we need to tackle this problem. But these are things that we already knew. But you can't do everything at the same time and these things are just still waiting to be handled until we have enough room for it. (Teacher school A)

Nevertheless, we still noted some examples of instrumental effects: four months after the inspection, the staff in school A is looking for a new pupil evaluation tool for speaking skills, and a plan is developed to meet certain critiques regarding pupil care and the activities for highly gifted pupils. There is, however, a generally shared belief that even without inspection each of those activities would have been priorities.

An immediate instrumental effect in school C concerned the infrastructure (that was given the judgement "restricted positive"). The principal deliberately invited the school board's person in charge of infrastructure for the announcement of the inspection result, as she felt the judgement "restricted positive" for infrastructure coerces the school board to engage into further financial investments. Indeed, four months after the inspection, plans are developed in consultation with the school board for new sanitary facilities on the school compound. Furthermore the principal of school C had some general ideas on how to act on educational matters in the inspection report but she first wanted to discuss the inspection results with the team members during individual staff appraisal discussions before engaging in activities. She regretted the inspection report's anonymity instead of calling the malfunctioning teachers by name, which limited her possibilities to use the inspection as support for her ideas on school improvement. Moreover she felt that the school policy should not be too much determined by the inspection results, as – due to the "differentiated approach" of the inspection (see "Research context") – only strengths and weaknesses in a small number of education areas had been identified.

Staff members in school C reported that the principal also made use of the announcement of inspection to stress that everyone needed to comply with regulations, and to impose new regulations. The approaching inspection was used as an opportunity to put pressure on teachers to increase the consequent use of materials throughout the different classrooms.

The inspection is particularly the principal's concern. (...) It may sound blunt, but during one of the staff meetings with a few colleagues we marked a tick every time she mentioned the word "inspection". And we ended up with a paper full of ticks! (Teacher school C)

In school E, the only improvements to daily practice were reported by teachers and were inspired by concrete (non-binding) advice for improvement.

During the interviews many practical ideas came up. The inspector never said "what you are doing is not good", instead she said "maybe you could try this to improve your lesson". She gave me some good practical advices. Now I try to apply the things she told me. (Teacher school E)

In contrast, when schools did not get constructive feedback or ideas for improvement, and only their existing ideas about strengths and qualities were confirmed (as discussed above), they were left frustrated and did not feel motivated to act on the critiques.

The inspection report did not provide us with concrete advices. It just sums up the facts. Maybe my expectations are wrong, but you would think that inspectors would give some advice about how to deal with certain issues, wouldn't you? (Teacher school C)

Also the indirect conceptual effects in these schools do not necessarily lead to concrete actions for improvement.

There are teachers who have sifted through the lesson plans and who investigated the match with their lessons, but what is the effect on their teaching practices? Nihil! They will probably have increased their knowledge, but the effect on their teaching is nihil. (Principal school A)

The passive reaction in school A, C and E can be explained by the lack of pressure to change and the feeling the inspection has endorsed the schools' policy and practices, and by the commonly shared idea that the school team deserved a period of repose after the inspection which is categorised as an "intensive and stressful" period for the school.

We didn't take much action yet with regard to the inspection report. I have to say, I deliberately let them work at ease. There are no issues that should be resolved by tomorrow, so I think I will ease the pressure in the future. (Principal school C)

Furthermore, the anonymity in the inspection report hindered these schools to take action upon the inspection critiques: statements such as "*some* teachers do not act according to school policy" make that the concerned teachers do not feel addressed. In school E, the principal regretted that his point of view on a certain weakness was confirmed during informal discussions with the inspectors, but was not included in the inspection report.

Finally, the absence of substantial instrumental effects in these schools is also explained by the *lack of understanding* of the critiques or by *disagreement* with the issues identified by the inspectors.

5.2.2. Instrumental effect due to the inspection judgement in school D

In spite of a passive reaction in the first weeks after the inspection, the strongest impetus to instrumental effects is given to school D in the three months between the inspection and the school board's decision to close the school. Even though the

inspection process is perceived as flawed and the inspection judgement is considered (by teachers) as harsh and unfair, several steps were undertaken to respond to the critiques mentioned in the inspection report. For example, the lesson plan for “environmental education” was changed, new teaching materials were acquired and the publisher of the teaching method was invited to the school to discuss options for the use of the method in the specific setting of a small school (with one teacher for two grades). Also, a separate room had been cleared to be used as “classroom for extra care activities”. Regarding infrastructure, small adaptations were carried out (e.g. logos for the emergency exit) and plans had been developed for the renovation of windows, electricity and gas installations. Even before the inspection, the school had anticipated on the inspection by replacing the old coat racks to safer models.

There was a strong feeling of disappointment after the inspection, but after the Christmas holidays we got a grip on ourselves. We read the report and had all kinds of ideas for next school year, the author of the teaching method had come by, (...) we were truly confident about it. (Principal/pupil care coordinator school D)

Staff members in school D doubted whether the school closure was really an effect of the inspection. It was felt that the decision to close the school had already been taken before the inspection took place, and that the school board only made use of the judgement “restricted positive” for infrastructure – which did not at all come unexpected – and the expected renovation costs to account for the school closure.

