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EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN TRANSITION

Learning, coping, adjusting: making school inspections work in Swedish schools

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School inspections involve multiple forms of governing. Inspection activities are regulative, inquisitive and meditative and correspondingly initiate different forms of ‘inspection work’ in schools and governing bodies. The aim of this paper is to explore the inspection work in Sweden carried out before, during and after inspection events. This paper is based on interviews with professionals who perform inspection work, such as head teachers and responsible key actors within municipalities and independent school chains; documentation analysis of forms and accounts sent to the Swedish schools’ inspectorate; and observations of inspection events. The results show that inspection work is rendered possible by transparent inspection schemes that govern in advance. Inspection work is geared towards internalising routine evaluative thinking and documentation. Quality assurance, or ‘systematic quality work’, has become the new panacea in the ‘evaluation society’. The inspectees turn their organisations inside out and learn to cope with inspections through adaptation or even strategic behaviour. Coping with inspections also involves the translation of bureaucratic demands and negative feedback into organisational learning.

Keywords: school inspection; governing; inspection work; constitutive effects; inspectees

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School inspections belong to an increasing trend of evaluation and state control described in terms of an ‘audit society’ (Power, 1996a, 1997) or an ‘evaluation society’ (Dahler-Larsen, 2012). School inspectors are often regarded as key actors in inspection events. Researchers have thus focused on their work, methods, knowledge, judgement making, strategies, tools and criteria (see e.g. Baxter, 2013; Lindgren, 2014; Sowada & Dedering, 2014). However, as Ek (2012) pointed out, in the Swedish context school inspections are a collective endeavour that presupposes active inspectees who take part in the process. Schools and governing bodies (huvudmän, i.e. municipalities and operators of independent schools) must be made inspectable. Inspectees thus prepare their organisations; they groom and compile documents, distribute questionnaires, answer questions, organise inspection events, respond to inspection results and manage emotional reactions. In other words, school organisations carry out ‘inspection work’.

Rather than focus on inspectors, the aim of this paper is to explore the inspection work carried out by inspectees before, during and after inspection events. The starting point is that inspection involves multiple forms of governing that initiate different forms of work. Bengt Jacobsson (2010a, 2010b) identified three different types of activities that govern states or organisations: regulative, inquisitive and meditative activities. Regulative activities include organisations following formal laws and directives, as well as more informal rules. Inquisitive activities invite or urge organisations to open up so that others can examine their work. Meditative activities, finally, refers to arenas in which experiences, ideas and methods are generated, discussed and transferred. Jacobsson’s concepts all acknowledge the active participation of organisations in governing and offer a broad script for exploring the inspection work carried out by inspectees. The regulative–inquisitive–meditative triptych also makes it possible to identify the constitutive effects of inspection (Dahler-Larsen, 2012) – that is, how inspection, rather than simply exercising control over education, might produce or reconfigure education. The analysis of inspection work serves to determine how school organisations take active part in governing education by inspection. The research question is as follows: What kind of inspection work is mobilised in governing bodies and schools, in terms of regulative, inquisitive and meditative inspection activities?
The paper starts with some notes on design. The theoretical section discusses inspection work as ‘doing governing’, which is followed by a presentation of Jacobsson’s conceptual framework. The results are structured in three parts: before, during and after the site visit. Finally, the concluding section includes the discussed findings.

Notes on design

In Sweden, school inspections were reintroduced in 2003 after a period of soft evaluations, in the form of ‘development dialogues’ and self-evaluation. At that time, inspections were carried out by the National Agency for Education (NAE). Since 2008, inspections have been carried out by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (SSI). Inspection activities consist of four types of evaluation processes: regular supervision, thematic quality audits (kvalitetsgranskning), licences and applications (certification of independent schools) and certification of complaints. Regular supervision of compulsory education is directed at rule compliance, results and formal juridical aspects of education (Lindgren, Hult, Segerholm, & Ronnberg, 2012). It focuses on deviations and clearly states the areas in which a school is failing to meet national requirements; it does not account for the structural conditions of the governing body or the economic, social and cultural backgrounds of parents, which might frame the work and results of schools.

The paper is based on two research projects that focused on inspection: ‘Governing by Inspection: School Inspection and Education Governance in Sweden, England and Scotland’ and ‘Inspecting the “Market”: Education Inspection and Education Governance in Sweden, England and Scotland’ and ‘Inspecting the “Market”: Education Inspection and Education Governance in Sweden, England and Scotland’. These projects produced cross-case studies on regular supervisions carried out in 2011. The case studies generated data on different aspects of the inspection process, including analyses of official SSI documents (material accessible on the agency’s website, such as the final inspection decisions, instructions for the schools and the judgement points), internal SSI material (interview manuals, judgement guidelines, memos, production schemes and other working documents) and a range of documents produced by schools. The case studies also included observations of inspection events (school visits including classroom observations and interviews) and internal quality assurance meetings at the SSI, during which inspectors, team inspectors and team lawyers deliberated on and finalised the official judgements and informal discussions among the inspectors during meetings as well as before, during and after the school visits. The data consist of more than 70 transcribed interviews with SSI staff (national and local officials and inspectors), training officers and local politicians at the municipal level; chief executives and other key actors from the school companies who represent their organisations; and head teachers and teachers from the schools. This paper mostly draws on interviews with representatives from governing bodies or so-called principal organisers and head teachers, as well as on document analyses of the forms and accounts sent by these agents to the SSI. However, all of the data from the projects, along with the ongoing discussions with SSI representatives and inspectees, have been used as a validating backdrop throughout the work. Finally, this particular paper also draws on data produced by a sub-study of one quality audit in two schools: a thematic audit of a selection of Swedish schools.

