

Institutional Maintenance Work as a Response to the Introduction of Inspections in Swedish Schools 2003-2008

Caroline Waks and Maria Blomgren*

Caroline Waks
Department of Business
Studies, Uppsala University
caroline.waks@fek.uu.se

Maria Blomgren
Department of Business
Studies, Uppsala University
maria.blomgren@fek.uu.se

Abstract

This paper focuses on a national governmental school inspections program that was reintroduced in the Swedish school system in 2003. The program included controls conducted by governmental inspectors whose task was to strictly inspect, ignoring activities such as consulting and advice-giving. In the article, we show that while the reintroduced school inspections pointed to the contours of a stricter audit regime in Sweden, studies of micro-level processes provided a more complex picture. Based on an interview study including inspectors, teachers, principals and public employees in the Swedish school system, our results show that the practices of the inspectors did not change dramatically. The inspectors participated in institutional maintenance work that kept institutionalised practices more or less intact. The paper contributes to the discussion on institutional maintenance work by investigating the role of hybrid professionals (inspectors with dual loyalties and obligations both to the state and to their professional peers) and how their interdependent relationship to stakeholders affected the conditions and character of institutional work activities.

Introduction

Keywords:
Institutional maintenance
school inspection
hybrid professionalism
interdependent relationships

The Swedish school system has been intensively reformed in recent decades. In the early 1990s, a far-reaching decentralisation programme was implemented, transferring power to the local municipalities. These changes were followed by reforms regarding deregulation, school choice, independent schools and governance by goals and results. These and other changes led to demands for more and improved evaluations of schools and their performances (Lundström, 2015). In this article, we focus on a central type of evaluation – national school inspections. When national school inspections were introduced in the Swedish school system in 2003, they had been absent for more than a decade. These inspections replaced a softer form of ‘quality dialogues’, where representatives of the national school authority had played the role of a critical friend or expert rather than an agent of control (Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 1995). The re-introduction of school inspections entailed a dramatic increase in resources and personnel inspecting Swedish schools (Rönnerberg, 2012), along with a continued reinforcement of the inspections. A new authority with a specific focus on school inspections was established in 2008. This authority strengthened its position by extending its remit, establishing stronger sanctions and providing more resources for the inspectors (Ivarsson Westerberg, 2015).

Although there was substantial development of school inspections during this period, it was by no means surprising. Evaluations, inspections and audits had become highly institutionalised ideas both in the Swedish public sector and elsewhere (Power, 1997; Ivarsson Westerberg & Jacobsson, 2013; Kastberg & Ek Österberg, 2017). Governance through different types of checks is,

***Caroline Waks** is an Associate Professor at the Department of Business Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden.

Maria Blomgren is an Associate Professor at the Department of Business Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden.

widespread today, especially when practices are decentralised. However, research has identified many challenges associated with extended audits and control mechanisms for welfare professionals (Ahlbäck Öberg et al., 2016). It has been argued that diminishing autonomy and more administrative work constitutes a risk to the quality of their work.

However, it is possible to organise evaluations, audits and inspections in different ways with concomitantly different consequences for professionals. In this paper, we focus on the initial phase of the national inspections of Swedish schools from the time they were re-introduced in 2003 until the new School Inspection Authority was established in 2008. Interestingly, this period constituted a transitional phase with a large proportion of the old structures and norms prevailing, although inspections based on new ideas were introduced. We argue that this period was characterised by institutional maintenance work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2009) on behalf of inspectors, principals and teachers. In other words, the new inspections were carried out at the same time as existing institutionalised ideas of cooperation and trust between inspectors and inspectees were maintained. The practices that were carried out thus changed, but not dramatically. As we found it intriguing to investigate how different ideals could co-exist, we wanted to answer the following questions: How can we understand the institutional maintenance work that was carried out during the period and what made this work possible?

The article is organised as follows. First, we provide a brief description of national school inspections in Sweden. We then describe school inspections in Sweden since the 1990s. Next, we describe our theoretical stance and present a relational and interdependent model of hybrid professionals' institutional maintenance work. In the following section, we describe the research design and research method. We then illustrate the meanings that were ascribed to the inspections and how they were dealt with by the national authority, inspectors, principals and teachers. In the concluding sections, we analyse the empirical material and conclude that the hybrid role of the inspectors and the interdependent relationships with the inspectees explain why the maintenance work could be carried out during this period.

School inspections in Sweden

Swedish schools have a long history of centralised state control and governmental inspections and evaluations. In the 1990s, the responsibility for schools was transferred from the state to the municipalities and a new school authority, the Swedish National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*) (here referred to as the Agency), was established. The Agency used the term 'informative control' to describe its governance ideals, which were based on the idea of governance in consultation with local actors and the teaching profession. Dialogues regarding quality involving the Agency, municipalities and schools characterised the period and the Agency was more of a critical friend or expert peer than an agent of control (Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 1995).

However, after nearly a decade, criticism of this 'softer' form of state governance of education emerged. On several occasions, the Swedish Parliament cited the need for more active and formal supervision, and the Swedish National Audit Office determined that the supervision was too weak and that the conditions for equity in education needed more attention (SOU, 2007:101). A

need to secure equivalence and quality in education thus motivated a 'return of the state' (Rönnerberg, 2012). In 2000, a public inquiry advocated narrower and stricter public supervision that should focus more on control than on giving advice (SOU, 2004:100), and demands were issued to make distinctions between the Agency's two roles – i.e., counselling and controlling.