In my view the inspection report was an easy excuse. The school board must have known very well the infrastructure would be turned down(...). The inspection came at the right time for them. (Teacher school D)

5.2.3. *Instrumental effects at management level in school B*

Similar to school A, C and E, school B received a positive judgement for education. However, the inspectors of school B identified several key features to be improved and labelled the education area “arts education” as “insufficient”. The inspection report included several critical remarks that were in line with ideas of the management team and provided them with the opportunity to push the school in the direction they preferred. This explains why we found more examples of instrumental effects in school B than in the other schools that received a positive judgement. Exemplary is that a teacher who feels proficient in “arts education” will give a “model lesson” in each of the classes, while the classroom teacher observes or participates. This initiative was only possible because the principal explicitly used the inspection report’s remarks on this education area to stress the importance of this action he had already developed before the inspection. In the school’s nursery department – where “arts education” was judged as “sufficient” – a similar activity was postponed (and possibly cancelled later on) because of resistance in the team.

Well, it [the inspection report] provides us with a strong incentive. It is written here in black and white that it needs to happen. While otherwise, if you haven’t got it written in black and white then they [the teachers] still have an attitude of “well, yes, maybe someday ...”. (Pupil care coordinator school B)

In line with the limited conceptual use of the inspection findings by teachers in this school, the initiative for activities following the inspection is taken by the management team. Teachers’ passive stance is partly explained by some disagreement with

the statements of the inspectors which they felt were “theoretical” and did not address the school’s daily concerns.

We are particularly occupied with the pupils and their progress and their well-being, while they [the inspectors] look at this and that plan, and we should have much more meetings and discussions, but, all in all, if you look at it: (...) we have so many things to do, in the end all these extra [requested] efforts would be at the expense of the pupils. (Teacher school B)

Summarising this section, we may conclude that the inspection leads to different instrumental effects in the case schools. Instrumental effects are observed when the inspection judgement was “restricted positive” (experienced as negative) or when key areas that need improvement are clearly marked by the inspection report. Instrumental effects are mostly initiated by the principal or the management team. The instrumental effects are rather limited in schools with a positive inspection report, due to (amongst others) lack of pressure, limited direct conceptual effects and lack of constructive feedback.

6. Conclusion and discussion

The present study investigated the effects of inspection in five case schools in Flanders. Our data suggest that the inspection announcement has a strong impact on the schools and that the effect after the inspection is mainly influenced by the inspection judgement. Regarding the *conceptual effect* of inspection – and in line with our hypothesis – mainly indirect effects are noted. In each school, there is an increased reflection on the quality of their education, before inspection. We also observed a strengthened awareness of the own school policy. In contrast, the inspection report generally does not lead to increased reflection amongst teachers and only to a little extent to increased reflection amongst the management team. The inspection report does not provide substantial new insights in strengths or weaknesses of the school. Therefore, most of the conceptual effects were obtained *before* rather than after the inspection.

We found that inspection in Flanders does not lead to substantial *instrumental effects* in the four months after the inspection in schools that received a “positive” report. While studies in other countries found little instrumental effects at teacher level and generally observed actions taken at policy level, our data suggest that the Flemish inspection incites well-functioning schools at neither of those levels. Only in the single school in our sample that received a restricted positive judgement for educational matters, staff engaged in the planning and execution of several activities to respond to the inspector’s critiques, even though they did not agree with the inspection findings.

In sum, responding to our first research question, our data suggests that inspection in Flanders in general leads to substantial indirect conceptual effects, but only under specific circumstances to other effects.

Regarding the explanation-oriented second research question, results indicate that the *inspection judgement* is paramount for the effects of inspection on the schools. As mentioned above, the strongest instrumental reaction was observed in the school that received the judgement “restricted positive” for educational matters, as well as in the school with a similar judgement for “infrastructure”. The lack of *external pressure* was amongst the main reasons for the rather passive reaction in the other schools.

Next to the inspection judgement, also school features (e.g. the reflective attitude of school staff and the pressure exercised by the management team) and (perceived) inspection features (e.g. the perceived extent to which inspectors grasped the school's "reality") were found to account for differences in effects between schools.

As noted in the conceptual framework, the current evidence base does not provide a coherent picture regarding the importance of the *acceptance of the inspection results* for school improvement. Our results are in line with earlier findings that stressed its importance (Chapman 2001; McCrone et al. 2007), albeit only for well-functioning schools and in a negative way: the idea that the inspection process or findings are flawed is mentioned as an incentive not to act on the inspection findings. In contrast, the school that did not receive a positive judgement did engage in school improvement in spite of non-acceptance of the inspection results. It is recommended for further research on the importance of acceptance of inspection results for the effects of inspection, to distinguish between schools that received different judgements.