According to the project design, the schools were chosen by diverse case selection (Gerring, 2007), focusing on demographic and economic structure (urban and rural areas) and previous inspection experience. The selection involved several steps. The municipalities (N = 4) and schools (N = 12) had to be inspected in 2011 by two of the four geographical divisions within the inspectorate. Matching pairs of municipalities were identified (two larger cities and two rural areas as municipality groupings A and B, respectively, in Table I). A sample of eight compulsory schools (S1 to S8) and four independent (but still tax-funded) schools (ID1–ID4) is included. The final selection of schools was guided by previous inspection histories (few or many remarks), as evident in the inspection decisions from the last round of inspection.

| Table I. Case selection: municipalities and schools |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|
|                                  | Few remarks     | Many remarks     |
| City                             | Few remarks (municipal) | S1 | S2 |
| South* grouping type A)          | ID1*            | S3*           |
| City                             | Many remarks (municipal) | ID2*         | S4 |
| East grouping type A)            | S5              | S6*           |
| Rural                            | Many remarks (municipal) | ID3*         | S7* |
| West* grouping type B)           | ID4*            | S8*           |
| Rural                            | Few remarks (municipal) | S1*          | S2* |
| East* grouping type B)           |                  |               |

The sites marked with * in the table are included in the Results section of this paper.

The data material was analysed using Jacobsson’s concepts as a framework. The key themes emerged by translating Jacobsson’s classification into the work carried out throughout the different phases of the inspection process.

Inspectees – doing inspection work, doing governing

This paper reflects a need to critically examine the recurrent processes that govern the intersections between centrally promoted plans and small-scale social life. As pointed out by Scott (1998), state attempts towards formalisation,
standardisation and control are often averted by practical and local improvisations and might also result in the development of new individual skills. It is thus important to acknowledge local and concrete modifications as well as the bending, improvisation or even resistance that tend to accompany a general rule of action. In doing so, the paper is inspired by the work of Clarke (2010, 2015) and his ideas on governing (see Clarke, 2015, pp. 12–13, for a discussion on governing vs. governance and governmentality as conceptual modes of treating inspection).

The perspective of Clarke (2010, p. 3) seeks to reflect ‘the potential richness of dealing with governing as an assemblage of apparatuses, processes and practices, rather than merely institutions, discourses or strategies’. Clarke (2010) encouraged scholars not to abolish the state as an analytical focus but to study and analyse changing state formations ‘across the “boundaries”’ and to engage in different contested conceptions of ‘heterogeneous forces, directions and conceptions of the right to govern’, or what Clarke labelled the ‘multi-ness of governance’ (p. 3). For example, the governance of education by inspection engages a range of agents who are responsible, made responsible, discovered, developed, groomed or even created. It involves key actors such as SSI officials, team inspectors, inspectors, lawyers and public relations officers. However there are also ‘objects’ of inspection, such as local politicians and officials, school company board members and officers, and head teachers and teachers. As argued by Clarke (2010, p. 7), these agents have the capacity to enact governance – to make the principles, models and schemas of governance materialise in practice. Thus, there are no direct transitions from the principles and plans to the practices of governance – and this, argues Clarke (2015), is one of the problems with governance theory in political science. What are conventionally described as ‘implementation processes’ are better understood as processes of translation in which meanings are subject to inflection and interpretation by active agents in specific locations. Inspection work is by necessity a polyvalent performance involving bargaining and improvisation, both inwards (in relation to internal demands) and outwards (in relation to external demands). Theoretically, this paper also draws on other conceptual ways of thinking. Governmentality (Dean, 1999; Li, 2007) offers a productive analytic framing for studies of states; decentralised power; and the practises, strategies and failures of governmental projects. Another source of inspiration is the work of Goffman (1959), particularly his ideas on impression management, which help us to better see the complexity and ‘messiness’ of inspection work, such as that it tends to take place on both the front stage and back stage (see also Lindgren, 2014).