In 2003, the Agency was reconstructed and given a more distinct monitoring role through the introduction of a separate department for school inspections within its organisation (Ivarsson Westerberg, 2015). At the same time, a new authority – the Swedish National Agency for School Improvement – was established and took over the role of conducting educational quality dialogues with local municipalities and individual schools. When the national inspections were re-introduced in the Swedish school system in 2003, they were organised by means of a 'six years task'. The inspection model was broad in its design and included both legal control and inspections of educational quality. The quality criteria were based on educational goals set at the national level and on requirements regulated by school constitutions. The inspections concentrated on self-evaluations, but inspectors were also present in classrooms and conducted interviews with teachers, students and parents. The inspectors focused on a few main areas where they assessed the results (norms, values and knowledge), activities (work on norms and values, teaching, steering, management and quality control), and preconditions for schools and municipalities (access to information and education resources) (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2005).

At the end of the studied period, it was decided that these changes were insufficient, requiring that the inspections be further developed (SOU, 2007:101). As a result, in 2008 a new organisational arrangement and recruitment policy was put into place with the establishment of an independent school inspection authority – the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (*Skolinspektionen*). The general director of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, as previous general directors in the field, did not have an academic background in the school sector. Instead, the general director had been an executive at the National Police Agency and general director of the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention. The new recruitment policy also adhered to the inspectors as the need for broad expertise in the areas of investigation methods and law was emphasised. (SOU, 2007:101, p. 96). The school inspections after 2008 were thus 'juridified' as they were concentrated on the student's individual rights and on the shortcomings in schools and municipalities more than on supporting local differences (Lindgren et al., 2012; Novak, 2018). Furthermore, the decisions following from the inspections were to a greater extent based on statistics and documents and focused on measurable results rather than on the complex processes that previously had been revealed in interviews and observations (Lindgren, 2015).

In light of the development of national school inspections in Sweden and considering our interest in professional work, the time in focus in this paper (2003-2008) seems particularly interesting to study. This period entailed a great deal of ambiguity concerning the job descriptions of the inspectors, which in turn created a discussion concerning their professional role and identity. Who were they – bureaucrats or professional peers? Their role was negotiated intensely, perhaps more so than during the coming period when inspectors with a new

professional background were recruited. Through their task of constructing and defining the inspections, the inspectors had, during this period, the chance of either acting as change agents and radically transforming their role and work in accordance with new policy directions or they could attempt to soften the advocated changes and translate them into something that would align more easily with previous ideals and practices. We argue that the activities of the inspectors during this period could be described as ‘institutional maintenance work’ (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2009).

Professionals’ institutional maintenance work

Institutional work is defined as ‘the purposive actions of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions’ (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215; Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2009, p.1). If studies within organisational institutionalism mainly have concentrated on how institutions shape action, the concept of institutional work implies an interest in the other direction – i.e., on agency and on how the efforts of actors affect institutions. The concept of institutional work thus implies intentionality: ‘Without intentionality, actions may have profound institutional effects but still not be institutional work’ (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2009, p.13).

As professional projects and institutional change are interrelated (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hwang & Powell, 2009; Suddaby & Viale, 2011), we use institutional maintenance work as our toolbox to analyse how professionals might act when they are asked to change or rethink the purpose of their activities. Studies of institutional maintenance work in professional settings have often pointed at the rather political activities in which professions as a collective engage in different strategies to keep established professional norm systems intact. A common topic has been to describe how the professions’ institutional maintenance work has been aimed at protecting professional discretion and control. A study of specialist doctors (clinical genetics) in the English National Health Service explores how institutional work is carried out by elite professionals who want to protect their professional dominance by adjustment activities (Currie et al., 2012). These specialists operated under the threat of being substituted by newly introduced medical and nursing roles, but the model of medical professionalism was recreated by classical professional strategies such as the delegation of routine tasks to other groups and by co-opting other professional groups, engaging them in keeping the existing arrangements intact. In this case ‘theorizing’ was highlighted as a particularly powerful type of institutional maintenance work since it served as a tool to convince others of the risk involved in changing the delivery of genetics services.

Efforts by professional associations to reverse change processes have also been used to protect professional jurisdiction. This type of institutional maintenance work was discussed in an article by Micelotta and Washington (2013). They illustrated how two associations representing the legal profession in Italy, as a response to an EU initiative to liberalise and promote competition within professional services, engaged in a type of ‘repair work’ to reverse change and restore the status quo. They overruled interventions by the Italian government through maintenance work aimed at repairing old rather than adapting to new institutional arrangements. Micelotta and Washington (2013) show that institutional maintenance not only must be ‘uncontested, taken-for-

granted reproduction of institutional scripts' (ibid., p. 38) but also could involve active efforts to reverse change processes.

Institutions operate on many levels and the materialisation of institutional change on the organisational field level is interrelated with activities by organisational members on the micro level (Zilber, 2002; 2009). Clinical professionals also function as 'institutional agents' as they adapt general principles to specific problems (Scott, 2008). It is therefore important to investigate not only the activities of professional associations, elite professionals and firms but also how organisational members make sense of and handle demands for changes in institutionalised practices at the level of the organisation. Only a few studies have done this. For example, Zilber (2009) described institutional maintenance work in a rape crises centre as 'narrative acts'. She showed how a therapeutic and a feminist meta-narrative of the Israeli society travelled into the organisation and were translated and edited by its organisational members. The study illustrates how the foundations of an already established institution (the feminist) was enhanced although not through 'an automatic duplication of the institutional order' (ibid., p. 226) but rather through several translations (Czarniawska- Joerges & Sevón, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008) between different social contexts.

In another study of how classroom practices were recoupled with accountability in an urban elementary school, Hallett (2010) shows how teachers defend their professional autonomy through informal symbolic power. Through a series of interpretive replies – i.e., storytelling and metaphors – where the teachers presented a selective picture of the past as something good and the new monitoring regime as something evil, they reconstructed the meaning of, and mobilised against these demands.

Hindsight wisdom has also been used as a strategy in institutional maintenance work. Lok and de Rond (2013) demonstrated how breakdowns in a highly institutionalised activity, the annual University Boat Race in Cambridge, were resolved through institutional maintenance. This work involved a process whereby 'practice deviations were accounted for as necessary, justifiable exceptions to a rule' (p. 205).