We find indications that some of the particularities of the Flemish inspections contribute to the absence of substantial conceptual and instrumental effects. Because of the strict distinction in the Flemish education system between inspection (for control) and school counselling (for advice), inspectors do not dispose of the legal right to provide *constructive feedback*. Schools are left with an analysis of their strengths and weaknesses but – in theory – no feedback is provided on how to move forward. Our results reveal that the inspectors' analysis of strengths and weaknesses mostly confirm what schools already know, while the absence of constructive feedback limits the extent to which schools can make use of the inspection in a conceptual or instrumental way. The lack of constructive feedback is reported as a demerit of the inspection for school development, which confirms the importance of this kind of feedback for school development indicated by earlier studies in other countries (Ehren and Visscher 2008; Willmott 1999). We observed the only instrumental use on teachers' own initiative in the case where the inspector left her strictly defined role of "assessor" and instead gave constructive advice for improvement. The importance of this kind of advice for positive effects at teacher level was also indicated by several earlier studies in other countries (Emmelot et al. 2004; McCrone et al. 2007; Wurster and Gärtner 2011). Our results indicate that teachers and schools demand in the first place what the Flemish inspection is not entitled to provide. Nevertheless, this study is not a one-sided plea to alter this situation, as a more guiding role for the inspectors has been subject of critique as well (e.g. the difficulties that arise from the seemingly incompatible roles of an advisor and an independent assessor (McNamara and O'Hara 2008; Woods and Jeffrey 1998)).

The differentiated approach adopted by the Flemish inspection – in particular the practice that *only a few education areas are evaluated* – intends to provide deeper insight in a smaller number of education areas. Nevertheless, the direct conceptual effect of inspection is limited. Even more, our results show that the current practice may be counterproductive for instrumental effects: schools could refrain from using the inspection report for setting their priorities for development as it is considered unwise to develop a priority plan based on a partial evaluation.

The results of this study also contribute to the discussion concerning *the impetus that inspection provides for well-functioning schools* for further development. As discussed above, the instrumental effects of the school inspection were limited for schools with a positive assessment. This study confirms a position taken by Penzer (2011), that usually neither little direct rewards nor impetus for hard-working

schools to get better is attached to the inspection process. Although in some cases the management team tried to make use of the inspection report to engage their staff in processes of school improvement, it was generally felt that this report does not provide a powerful tool for this purpose. Our research findings suggest that an external lever is also required for schools to engage in direct conceptual use of the inspection report, and even more so to engage in actions for school improvement. In that respect, the absence in the Flemish inspection context of the obligation for schools to respond to the inspection report may be seen as a missed chance. A profound study into the driving effect of this obligation in other educational contexts is warranted. Furthermore, future research could focus on possibilities and opportunities to strengthen the motivation and capacities of well-functioning schools through systems of school inspection. The effects of a stronger differentiation in categories of inspection judgements could be part of such research as there are large differences between countries and within countries over time in this regard (Döbrich, Schnell, and Sroka 2008). Of course, also the side effects of such a differentiation should be taken into account. An adapted inspection approach based on a risk assessment in order to maximise school improvement after inspection has been proposed by academics, but the effects of such an interactive approach has not yet been profoundly researched (Ehren and Visscher 2006).

This study provides insight in the effects of being inspected within Flemish primary schools. The research design – including several consecutive interviews at different periods – allowed to gain deeper insight on the effects on schools before, during and after inspection. The aim was not to come to generalisations in this regard but rather to explore the effects in a specific context, thereby responding to the need expressed by several academics to contribute to the knowledge base by studying the effects of inspection in diverse contexts. As a consequence, one can aptly argue that the validity of our findings might be restricted to the Flemish context. More international comparative studies using a common framework for data gathering and analyses are needed to address this issue. Another limitation concerns the explaining features of the effects. It has been argued that establishing causal relationships between inspection and school improvement is methodologically challenging due to the difficulty to attribute relative weight to the many internal and external factors that contribute to the process of change (Matthews and Sammons 2004; Wilcox and Gray 1996). In this qualitative study, we aimed to profoundly grasp the reality of the impact of inspection, while being aware of the complex realities that are involved in the study domain.

Despite these limitations related to generalisability and causality, our intensive case studies clearly illustrate that inspection can lead to a number of conceptual and instrumental effects, given that a number of prerequisites and conditions apply. In this sense, it clearly informs both academics and policy-makers in their attempt to understand and shape the current and future effects of school inspections.

Notes on contributors

Maarten Penninckx is a PhD student at University of Antwerp and researcher at the Edubron Research Unit (www.edubron.be). His current work focuses on the effects and side effects of inspections.

Jan Vanhoof is an associate professor of the Institute of Education and Information Science at the University of Antwerp. He is a member of the Edubron Research Unit. His current

research activities focus on school policy and quality care in general and on school self-evaluation and data-driven school policy in particular.

Sven De Maeyer is an assistant professor at the Institute for Education and Information Science. He is a member of the Edubron Research Unit. His research focuses on educational measurement and methodological issues in educational sciences.

Peter Van Petegem is full-time professor at the Institute of Education and Information Science of the University of Antwerp. He leads the Edubron Research Unit and the Centre of Expertise in Higher Education.

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