Nevertheless, research on inspectees is rather scarce, particularly regarding the work carried out by the representatives of governing bodies and head teachers. Given the Swedish model of regular supervision, with a focus on formal rule appliance, these agents – rather than teachers – are central actors in the inspection process. One important aspect of regular supervision is the establishment of internal organisational inquisition. The check concerning the implementation of systematic quality work is in line with Power’s (1996a) notion of ‘control of control’ (p. 15): Regular supervision does not primarily focus on first-order activities (teaching in classrooms) but is based on internal systems of control. One of our informants, a head teacher, explained this as follows:

They [the SSI] are mostly oriented towards ensuring that we are in charge of things. That is the systematic quality work, that we make sure that we know … that we control what we are doing. It is a kind of follow up of the internal control … more a documentation about following routines … to have a structure and follow up and control one’s own work in some way. They are looking at this a lot … their [the inspectors’] judgement is based on specific criteria which must be matched … You’re supposed to control what you’re supposed to control and so on. (Head teacher, Rowan School)

Following Power (1996b, p. 289), the active process of making things (such as school organisations) auditable (or inspectable) involves two components: ‘the negotiation of a legitimate and institutionally acceptable knowledge base; [and] the creation of environments which are receptive to this knowledge base’. Ek (2012) studied how public organisations are made auditable; this study is one of few examples that draw attention to the fact that school organisations are active participants in regular supervision. For example, head teachers (and school administrators) collect a long list of documents requested by the SSI: They distribute information about the supervision within the organisation and to legal guardians and pupils; distribute SSI surveys directed to legal guardians, pupils and teachers; plan and organise the school visits; and have regular contact with the responsible inspectors. Because participation presupposes predictability, the SSI has made the process transparent, so that the inspectees know beforehand how they are being inspected. The inspectees are thus invited to describe their organisation and work in order to make them auditable. Ek (2012) also acknowledged that auditability involves the internalisation of an attitude towards supervision that makes it meaningful and useful. School actors ‘make efforts to perceive it as an opportunity to develop and learn, not as control’ (Ek, 2012, p. 184, translated from Swedish). To conclude, inspection work suggests that inspectees are active in the construction of the inspection process. The following section seeks to direct Jacobsson’s notion of regulative, inquisitive and meditative activities to the analysis of inspection work.
Regulative, inquisitive and meditative activities

Jacobsson’s conceptualisation of governance activities was developed to understand the Europeanisation of Baltic states – particularly the changes and adjustments in central state administrations related to their transition towards becoming modern and legitimate European states. How then are these concepts applicable to school inspections as a mode of governing?

First of all, and as argued above, the SSI’s regular supervision\(^2\) is explicitly oriented towards formal rule compliance. Borrowing from Jacobsson (2010b), it is reasonable to talk of ‘scripted’ schools in the sense that school organisations, perhaps more than ever during the last two or three decades, are obliged to follow rules. School inspections play an important role here. Regular supervision is based on the School Act and school ordinances, and the emphasis on the regulative aspects of education has prompted scholars to describe inspections in terms of ‘juridification’ (Lindgren et al., 2012). The notion of regulative activities, which include organisations’ work to follow formal laws and directives, is thus an important aspect of school inspections, and penalties for rule violations are also part of the model of regular supervision. According to a newspaper interview with Ann-Marie Begler, general director of the SSI (Dagens Samhälle, 2013; see also Hult & Segerholm, 2012), school inspections are also strongly ‘regulative’ in the sense that the SSI makes certain interpretations of formal rules, and its judgements become rules that schools must follow. Hence, concerns with informal and voluntary, or ‘soft’, rule following also apply to school inspection. Soft rules such as the Swedish NAE general guidelines and recommendations retrieved from research are also important in the SSI’s work.

Indispensable elements in current school inspections are also elements of self-evaluations or activities in which school organisations make themselves transparent and ‘turn themselves inside out’ (Power, 2004) in order to be inspected. These inquisitive activities invite or urge organisations to open up so that inspectors can examine their work. Inspectees are encouraged to describe what they are doing and how they are doing it. Related to this are also phenomena in which the inspectees change their behaviour, modify their documents or bend the truth during interviews to look good in the eyes of the inquisitor (Power, 1997). Window dressing and gaming are generic terms that describe such manipulative strategies. Jacobsson is not exploring the historical dimensions of the inquisitorial system, but in the context of Swedish school inspections this link is in fact relevant. One of the interviewed inspectors even compared inspections with the Inquisition: ‘If you are looking at juridical systems, there is one that resembled this one and that is the Inquisition. We are both prosecutor and judge’ (Inspector P, Pine School).

Finally, there are the so-called meditative activities. School inspections directly or indirectly give rise to different forms of activities in which inspectees discuss, probe or penetrate issues related to inspection. Direct encounters with inspectors might include meditative dimensions, but inspectees might also perform such activities themselves at different stages of the inspection process. Inspection work can thus be understood in terms of ‘policy learning’ that serves to spread, imitate and implement new and legitimate ways to organise education, management, leadership and instruction. Policy learning might be evoked directly by specific, regular supervision but might also be more loosely linked to inspection. Meditative activities in education thus involve the messy, ‘dirty’ and creative processes through which regulation and policy meet the reality of concrete schools. This dynamic way of understanding how policy is done differs from what is often understood according to a simple, rational and linear idea of policy implementation, and it links well with educational research on soft governance (Lawn, 2006) and policy enactment (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012).