A relational dimension of institutional maintenance work at the micro level has also been described. Bridwell-Mitchell (2016) define institutional maintenance work as a relationship existing in cooperation among peers. She acknowledges a type of 'collaborative institutional agency' related to micro-institutional change or maintenance. The professionals figured things out as they went along. It was a type of activity that involved 'numerous, diverse, typically non-elite individuals working together to construct shared understandings, aims, and practices to execute new work routines in uncertain, ambiguous, or otherwise problematic institutional contexts' (ibid., p. 184-185).

However, the possibility of developing such a relational dimension is most certainly conditioned by the roles the people involved play. We argue that the inspectors and the inspectees developed a relation because they, at least partly, saw each other as peers. This view was possible because the inspectors had dual (or hybrid) roles that included being both an educational and a bureaucratic expert. Although previous studies have usually highlighted professionals as having rather 'pure' roles, we argue that professionals' institutional maintenance work needs to be more than merely protecting clearly defined professional norms

and institutionalised practices of the group. Previous studies on institutional maintenance work ignore this hybridity of professional roles and the type of relational work that actors engage in when managing elements based on different norms and values.

Hybrid professionals and institutional maintenance work – a relational and interdependent model

Today, organisations are framed by institutional complexity as they need to relate to political control, to professional norms and to market influences (see Pache & Santos, 2010). This often results in complex and hybrid roles and identities of the professionals working in these organisations. Typically, hybrid professionals have developed a certain knowledge outside their main area of expertise (Blomgren & Waks, 2015), such as the national school inspectors. The inspectors had adopted professional norms by means of their formal education and practical training as teachers or principals as well as by being representatives of a public authority embedded in a bureaucratic norm system. The inspectors were tasked to ensure that schools complied with political decisions.

A few studies of ‘hybrid’ professionals and professionalism have been carried out (cf. Noordegraaf, 2007; Blomgren & Waks, 2015; Noordegraaf, 2015; Schott, van Kleef & Noordegraaf, 2015). A study of how veterinary inspectors coped with potentially conflicting work principles (Schott, van Kleef & Noordegraaf, 2015) found that inspectors, in a rather pragmatic way, used different strategies: they either accepted organisational factors or enacted them into a more integrated set of professional/organisational work principles. Other studies have highlighted how hybrid professionals both negotiated change and protected stability in organisations characterised by institutional complexity. In a study of professional hybrids in the Swedish healthcare system during the introduction and implementation of national quality comparisons (Blomgren & Waks, 2015), it was shown how one important part of the professional hybrids’ work was to function as linking-pins between different norm systems by creating legitimacy and wide organisational support for different change initiatives. These efforts were balanced by other activities promoting stability. The professional hybrids guarded medical activities from excessive political intervention using different buffering activities.

Hybrid professionals can thus promote changes not only by ‘educating’ or negotiating a more holistic approach vis-à-vis change initiatives but also by protecting stability and institutionalised practices using different buffering strategies. By focusing on the institutional work of such hybrid professionals, we argue that we can better understand the details of the balancing act between duplication and change, which Zilber (2009) describes as central in institutional maintenance work. The activities of hybrid professionals involve sense making and negotiation activities that promote both stability and change. Strategies such as storytelling, metaphors and hindsight wisdom are used both as means to defend institutionalised practices and to encourage change. The hybridity of professionals seems favourable for handling the simultaneous processes of stability and change inherent in these types of institutional maintenance work processes since they provide a holistic understanding of situations.

Methodological considerations

The decision to focus on inspection practices and the inspection profession and its relationship with inspectees was grounded in a ‘mystery’ (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) that we came across early on during the research process. At that point, we were analysing the responses of the teaching associations and local professionals to the reintroduced school inspections (Blomgren & Waks, 2009). Our results showed that both the professional associations and local professionals maintained a rather low profile in relation to the inspections. Neither the professional associations nor individual teachers held any strong opinions concerning the inspections. In addition, the inspections were rarely discussed in the media. We were rather surprised by the relatively smooth introduction of the inspection program and the rather low-key response by the teaching profession given that international studies within the area of basic education had demonstrated how transparency and accountability reforms challenged professional autonomy (Troman, 2000; Webb, 2005; 2006) and that professionals often responded to them by resistance or different decoupling mechanisms (Perryman, 2006). After all, this was a governance mechanism that previously had been considered out-of-date and bureaucratic.

Because one possible explanation was to be found in the way that inspections were being practiced, we decided to focus particularly on the role of the inspectors in the change process. When understanding professionals as practitioners that actively influence and shape change initiatives (Muzio, Brock & Suddaby 2013, p. 700), an institutional work perspective has been put forward as particularly suitable since it focuses on how the efforts of actors affect institutions rather than the other way around (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2009). We followed this approach when revisiting our data but with a focus on how the inspectors made sense of the government’s new demands and how the inspections also were conditioned by the expectations of the inspectees. Our focus was informed by auditing research that had shown that the relationship between the auditor and auditee is not hierarchical but based on negotiations and compromises on how data and assessment criteria should be interpreted and implemented (cf. Pentland, 1993; Harper, 2000; Power, 2003a; 2003b). This is also the case in the area under investigation here – Swedish school inspections. In a study of how auditability was created in the process of state inspections within schools and elderly care in Sweden during the period after our investigation (2008 and onwards), it was shown that the relationship between inspectors and inspectees was not clear cut. The study highlighted the role of inspectees and how they, in their efforts to become auditable, were co-creators rather than objects of audits as they provided the inspectors with representations on which they later evaluated the organisation’s activities (Ek, 2012). To broaden the analysis, we not only focused on the inspectors’ representations but also on the inspectees’ representations to uncover knowledge about how inspection practices were conditioned by the interrelationship between the inspectors and the inspectees.