In summary, these concepts do not individually point out radically new phenomena in education governance or in school inspection. Rather, they collectively offer a script for a coherent exploration of inspection as a mode of governing education that incorporates the active participation of inspectees. Of particular interest are the seemingly peripheral and previously lesser known aspects of inspection such as ‘doing governing’. In this context, Dahler-Larsen’s (2012) notion of constitutive effects becomes relevant. The idea here is to draw attention to what are somewhat inadequately thought of as negative or unintended effects of evaluative practices. The normative and taken-for-granted judgement concerning good or bad side effects is suspended here. Constitutive effects are analytical and non-normative concepts that refer to processes where an evaluative practice – such as inspection – constitutes, produces or reconfigures the very phenomena (e.g. education, ideas, identities, social relations, time or organisation) it is supposed to measure or control.

Results

This section explores inspection work in terms of regulative, inquisitive and meditative activities. The structure of the following presentation corresponds to the chronology of the inspection process, with the site visit as the centre of the process.

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\(^{2}\)Regular supervision involves a 5-year cycle of inspections for all Swedish schools.
Before the site visit

Inspection work starts with a letter from the SSI to the governing body containing information about the upcoming regular supervision. As pointed out by Dahler-Larsen (2009), evaluative practices impose a particular temporality on organisations. The issue of timing (Ek, 2012) is an interesting dimension here. An inspection might take place at a point in time when an organisation is not ready for inspection, and this state can potentially affect inspection work and the outcome of the process. Regular supervision has its own logic, a chronology and temporality revolving around a snapshot of the organisation – before, during and after the inspection event. School organisations also have a particular rhythm. An important aspect of inspection work is to merge and incorporate the everyday life – the ordinary flow of events and routines – as well as the past and the future of the particular organisation, with regular supervision.

The Little West municipality was supervised immediately after the introduction of the new school act and the new curriculum in the summer of 2011. It had recruited a new training officer and new head teachers; in addition, ongoing political debate concerned the municipal organisation of schooling in the sparsely populated areas. All these factors produced uncertainty and even frustration in the inspection work.

Even though the timing is important, there is nothing surprising about regular supervision. The SSI seeks to provide extensive information, and in a sense the agency has developed transparency as a governing tool or as a way of ‘anticipating steering’. The SSI wants school organisations to prepare and start to adjust their practices according to the rules and norms. On the website, the SSI describes the inspection process and the criteria; all decisions from previous supervisions are also on the website. In addition, the interactive web-based tool Check Your School (www.kolladinskola.se) makes it possible for schools to conduct their own inspections beforehand. This initiative clearly evokes the notion of governmentality through which subjects actively mobilise themselves – and, presumably, their knowledge, beliefs and values – in practices of state power (Dean, 1999). There are also different conferences arranged by the SSI. Some of these activities have the SSI as the active mediator of ‘inspection knowledge’, but the transparency also triggers other meditative activities: Inspectees read and discuss old decisions; they seek contact with others or use existing networks to prepare and learn from each other before being inspected. They also use these short and informal contacts to produce internal organisational comfort. Head teachers always provide information about approaching supervision within the organisation, and sometimes they feel the need to calm their staff. Hence, there might be tension and insecurity among teachers in relation to the site visit and the possibility of a heavy workload after the inspection. Thus, as pointed out by Dahl (2010), an inquisitive focus on deficiencies tends to produce organisational discomfort.

Governing bodies organise preparatory activities in different ways. In this study’s sample, the operators of independent schools appeared to work more with the implementation of common routines, work procedures and documentation related to inspection. Their organisations also seemed to allow closer contact between management and individual schools and their staff when it came to organising inspection work.

Well, really the best I can prepare the schools is to inform them about the recent inspections in the company. What was observed as being positive or negative. To tip them off, things inspectors would be looking at in particular. (Representative, operator of the independent Oak School)

At the time of the interview, this informant had been involved in inspection processes for about 7 months. Besides dialogues with the SSI, his work with preparations also included discussions with head teachers and teachers at local schools.

Interviewer: Is there a strategy to handle the SSI?
R: Well, there’s no strategy on paper, but we want to follow the law. We don’t want to break any of the school laws; we want to be a part of the school community here. Our head teachers are prepared; they get training in school law. All of them have to have rektorsutbildningen [mandatory education for head teachers]. Our head teachers have regular conferences where they discuss recent inspections. In fact, tomorrow there’s a head teachers’ conference and I will be there. I will be presenting some of the weird occurring points that have come up in our inspections and some strategies on how we can improve on those for the next time an inspector comes to another one of our schools.

The representative for another school chain, Cornet School, has serious plans to develop formal strategies in order to prepare for inspections and minimise efforts. It is clear from the following quote that inspection work does not include inspectors as resources or as partners.

We get so many questions from the SSI, and so many new questions. We have our hands full just to answer these questions. We spoke about this the

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1The school inspectorate’s day (Skolinspektionens dag) is one such recurrent conference that contains lectures by SSI staff and researchers and organised discussions on topics related to school inspection and school development. Inspectees often attend these conferences in the preparatory phase in order to orient themselves and become up to date.

2This interview was conducted before SSI’s implementation of ‘company supervisions’, which involve the simultaneous supervision of all schools within an independent school chain.
other week; we need to build a database where we can look for examples when it comes to issues like systematic quality work. Today we get the same questions directed to eight units [schools] about how we’re going to solve the systematic quality work. And the thing is, first of all I want us to give the same answer as we previously did. I don’t want the SSI to catch us with our pants down – ‘you did not answer the same way as you did six months earlier’. Secondly, I want to save time. I don’t want to write down the same tirade if it’s already put on paper. If we would pull this through and organise ourselves in order to be more effective in relation to the SSI, we would of course involve the head teachers in this work. It is about organising some kind of document bank. (Representative, principal organiser, Cornet School)

The concrete preparatory phase of inspection work is between 3 and 5 days, depending on the size of the school. Many of the administrative tasks might be delegated within the organisation. Gathering documents is a crucial element in this phase. The training officer in the Little East municipality describes the delivery of documents to the SSI: ‘It was a full A4 cardboard box. Impossible to close, we had to use Scotch tape’.

At the time of this study, schools submitted a wide range of documents: a quality report, a work plan, a plan against offensive behaviour, the school’s code of conduct, a detailed record of staff, examples of students’ individual development plans and action programs, the school’s plan to live up to the national time schedule, records of students’ results on national tests for recent years, records of students’ goal attainments for the last 5 years, examples of plans concerning work with students in need of special support, examples of protocols from student healthcare conferences, examples of decisions concerning placement of students in remedial classes, examples of decisions concerning reduced courses of study and examples of evaluations. The head teacher also fills out a self-evaluation form (verksamhetsredogörelse, see below), which is directly linked to the SSI’s judgement points. Finally, in this step, the school submits the results of an SSI survey directed to a sample of students. Head teachers also inform legal guardians about the upcoming inspection, pick out teachers for interviews and organise site visits.

Consequently, documents play a crucial role in the inspection process, and the transformation of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge by inscription (Freeman & Sturdy, 2014) is a central aspect of inspection work. As pointed out by Power (1997), the practices of the audit society are about the production of legitimacy and risk management. School inspectors might have problems collecting evidence that schools are achieving goals or following rules. School organisations might also have difficulties reassuring inspectors that this is the case. School inspection is thus largely oriented towards the demonstration of appropriate structures and procedures, proving that strategies, plans and documents are in order (Jacobsson, 2010a). As noted by Jacobsson (2010a) these tools or devices produce legitimacy; they ‘can be seen as rituals and ceremonies celebrating rational decision-making’ (p. 16). The inspectable school learns to adapt to bureaucratic demands and makes sure that it has all documents in place. This is a way to make the process less time consuming and to affect the inspection results in a positive direction. The Big South municipality is a big and well-organised municipality, but the training officer there still admits that preparation was a challenging aspect of regular supervision.

Interviewer: How much preparation work did you do before the site visits?

S: I can’t size it up, but all the logistics, I mean all the material, has taken a lot of time. We have been able to find the material, but we have also noticed that we have not been in control of the paperwork.

I: Next time you will and then it will not take that much time?

S: Yes, and we have spurred head teachers to take command over the papers. (…) It’s a kind of self-clean-up.

Schools that are confident in their paperwork do not groom documents; they show their papers as they are. Others might use inspection work to clean and fix documents. In a sense, this is an example of window dressing (i.e. a form of impression management; Goffman, 1959) by which schools offer inspectors a polished version of their reality. On the other hand, this strategy meets the purpose of inspection: Schools adjust their practices in accordance with regulations. The transparency of the inspection process fosters preparatory strategies, and in a sense these strategies also make the inspection more effective.

Inspectees are often uncertain about how to interpret regulations and come up with solutions that are formally ‘right’. Priming often implicates meditative activities in which head teachers talk to each other and seek advice from the SSI, the NAE, consultants or the research community. Principal organisers also try to calibrate or streamline different documents internally. This is a strategy used to align documentation to regulations and guidelines, but it can also been seen as a form of risk management that seeks to minimise SSI critique. Of course, the standardisation of individual development plans or action plans also serves the purpose of making teachers’ work easier and more effective.

One central document that the SSI requires is the previously mentioned self-evaluation form (verksamhetsredogörelse), which contains about 30 questions. This form is closely linked to the judgement points on which inspectors base their overall judgements. It is a regulative activity in the sense that it takes the national aims and requirements
articulated in the national curriculum, syllabus and other regulations as an explicit starting point. It is also an inquisitive activity that encourages head teachers to not only describe the inner work of the school but also to internalise an inquisitive approach to leadership as such. Inspectees are called upon to make their own inquiries concerning rule application as questions blend regulative and inquisitive elements.