In addition, in relation to many previous studies of how professionals engaged in institutional work that often had investigated ‘pure’ professionals’, the inspectors in our study represented a deviant case (Silverman, 2005, p.133). The school inspectors were special because of their hybridity as both government agents and professional peers. That is, they had specialised

knowledge in public sector supervision and had obligations to ensure state mandated compliance and they had experience and specialised training as educators. With these understandings, we became interested in exploring how this hybridity affects inspection work, frames activities that encourage change and at the same time reassures stability (the role of institutional maintenance work).

Data collection

A total of 36 interviews were conducted (see appendix). We interviewed managers and members of the team at the Agency who designed the inspection template. We also interviewed the chairs of the three professional associations, teachers, principals, municipal school managers, public servants and representatives from the inspection teams. We conducted interviews at six schools in three municipalities that had been subject to inspection by the Agency during the studied period. All the inspectors had a background in education. The interviews were conducted between 2003 and 2008 and concerned the preparation for, implementation of, and reactions to the inspection visits on part of the groups involved. The interviews were open-ended. Inspectors were asked to describe and discuss how they worked with inspections, their level of professional discretion and how they understood their (possibly new, more controlling and less supporting) professional role as inspectors. Teachers and principals were also asked to describe how they prepared for the inspection, the actual inspection at the school and the work after the inspections. They were also asked how they made themselves and the school auditable, what they expected from the inspections and whether they used the inspection report to make changes in the school or in their professional practices. Conducted in 2008, the last set of interviews asked the same type of questions of a few more principals and teachers.

In addition to the interviews, both public and internal written material were used to gain a richer picture of the pre-requisites for reintroduced inspections. Initial internal work documentation from the Department of Educational Inspections at the Agency provided us with information about areas that would be inspected, quality criteria and indicators and suggested methods for inspections. This internal documentation, the rich descriptions of inspection activities provided on the home page of the Agency and the Agency's annual reports in 2002-2008, were used as stepping stones for further discussions with representatives from the inspection profession. Finally, the inspectors' assessments of schools summarised in public inspection reports provided a basis for discussions with inspectors, teachers, principals, municipal school managers and civil servants at the inspected schools in the three municipalities.

Analytical approach

Since we were interested in how the new governmental directives affected institutionalised practices of the inspectors, the first round of analysis of the empirical material was aimed at getting a sense of which direction the inspections were headed. Our first analysis established that even though there had been rather drastic structural changes (reintroduced inspections, intensified control – all schools and municipalities were to be inspected in six years cycles and a sharper control mandate for the Agency), there were signs that pointed in

another direction than towards a fully-fledged monitoring regime (cf. Power, 1997; Strathern, 2000). The Agency did not engage in activities such as the construction of league tables and rankings of schools. The Agency did not use blame, shame, policing, or punishment of individual teachers or principals. The Agency seemed to maintain the idea that authority should ‘stop at the border of the municipality’. That is, the Agency seemed to accept the status quos idea that the responsibility for quality work was in the hands of the local actors and these actors should be responsible for quality improvements rather than being governed by strict rules imposed by outside authorities. Thus, the inspection did not seem to involve the bureaucratic straight jacket that one would have expected.

So, what role did school inspectors actually play in this specific development? How did their hybridity and dual obligations towards different stakeholders affect the way they interpreted their new mandate? In the second round of analysis, the accounts in the interviews (i.e., how inspectors and inspectees made sense of and acted in relation to the inspections) were analysed in relation to the hybridity of the inspection role and in relation to previous descriptions of institutional maintenance work presented in the literature.

The introduction of national school inspections in Sweden (2003)

When the school inspections were introduced in 2003, the government expected tighter state control. This control would be imposed through a distinct authority structure and school inspections so as to secure all schools in Sweden provided the same quality education (Rönnerberg, 2012). To achieve this, the government wanted to make clear that monitoring was one of the main responsibilities of the Agency. In a government bill from 2002, inspection was presented as a ‘fresh start’:

The inspection, which should include both quality control and regular supervision, should be exercised regularly both at the levels of municipalities and schools. The ambition of the government is that the scale of this activity in the long run should be scaled up considerably and eventually be doubled in comparisons with today’s situation. This means a fresh start for the SNAE (The Swedish National Agency for Education) as an authority. (Government bill, 2002/03:1, p. 63)

The first round of inspections was carried out in the second half of the same year. The inspection model was developed by a team of two representatives from each of the inspection department’s five regional units. This team was headed by the quality manager at the Agency’s department for educational inspection. The design of the inspection model and the formulation of the quality criteria on which it was built were developed by the Agency. The team had drawn inspiration from previous inspections and quality audits and from work on quality issues at other organisations such as the National Agency for Higher Education and from auditing procedures implemented in other countries and regions such as the Netherlands, England and Scotland (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2004, p. 13; SOU, 2007:101, pp. 43–44).

The school inspectors' balancing work

The new assignment and role of the inspectors meant that the inspectors had to change their work practices, a process that spanned several phases.

Making inspection into something 'modern' and 'contemporary'

The first two years of the programme were viewed as a phase for building up and developing the educational inspection system. The first task was to secure an acceptance for re-introducing inspections, a concept that had previously been considered unfamiliar and out-of-date in society and among schools:

We started out really carefully – sort of trial and error. How would schools and Sweden accept this word again? But gradually we started talking about 'educational inspectors' and then after that it became 'educational inspections' and now we are even talking about 'inspection units'. These words were almost banned five years ago.
(Quality Manager, Department of Educational Inspections)

Some teachers and inspectors worried that the inspection would become too much of a controlling activity. This worry was addressed by referring to the inspection as a new type of activity in line with 'modern' organisations and by distinguishing it from past school inspections:

I think it's a little tricky, this concept of inspection. It's something that was removed in the 1970s but that has been around since the 1800s. So one can easily get a picture of what it is. But perhaps it is not like in the old days. This particular school inspection is in a new way. It is part of today's criterion-referenced system that we didn't have back then. Maybe you have a picture of the inspector sitting in the back of the classroom taking notes. But that's not really the way it goes now. (School inspector)

It was important to emphasise how the 'new' inspections deviated from school inspections from the 'old' days. The new inspection was not directed towards the activities of individual teachers but rather towards how the school functioned as a whole and on the accountability of principals and the authorities in question (municipalities and/or operators of independent schools). It was a deliberate choice, the inspectors argued, not to imitate the English model, which is known for 'policing' teachers by holding individual teachers accountable.