Some head teachers write a lot in these forms, while others are brief. Based on the present data, it appears as if experienced head teachers at municipal schools with a decentralised leadership (based on trust in the professionalism of teachers) spend less time in inquisitive activities and, consequently, produce less extensive accounts. One such example is the head teacher at Poppy School, who answered many of the questions with a laconic reference to another document, the school’s quality account (kvalitetsredovisning) – that is, a document that describes the school’s organisation and work, which was sent to the SSI along with the other documents.

Most of the documents that inspectees send to the SSI are not produced for inspection purposes. Nevertheless, these documents often have a tight alignment between different regulations and soft rules based on guidelines and normative research. Some of them accommodate reflections and direct references to legitimate strategies and sources of inspiration. The Little West municipality wrote an action plan about the most prominent aspect of the current education discourse: declining results.

What are the reasons behind our declining results? In the National Agency’s overview of current knowledge, ‘What Affects the Results in Swedish Compulsory School?’, it is noticed that the reasons behind changes in the results of compulsory school are complex and rooted in factors on different levels – from the system level (policy documents, governing bodies) to the classroom level. In our concrete work for change we acknowledge findings from present educational research. We look at and reconsider our work based on knowledge about factors leading to successful learning. In November 2010 we invited representatives from X municipality and let ourselves be inspired by their journey from the bottom to the top when it comes to school results. We now carry on our own process and our own practical work for change. (Action plan, Little West municipality)

In a sense, this document could have been written directly to the SSI, but it was not. However, it displays indispensable features of an educational organisation that seeks to develop and become successful. As pointed out by Jacobsson (2010b) this is partly a question of legitimacy: ‘To be recognized in its own field as trustworthy and serious, an institution must be properly organized (…) and be equipped with all the accoutrements of a formal organisation’ (p. 2). The accumulation and usage of data concerning results and the willingness to learn from others, or to follow rules, are such examples. This kind of document reveals numerous examples of inspectees writing extensively about their systematic quality of work; how they rely on scientific ground and proven practice; and how they improve routines, implement policies and carry out development work.

To conclude, the preparatory phase is regulative, inquisitive and meditative, and these activities often blend together as inspectees carry out inspection work. Notably, some inspectees manage to turn regular supervision – an activity that is commonly regarded as strictly regulative – into a meaningful process of learning. The academic manager at Eternell School, a private school chain, provided a telling account of school actor’s self-governed approach to preparation:

Interviewer: The last time [we spoke], I remember that you said that you had read a few SSI decisions and that this had taken up some of your time. Did this affect your work in any way?

R: No, I would not say so, or just in a positive way. By reading these SSI decisions I learned more about how to develop our school… I don’t see this as something negative at all. It’s just something I do in order to improve and develop myself. This preparatory work. It’s not as though somebody told me that I ought to read these decisions or anything else; it was voluntary.

During site visits

During the site visits, which tend to last for between 1 and 3 days, inspectees might take part in interviews or be the objects of inspectors’ observations. Responsible officials within governing bodies and head teachers at local schools host these visits and must make sure that practical matters are worked out and that inspectors are provided with localities and, if requested, given additional documentation. This phase of inspection work involves meetings and thus requires particular competencies. The interviews call for the ability to narrate and provide in-depth descriptions about the inner work of a school – to transform embodied and inscribed knowledge (Freeman & Sturdy, 2014) into speech. Not all inspectees are comfortable with this, and on some occasions SSI criticism appears to find its root in the lack of an ability to answer questions or present coherent narratives. The issue of timing is also important here. Schools regularly change head teachers, and new ones might have problems answering detailed questions.

Organisations also use time to their advantage. If the SSI confronts inspectees with troubling statistics, the latter sometimes bring forward the latest (and better) figures as a defence: ‘I just got the latest numbers …’. Thus, statistics are powerful evidence in the hands of inspectors, but they are always perishable and potentially
problematic in terms of direct accountability. Inspection work might thus serve the purpose of undermining inspectors' judgement or finding counter evidence. When schools use their own statistics or compare SSI decisions to disqualify inspectors' judgement, they engage in a particular form of regulative activity: They use the rules, tools and logic of inspection as a form of self-defence.

Inspectees describe interviews with inspectors differently, as both ‘formal hearings’ and ‘nice chats’. Inspectors’ appearance takes on many forms, despite the fact that the interviews are highly standardised and linked to distinct criteria. The interviews also bring about the question of honesty: To what extent shall inspectees reveal problems and weaknesses and thereby expose the organisation to potential criticism? The inquisitive dimensions of inspection give rise to these kinds of considerations.

Inspection work is also framed by motifs, which can have an effect on how questions are answered. SSI critiques are used by inspectees to put pressure downward or upward in the organisation (Rönnberg, 2012). For example, head teachers use inspection decisions to push internal improvement, while teachers might criticise their governing bodies or head teachers during SSI interviews as a way to accomplish change or give voice to discontent.

In this sense, the meetings between inspectors and inspectees contain regulative, inquisitive and meditative elements. They are arenas in which regulation and inspection are discussed, but they also offer opportunities for more general questions related to schooling and school improvement. In sum, the visits are intense but rather short; as such, they do not involve much work. Nevertheless, these intense encounters are prepared and happen through the active participation of inspectees.

**After the site visit**

The time after a site visit includes different moments. First there is the instantaneous organisational process of debriefing and speculation: ‘How did we come out?’ This is not necessarily a joint organisational endeavour because an inspection might in fact occur rather unnoticed by many teachers at a school. After a while, the head teacher receives a preliminary decision for fact checking, and later there is a public announcement: the actual publication of the decision and a press release on the SSI’s website, which is often noticed by the local newspaper. Negative media exposure – which is used strategically by the SSI to put pressure on inspectees (see Rönberg, Lindgren, & Segerholm, 2012) – often produces discomfort in organisations and individuals (see Grek, Lindgren, & Clarke, 2015, for a discussion on emotional effects). The development manager at Willow School, a private school chain, had numerous meetings with head teachers after inspections to work with such consequences of inspection: In the first stage there is a strong first reaction. That is, they take it rather personally and that is something they need to work on themselves, both as individuals and as professionals. Many of them feel like they're getting hit in the face, but as we work through it, it usually gets better.

During this phase of supervision, the ordinary work in school organisations continues. Inspection work might be more or less incorporated into the ordinary activities because most of the deficiencies are normally well known by inspectees beforehand. Some of this work is initiated immediately after the visit based on preliminary feedback from inspectors during the site visit. However, local schools are sometimes delayed or left anxious in this phase of inspection work while awaiting central directives. Hence, there are often systematic deficiencies in schools within a municipality or school chain.

There are things that are being dealt with centrally by the municipality. And then it’s like, how much shall we work on this here at the local school and how long are we going to wait and see? Because we know things are coming from the municipality. There is a need to find a balance here (…) and wait and see when we get the final directive. (Head teacher, Moss School)

Some deficiencies are dealt with easily while others are more difficult to identify and act upon. The alignment of documents is rather easy and concrete according to inspectees. Deficiencies that refer to educational processes are more intricate because they involve many professionals who are expected to change their way of working in the same particular direction. The chairman of the school board at Little West described the municipal working procedure as ‘strategic’. As he explained:

You need a structure for how to precede and work with this [the SSI criticism]. You need to follow through and make sure you take care of all the parts. I: Can you say something more about this strategy? R: Well, it is mostly the management group – head teachers and the training officer – that is working constructively with these issues. And then we get reports about how things develop and we have the chance to ask questions. They have scheduled a couple of days just to go through the last inspection.

The phase after the site visit involves meetings and collaboration. The dialogue is internal but also directed to the SSI. Sometimes inspectees want to discuss particular issues, or the SSI might seek contact to check how things are going or to require additional documentation. Around 2011, the SSI started to organise feedback seminars with governing bodies where the group of responsible inspectors meets with representatives and head teachers. Usually these seminars start with inspectees as the listeners: ‘This was great feedback for me;
I wrote and wrote’ (head teacher, Arctic Raspberry School). The latter half of the seminar permits group discussions and presentations by inspectees, after which inspectors give advice and suggestions for further reading (the SSI’s own reports from quality audits, for example). This meditative activity is an example that reflects the SSI’s transition from mere control to a model that also includes ambitions to deliberate on and develop education. These activities are appreciated by inspectees who want explanations and advice about how to ‘do things right’.

Inspectees argue that the ability to transform the SSI’s focus on deficiencies into organisational learning is important. The focus on shortcomings is not something they are used to in their daily work as educators. Nevertheless, they try not to become4 defensive or take criticism personally. Instead, they try to listen and understand. In a sense, inspection work is about making necessary translations and turning negative feedback and coercion into a meaningful and productive process. Regular supervision, a summative evaluation finalised in a deviation report (a decision), is used as a formative tool for future change.

If you are at the bottom [of the ladder of feedback], you might feel that these are strange people asking questions and allowing themselves to take on the role of supervision. But I hope we are mature enough to listen to their judgement and consider what we find relevant. From this perspective I would say that the way we use the decision, our emphasis, is on development. But we are under their control in the sense that we can’t say ‘no’. (Head teacher, Ulltistel School)

Dealing with SSI criticism involves processes of adaptation whereby organisations seek common, standardised solutions. Principle organisers produce templates for schools to use, and they copy successful solutions from others. In this context, Power’s (2007) ecological parallel is telling. Writing about organisations striving for legitimacy, Power (2007, p. 8) acknowledged that ‘copying immediate neighbours has always been a natural survival strategy’. Mimicry and isomorphism can thus be seen as ‘modes of uncertainty management’ (Power, 2007, p. 8; see also DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, on mimetic isomorphism). Standardised solutions and replication are ways to guarantee quality in the form of rule compliance, minimising the risk of SSI criticism.