An open process for adapting inspection work

Balancing the different expectations was also done by means of a wide and open process for establishing the specifics of the inspection practices. This establishment of expectations involved many things. From the start, it was decided that inspections should target both teaching quality and regulatory compliance. Second, the original sharp distinction between the Agency and the Agency for School Improvement was deemphasised: the task of the first was originally to point to strengths and weaknesses and the task of the latter was originally to help schools and municipalities develop and improve their

activities. The task of the inspectors was instead defined more broadly. Although the overall expected role of the inspectors was that they should exercise public authority, this exercise should also include having a dialogue with the persons at the local level since they were the ones that knew the school world:

We have to listen to them. We must have a dialogue and we are not the police. So, I think we succeed in creating a good dialogue, a dialogue they often long for actually. You often hear how they say that 'we don't have enough peer discussions'. We do explain the purpose of it [the inspections] and we don't hide that it's about control. (Quality Manager, Department of Educational Inspections)

Balancing between consulting and controlling

The inspectors were aware of and understood that many teachers expected that the inspections would fulfil the need for peer discussions and consultations:

It's not just anyone who comes there and observe. You ask these teachers: how do you do your work? How do you reason when you work? And there is not one person at any time that asks such a question to a teacher. [...] I think there is a need for confirmation and a desire by schools to have educational discussions. (School Inspector)

The inspectors were not allowed to give advice. They handled this constraint by encouraging the principals and teachers to interpret their school curricula and discuss what the curricula represented in relation to their own local context:

We think it is important to return to what it says in the curriculum. This is what it actually says. This is what you need to have a discussion about, locally. What does it mean for your local conditions and for your individual demands? How will you translate this into your own practice? (Regional Unit Manager, School Inspections)

In this way, the inspectors tossed the responsibility for quality development back to the local practitioners. There were, however, some inspectors who turned the inspection into a discussion of alternative options to solve various problems. In this type of practice, the inspectors used their hindsight wisdom to cope with the demands of the principals and teachers. The inspectors did not give direct advice, but they could use their experiences with previous cases to 'discuss different alternatives':

It is not at all as if we provide direct practical advice on how to act. But we can discuss various options. (School Inspector).

Some inspectors also admitted that they sometimes acted at the boundary of consultation when they inspected schools:

We should never give advice. But, on the other hand, it is sometimes difficult not to. If you could give some advice and you want to do that, then you could say that there is a municipality that does this or that, so maybe you should get in touch with them. But the mandate is to inspect. I don't think we are in any way involved in consultation work. (School Inspector, External Expert)

But inspections were not always about finding a middle way and trying to find a solution that fulfilled all interests. Sometimes the inspectors used strategies to protect institutionalised practices in line with professional rather than bureaucratic norms.

Holding on to institutionalised practices through buffering

In order not to exacerbate the schools' administrative burden in connection to the inspection, the inspectors only asked the schools to send the documentation that they already had and not to put effort into writing new documentation to improve auditability. Furthermore, the inspection reports never involved quality comparisons of schools and on purpose they did not present rankings, listing high and low performing schools:

Knowledge is not only about facts and the reproduction of facts. It is also about skills and about understanding. It's about teaching students to think critically. It's about teaching students to by themselves take in the context and the bigger picture. And the quality of this type of knowledge is much more difficult to measure. (Regional Unit Manager, School Inspections)

So, the inspection reports were not only focused on easily measured results such as student grades but also on such things as whether the school educated their students to think critically and to comprehend how different facts linked to a broader picture and if the students worked and acted according to norms and values stipulated in the education act.

So far, we have seen how the inspectors and the Agency balanced the roles of controlling and consulting and how they conducted the inspections at the same time as they held on to some institutionalised practices. To further understand how this was done, we need to probe a bit deeper into some important factors that conditioned the inspections.

Factors conditioning the inspections – hybridity and interrelations

When the inspections were introduced, most the employees at the Agency had a background working with either regular supervision or quality dialogues (SOU, 2007:101, p. 45). That is, the members of the organisation were trained according to two quite different ideal types of public supervision – one based on goal rationality, which implies securing legal conformity through external control and one based in practice rationality, which involves giving advice and supporting local practices (Johansson, 2006). Another factor that had the potential to inhibit the new inspection program was the dual obligations and/or

loyalties of the public inspector. On the one hand, authorities had to rely on experts within the same professional community for supervision and control of auditees (Power, 2003a; 2003b). A majority of the inspectors at the Agency had previous experience in the educational field as researchers, education consultants, teachers and/or principals and thereby often shared similar educational backgrounds, expertise and professional norms as the inspectees. However, the inspectors were also bureaucratic civil servants representing the state. Nonetheless, the inspectors' experience with the professional norms of teaching complemented their skills and expertise with public auditing.

The interviews made it apparent that the school employees expected the inspectors to have a hybrid role. The principals expected that the school inspections would help legitimise and enhance their roles both as pedagogic leaders and as managers of schools. All interviewed principals promoted the government inspections and perceived the inspectors as experts of the regulatory framework that conditioned school activities. They welcomed the opportunity to discuss school issues with professionals who had significant experience in the field of school governance: "I thought it was very positive to have an outside audit of our activities [...] and especially by people who are really knowledgeable about the rules that govern our work" (Deputy Principal).