In the final phase of inspection work, inspectees are obligated to submit an account in which they describe how they have undertaken measures to cope with the deficiencies pointed out by inspectors. They spend time writing and describing how and what they do; once again, they make their own work visible by representation. Sometimes there is friction. For example, inspectees might ‘talk back’ to the SSI. The Big South municipality explained in its account to the SSI that it was already doing what was expected. The underlying idea here was that the SSI’s criticism was wrong in the first place. In such accounts it becomes evident that the organisations are often already working on the deficiencies pointed out by the SSI. Inspectees might describe and refer to development work initiated long before the visit. These are processes that are already in motion but might be dealt with more intensively when highlighted by the SSI. As previously mentioned, the ongoing development of school organisations, with their own particular rhythms and flows, must be merged with the SSI’s snapshot vision.

Conclusions

The regular supervision of compulsory education in Sweden is explicitly framed as a regulative activity, and this is the way it is normally described. Jacobsson’s (2010a, 2010b) notion of regulative, inquisitive and meditative activities draws attention to inspectees’ active work and their preparation, cooperation, transformation and learning in relation to regular supervision. The argument is that different forms of inspection work are required to complete inspection. Regulative activities involve aspects of rule following whereby inspectees act or try to act in accordance with formal and soft or informal rules. Regular supervision also involves inquisitive and meditative activities in which inspectees describe their work in order to be inspectable and engage in different learning processes throughout the inspection process. In this work, inspectees mix strategies. There are considerations and actions taken to look good in the eyes of inspectors, but above all there is a will for improvement and a struggle to align practices and documents with rules. In this process inspectees seek support inside and outside the organisation. They might use existing networks and establish new contacts with other inspectees, researchers and consultants. In addition, they might have dialogues with the SSI as well as the NAE. Hence, this study illustrates the important role of inspectees in the state governing of compulsory education. For example, it shows how experienced head teachers might use trust in order to facilitate and transform regulative and inquisitive activities.

In a sense, school organisations seek to transform the summative model of supervision into what they consider a more productive formative process. School actors thus use their professional pedagogical knowledge to make inspection work. Jacobsson’s (2010a) observation – that regulative activities are seldom purely regulative – thus pertains well to educational organisations. Inspectees extend the reach of regular supervision by doing more than is formally required – by priming, grooming, dialoguing, benchmarking, inquiring and imitating. On the other hand, the study also displays some of the seemingly inherent paradoxes of this mode of inspection –
for example, that inspectees hide problems from inspectors in order to avoid criticism or hesitate to bring such issues to the table. Regardless of the potential advantages in terms of accountability, a tough inquisitive mode of inspection appears to produce sharper divisions between the front and back stages of school organisations and, thus, more delicate challenges for leadership.

In this final section, I return to the issue of constitutive effects. Today, organisations need indexical signs to prove they are legitimate. Inspection and internal control of control might thus take on the form of rituals (Power, 1996a). Largely, the inspection work described in this study is geared towards making organisations inspectable and towards internalising and making evaluative thinking and documentation routine. Quality assurance, or ‘systematic quality work’, has become the new panacea in the ‘evaluation society’ (Dahler-Larsen, 2012). These regulatory activities increase the focus on what is formally correct, and the parallel eagerness when it comes to informal rule application might also lead to homogenisation. If so, this is at odds with the political intentions related to decentralisation and deregulation. Such reforms have sought to produce pluralism and leave more opportunities and greater autonomy to school organisations.

One crucial issue in this context is the potential de-or re-professionalisation of head teachers and teachers. Their educational professions are not just increasingly reoriented towards juridical and bureaucratic aspects through involvement in regulative activities. In addition, their desire to follow rules appears to feed insecurity and expert dependency, and they thus seek advice and support from external authorities, researchers and consultants. The question is thus whether these school actors are actually incapable of managing what is traditionally the core of their profession – pedagogical work with children – or whether their insecurity is related to a forced obligation to document and present their work in a legitimate fashion within an increasingly regulated context. Even more importantly, the question is whether this insecurity and/or incapability is rooted in pedagogical problems or in inspection problems: Does regular supervision promote productive discussion and potential resolution, or does it muddle such processes? Sociological work on juridification (Mouffe, 2005; Teubner, 1998) displays how human conflicts and professional problems are formalised out of their living context and distorted by being subjected to a legal consciousness.

From this perspective, it could be argued that regular supervision expropriates and depoliticises fundamental professional, social, economic and political problems by reducing them to deficiencies in relation to statutes or evidence-based research.

Given this problem, one could raise the question of whether inspection solves ‘real’ problems? Jacobsson (2010b) made the following argument: Autonomous units are less focused on seeking solutions to immediate problems, and more focused on becoming accepted in their own activity fields. This means, for example, that they open themselves up and become susceptible to all kinds of solutions offered by the technocratic experts of the modern world. (p. 8)

On a general level, it is impossible to decide if inspection work deals with real problems or not. Inspection work can appear to be an empty ritual, but then again actors within school organisations are seldom cynical or stupid. They often make their own judgements, and they use whatever comes out of inspection as they carry out their everyday work after inspectors have left the scene. Further research is therefore needed to explore the constitutive effects of inspection.

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