The fact that the inspectors were expected to be experts in the regulatory framework of school activities was also complemented by the principals' view of the inspectors as professional peers who can appropriately evaluate and validate the way modern principals and schools perform:

I feel as though they approve of how we run the school. They are excited about what we are doing. They see opportunities and they notice that we work in line with the curriculum. So much of what they say becomes a validation [of what we do]. (Principal)

Most principals expected the school inspection to be a tool to be used in their work as school managers. One principal who managed a large compulsory school described her school and many of the teachers who worked in it as conservative and uninterested in making changes. Since the inspection team shared her opinion, she used the inspection as a way to convey the importance of considering changes that correspond with contemporary pedagogical research:

I welcomed the inspection since I am a relatively new principal here at the school and, according to how I define modern schooling, I feel that there is a fair bit of work to be done here. But, on the other hand, traditions are very strong and you don't just walk in and act cocky. Instead, changes must progress gradually with one's colleagues being fairly involved. (Principal)

Some principals also saw the inspections as a way to control how the municipality funded and ran the school. The report could be used to legitimise different types of demands that they might have on municipal politicians. If the inspection report showed weaknesses in school activities, then the school's previous calls for extended resources could be seen as legitimate claims.

The teachers also expected the inspectors to act as hybrids, although some teachers emphasised the inspectors' educational roles and other teachers emphasised the inspector's bureaucratic roles, roles that included controlling and monitoring the management of the municipality and schools. The teachers who were particularly positive about the inspections believed that the inspectors were serious and trustworthy professionals who asked relevant questions. As peers who could be expected to provide useful advice, the inspectors were seen as providing external assessments that rendered problems in daily routines visible and stimulated improvements in educational quality. Many teachers expected the inspectors to be, if not part of the teaching profession, at least acting in their interests rather than as external representatives of the state and the government. They described the inspectors as 'serious', 'trustworthy' and 'peers'. According to some teachers, the inspections helped validate their professionalism in an otherwise often very lonely and invisible profession:

I felt that it was rather nice that they showed up. In your daily work, you are occupied only with the things that are not working. Then it is nice to have someone external who shows us that we actually are doing good things as well. (Teacher)

Some teachers stressed the other side of the inspectors' dual role – a public servant and bureaucrat. These teachers did not feel that the inspection primarily was an issue of concern for them as teachers, but rather an issue for the school and municipal management:

I don't think that they should interfere with teaching practices, but with how the school is being controlled and managed and where resources are allocated. (Teacher).

Overall, the principals and teachers expected the inspectors to be both bureaucratic experts and professional peers. In this dual role, they expected the inspectors to ensure educational equivalence and quality using their expertise with rules and regulations as well as their experience as educators. As bureaucrats, the inspectors were expected to support the school in its navigation of the politics of the municipality; as professional peers, the inspectors were expected to be sounding boards and help develop effective school activities. The teachers and principals also expected that the inspection confirm and advance their professionalism. Specifically, principals believed the inspections would help them become better managers and pedagogic leaders and teachers believed that the inspections would help them become better teachers. Taken together, all these expectations made the task of the Agency and its inspectors rather complex. The inspectors could of course choose to ignore the principals' and teachers' expectations that did not correspond to the governmental expectations regarding the Agency's new role, but they chose not to (or could not). Consequently, the inspectors interpreted inspection work as a process of mediating between expectations of being a peer giving advice and being an inspector monitoring school practices. The inspectors needed to relate that interpretation to the group's self-image and institutionalised practices. The activities implied sense-making activities and mediating in several steps.

Although structural changes were put into place and the word ‘inspection’ was re-introduced, the institutionalised practices of inspection work and the self-image of the inspectors as professional peers of both the schools and municipalities were still kept more or less intact.

Inspecting as institutional maintenance work – concluding discussion

Our results show that the inspectors adapted the new inspection practices in different ways. It was important that the inspections did not correspond to how the governance of schools was previously executed. That is, they should be seen as a new, ‘modern’ type of governance in accordance with modern society. Through activities such as storytelling (‘in the old days the inspector sat in the back of the classroom and took notes’) and through metaphors that stressed what inspections were *not* about (‘we are not police officers’), the inspectors promoted change as they defended the re-introduction of inspections. But we could also see how the inspectors sometimes used hindsight wisdom in order to hold on to institutionalised practices. They would account for deviations in the inspection practices ‘as necessary, justifiable expectations to a rule’ (Lok & de Rond 2013, p. 205). For example, inspectors would not give advice as it was not allowed in the new system; instead, they went around this prohibition by ‘discussing optional alternatives’. The outcome of these balancing and buffering activities was that the definition of education quality and how to reach it remained more or less intact and in accordance with the inspectors’ institutionalised practices, even though the structures that conditioned those practices had changed.

As with previous literature, this study also points to the relational dimension of institutional maintenance work and how institutional maintenance work is conditioned by the expectations of different stakeholders. If Bridwell-Mitchell’s (2016) discussions about the relational aspect of institutional maintenance work illustrated how equal peers worked together to construct shared understandings and practices, our study highlights how the relational dimension between different and rather unequal professional groups (inspectors and inspectees) conditioned the outcome of change initiatives. The relational dimension of the inspectors’ balancing work created stability. The relationship between inspectors and inspectees was built on mutual trust as the inspectees saw the inspectors as educational or bureaucratic experts who did their best to fulfil as many expectations as possible. The fact that the inspectors were experts in education meant that the teachers and principals trusted them and wanted them to be engaged in peer discussions, but this also meant that it was difficult for the inspectors to disregard the expectations of teachers and principals and to act only as control agents. On the one hand, one could say that the outcome was conditioned in such a way that the stricter monitoring role was enacted in its “softest possible” version. On the other hand, this also meant that the inspectees accepted the changes, creating positive conditions for improvement of practical work.

How was it possible for the inspectors to be involved in maintenance work of their institutionalised practices even though they were charged with changing those practices into something more controlling? We argue that one reason for

this is to be found in the hybrid role of the inspectors and the interdependent relationships that they were engaged in. As a result, the inspectors seemed to be able to create legitimacy both in relation to the local practitioners and in relation to the state authority. The way that the inspections were conducted and practiced seemed to offer something for everyone. For teachers, the inspections gave opportunities for peer discussions; for principals, the inspections were used to improve their managerial skills. These expectations were secured while satisfying state expectations.

In the study, it is shown how an important balancing or modification strategy was to interpret inspection work rather broadly. This gave room for different interpretations and also for holding on to the essence of the institutionalised practices at the same time as modifying those practices in accordance with governmental demands. It was both how the inspection model was constructed (that it should be about control but that it should not take away the responsibility of the local schools and municipalities to develop school activities) and the interdependent relationship between inspectors and inspectees that made this possible.

By taking the hybrid roles of the inspectors and their interdependent relationship with inspectees into consideration, we can advance Zilber's (2009) argument that institutional maintenance work neither means a pure duplication of existing practices nor a complete change, but it is a balancing act between these two positions. The hybrid role of the inspectors and their relationships with the inspectees explains why the sharpened inspections were met by institutional maintenance work and not by efforts to change or disrupt already established institutions. Such considerations also give us a better understanding of how institutional maintenance work is practiced, the balancing of stability and change. In this particular case, the inspectors needed to establish legitimacy of both the government and the inspectees. Lastly, by acknowledging the hybridity of the inspectors and their particular relationship with the inspectees, we can also explain how structural changes in public control, which at the outset seem very radical, do not necessarily have to be as radical on the local level. When investigating change of institutionalised practices at the micro level, the 'grand era' changes often described in ideal typical categories such as 'the audit society' or 'new managerialism' become less black and white. Rather, we may witness a more incremental type of change. However, with all facts on the table, this eventually seems to have led to a rather dramatic change through the establishment of the new inspection authority in 2008.

Acknowledgements

We are thankful for the funding from the Swedish Research Council (421-2011-1382).

References

- Ahlbäck Öberg, S., Bull, T., Hasselberg, Y., Stenlås, N. (2016). Professions under Siege. *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift*, 118(1): 93-126.
- Alvesson, M. & Kärreman, D. (2007). Constructing mystery: empirical matters in theory development. *Academy of Management Review*, 32(4): 1265-1281.

- Blomgren, M. & Waks, C. (2009). Lärarna och utbildningsinspektionen: professioners roll i institutionell omvandling. In: Adolfsson, P. & Solli, R. (eds.) *Offentlig sektor och komplexitet: om hantering av mål, strategier och professioner*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Blomgren, M. & Waks, C. (2015). Coping with contradictions: hybrid professionals managing institutional complexity. *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 2(1): 78-102.
- Bridwell-Mitchell, E.N. (2016). Collaborative institutional agency: how peer learning in communities of practice enables and inhibits micro-institutional change. *Organization Studies*, 37(2): 161-192.
- Currie, G. et al. (2012). Institutional work to maintain professional power: recreating the model of medical professionalism. *Organization Studies*, 33(7): 937-962.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B. & Sevón, G. (1996). *Translating Organizational Change*. Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- DiMaggio, P. J. & Powell, W. W. (1983). The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2): 147-160.
- Ek, E. (2012). *De granskade. Om hur offentliga verksamheter görs granskningsbara* (doctoral dissertation). Göteborg: School of Public Administration, University of Gothenburg.
- Government bill 2002/03:1. 'Budgetproposition för 2003'. Stockholm: Finansdepartementet.
- Hallett, T. (2010). The Myth Incarnate: Recoupling Processes, Turmoil, and Inhabited Institutions in an Urban Elementary School. *American Sociological Review*, 75(1): 52-74.
- Harper, R. (2000). The social organization of the IMF's work. In Strathern, M. (Ed.) *Audit Cultures. Anthropological studies in accountability, ethics and the academy* pp. 21-51. London: Routledge.
- Hwang, H. and Powell, W. W. (2009). The rationalization of Charity: The Influences of Professionalism in the non-profit Sector. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 54(2): 268-298.
- Ivarsson Westerberg A., (2015). *På vetenskaplig grund. Program och teknologi inom skolinspektion*. Södertörn: Förvaltningsakademin.
- Ivarsson Westerberg, A. & Jacobsson, B. (2013). *Staten och granskningsområdet*. Södertörn: Förvaltningsakademin.
- Johansson, V. (2006). *Tillsyn och effektivitet*. Umeå: Boréa Bokförlag.
- Jacobsson, B. & Sahlin-Andersson, K. (1995). *Skolan och det nya verket: Skildringar Från styrningens och utvärderingarnas tidevarv*. Stockholm: Nerenius och Santéus förlag.
- Kastberg, G., & Ek Österberg, E. (2017). Transforming social sector auditing – they audited more, but scrutinized less. *Financial Accountability & Management*, 33(1): 284-298.
- Lawrence, T. B. & Suddaby, R. (2006). Institutions and institutional work. In: Clegg, S. R., et al. (eds.) *Handbook of organization studies* (pp. 215-255). London: Sage.

- Lawrence, T. B., Suddaby, R. & Leca, B. (2009). Introduction: theorizing and studying institutional work. In: Lawrence, T. B., Suddaby, R. & Leca B. (eds.) *Institutional work: Actors and agency in institutional studies of organizations* (pp. 1-27). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lindgren, J., Hult, A., Segerholm, C. and Rönnerberg, L. (2012). Mediating school inspection – Key dimensions and keywords in agency text production 2003-2010. *Education Inquiry*, 3(4): 569-590.
- Lindgren, J. (2015) The Front and Back Stages of Swedish School Inspection: Opening the Black Box of Judgment. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 59(1): 58-76.
- Lok, J. and De Rond, M. (2013). On the plasticity of institutions: containing and restoring practice breakdowns at the Cambridge university boat club. *Academy of Management Journal*, 56(1): 185-207.
- Lundström, U. (2015). Systematic quality work in Swedish schools. Intentions and dilemmas. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration*, 19(1): 23-43.
- Micelotta, E.R. and Washington, M. (2013). Institutions and maintenance: the repair work of Italian professions. *Organization Studies*, 34(8):1137-1170.
- Muzio, D., Brock, D. and Suddaby, R. (2013). Professions and institutional change: towards and institutional sociology of the professions. *Journal of Management Studies*, 50(5): 699-721.
- Noordegraaf, M. (2007). From “Pure” to “Hybrid” Professionalism: Present-Day Professionalism in Ambiguous Public Domains’. *Administration and Society*, 39(6): 761-85.
- Noordegraaf, M. (2015). Hybrid professionalism and beyond: (new) forms of public professionalism in changing organizational and societal contexts. *Journal of Professions and Organization*, 2(2): 187-206.
- Novak, J. (2018). *Juridification of educational spheres: The case of Swedish school inspection* (doctoral diss). Uppsala: Uppsala University.
- Pache A. C. & Santos, F. (2010) ‘When Worlds Collide: The Internal Dynamics of Organizational Responses to Conflicting Institutional Demands’, *Academy of Management Review*, 35(3): 455–76.
- Pentland, BT. (1993). Getting comfortable with numbers: auditing and the micro-production of macro-order. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 18(7): 605-620.
- Perryman, J. (2006). Panoptic performativity and school inspection regimes: Disciplinary mechanisms and life under special measures. *Journal of Education Policy*, 21(2): 147-61.
- Power, M. (1997) *The Audit Society – Rituals of Verification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Power, M. (2003a). Evaluating the Audit Explosion. *Law & Policy*, 25(3): 185-202.
- Power, M. (2003b). Auditing and the production of legitimacy. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 28(4): 379-94.
- Rönnerberg, L. (2012). Reinstating national school inspections in Sweden. The return of the state. *Nordic Studies in Education*, 32(2): 69–83.
- Sahlin-Andersson, K. (1996). ‘Imitating by Editing Success: The Construction of

- Organizational Fields'. In: Czarniawska- Joerges, B. and Sevón, G. (eds.), *Translating Organizational Change*, pp. 69-92. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Sahlin, K. and Wedlin, L. (2008) 'Circulating Ideas: Imitation, Translation and Editing' In: Greenwood, R., Oliver, C., Sahlin, K. and Suddaby, R. (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, pp. 218-242. London: Sage Publications.
- Scott, R. (2008). Lords of the Dance: Professionals as Institutional Agents. *Organization Studies*, 29(2): 219-38.
- Schott, C., van Kleef, D. and Noordegraaf, M. (2015). Confused professionals? Capacities to cope with pressures on professional work. *Public Management Review* (published online: 27 Feb 2015).
- Silverman, David (2005) *Doing Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Strathern, M. (2000) *Audit cultures. Anthropological studies in accountability, ethics and the academy*, pp. 57-89. London: Routledge.
- SOU (2004:100) 'Tillsyn - Förslag om en tydligare och effektivare offentlig tillsyn, slutbetänkande av Tillsynsutredningen'. Stockholm: Fritzes.
- SOU (2007:101) 'Tydlig och öppen: förslag till en stärkt skolinspektion'. Stockholm: Fritzes.
- Suddaby, R. & T. Viale (2011). Professionals and field level change: institutional work and the professional project. *Current Sociology*, 59(4): 423-442.
- Troman, G. (2000). Teacher Stress in the Low-Trust Society. *British Journal of Sociology and Education*, 21(3): 331-53.
- Webb, P. (2005). The anatomy of accountability. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(2): 189-208.
- Webb, P. (2006). The choreography of accountability. *Journal of Education Policy*, 21(2): 201-214.
- Zilber, T.B. (2002). Institutionalization as an interplay between actions, meanings, and actors: the case of a rape crisis center in Israel. *Academy of Management Journal*, 45(1): 234-254.
- Zilber, T.B. (2009) 'Institutional maintenance as narrative acts'. In: Lawrence, T. B., Suddaby, R. and Leca B. (eds.) *Institutional work: Actors and agency in institutional studies of organizations*, pp. 1-27. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix

Interviewees

The Swedish National Agency for Education

Manager School Inspections, 2003

Quality manager, 2003

Inspector 1, municipality A 2003

Inspector 2, municipality A 2003

Inspector 3, municipality A 2003

Regional manager, School Inspections 2005

Inspector, part of method group, team leader municipality B 2005

Total interviewees: 7

Professional associations (2007)

Chair, The Swedish Association of Teachers (Läraryrket)

Chair, the National Union of Teachers (Lärarnas Riksförbund)

Chair, the Swedish Association of School Principals and Directors of Education (Sveriges Skolledarförbund)

Total interviewees: 3

Municipality A 2003

Municipal school manager

Civil servant, controller municipality level

Principal Public School

Teacher 1 Public School

Teacher 2 Public School

Principal Private School

Teacher Private School

Total interviewees: 7

Municipality B 2005 and 2007

Principal Public School 1 (2005)

Assistant principal 1 School 1 (2005)

Assistant principal 2 School 1 (2005)

Teacher 1 Public School 1 (2005)

Teacher 2 Public School 1 (2005)

Vice president, Municipal Committee for Education and Labor Market (2007)

CEO Private School enterprise (2007)

Legal expert Private School enterprise (2007)

Principal Private School (2007)

Total interviewees: 9

Municipality C 2008

Quality manager and school inspector, municipality level

Municipal school manager

Principal Public School 1

Teacher 1 Public School 1

Teacher 2 Public School 1

Principal Public School 2

Teacher 1 Public School 2

Teacher 2 Public School 2

Principal Private School

Teacher Private School

Total interviewees: 10