The Re-emerging State?
Motives and arguments underlying the reintroduction of Swedish national school inspections

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On a general note, processes of globalisation, deregulation and privatisation have been argued to weaken the nation state’s ability to govern. Upon closer examination, however, the state has been active in the processes of change that are challenging it and the state appears to have retained its capacity to govern (Pierre & Peters, 2000). Even so, the processes and instruments of governments are indeed subjected to change and, for instance, output oriented measures appear to receive increased importance. Governing the field of education has traditionally posed quite a challenge, and political steering has proven to be difficult (Rothstein, 1992). The system of steering education has undergone a radical transformation in Sweden, particularly during the 1990s. This development turned Sweden from having one of the most centrally regulated and framed education systems to having a system characterised by almost the total opposite (Daun, 2004). Yet, at the same time, other decisions have been made that, at least in part, seem to diverge from the path that the reforms of the 1990s had followed, as they appear to increase the role of the state, for instance by transferring previously decentralised responsibilities back to the centre.

This paper addresses one of the recent policy developments in Swedish general education (compulsory and upper secondary education) by exploring the reintroduction of direct national school inspections. The Swedish education system has witnessed both the establishment of an inspectorate, back in the 19th century, as well as its drastic dismantling in the wake of the extensive decentralisation reforms in the early 1990s. By 2003, the Inspectorate was rebuilt again and individual schools are now visited and inspected by the National Agency of Education on a six-year cycle. Even though the context in which the state now uses inspection as a means of educational control bears little resemblance to the strongly regulated and framed system of the past, Swedish policy makers put great confidence in the inspections as a means of steering. What are the intentions underlying this turn? In this paper, the motives and arguments underlying the reintroduced school inspections will be discussed with reference to the problem(s) they are intended to resolve. The discussion is facilitated by unfolding the representation of the policy problem the revived inspections addresses and empirically informed by official documents from the decision-making process.

In conclusion, the problem is represented as the need for additional state control and involvement in order to uphold an equivalent education of high quality. Intensified state involvement is legitimized by arguing that a) school results and performance, b) quality improvement and evaluation efforts at municipal and school levels and c) systematic information from school site visits are unsatisfactory or lacking. Increased control and central state involvement in education is assumed to bring about improvement and to act as a tool to collect valid information, but several issues are left unproblematised in the discussions leading up to the revived Swedish school inspections. State steering by an extensive inspection scheme implies that the reins on Swedish education have been tightened by the centre and raises issues that remain to be further explored.

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1. Introduction

The welfare state is increasingly being displaced by the ‘regulatory state’ and instruments of audit and inspection are becoming more central to the operational base of government. However, it remains to be seen how well this argument travels to other countries and systems (Power, 2000, p 114).

A large number of public sector reforms have been undertaken in the OECD countries over the last couple of decades, aiming at changing management and control of public services, and not primarily targeted at, in the first place, reforming the actual content of the provided services (Brunsson & Sählin-Andersson, 2000). Not least the introduction of external auditing and evaluation has been one popular aspect in these reform processes (Stensaker, 2000). Furthermore, the large number of reforms aiming at managing and controlling public sector activities have often been proposed by politicians representing a broad political spectrum, and has repeatedly been enacted without any larger political struggles or conflicts (Brunsson & Sählin-Andersson, 2000).

Management and control reforms, in education and elsewhere, take place in a context in which the nature and policy making function of the state is challenged. Processes of globalisation, deregulation and privatisation has led to the nation state’s ability to govern being increasingly questioned. Even so, rather than the state completely abdicating, new forms of governance have emerged, accompanied with claims that the state still has an important role to play (Davies, 2002; Pierre & Peters, 2000). In particular, focus on steering the output side and performance of the system rather than controlling inputs can be mentioned (Hudson, 2007; Erkkilä, 2007). The conception of an emerging “audit society” (Power, 1999; 2000) offers an understanding of the apparent increased desire to control complex public policy activities and their outcomes in particular, measuring and checking output rather than input.

When it comes to education, the issue of how to evaluate and control performance is widely discussed throughout Europe and an area of intense reform. (De Wolf & Janssens, 2007; Wilcox & Gray, 1996). The question of how to assess educational systems holds a top position on reform agendas in several countries, and it is a clear tendency towards placing individual schools and their performance in the limelight of such strivings (OECD, 1995). School inspections can play an important role in this regard¹. By performing school inspections, individual school units are being subjected to scrutiny by means of external evaluation by a superior agency or authority. Inspections are powerful policy tools, and may be utilized in several ways and serve different purposes (Lander & Granström, 2000). Inspection may, for instance, be used to monitor, evaluate and/or compare schools and their performance (Marshall, 2008) and thereby employed as an accountability tool (Helgoy & Homme, 2006). Inspection can also be used to reassure and

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¹ This paper is a preliminary first draft of a study within my junior researcher’s project, financed by the Swedish Research Council’s Committee for Educational Science, 2008-2012. My aim for the project as a whole is to describe, analyse and critically examine the tension of simultaneous centralisation and decentralisation in contemporary Swedish education policy by studying the revived national school inspections.
produce a sense of safety and comfort in the system (Power, 1999), or to convey a sense of close watch to the inspected, thus serving a self-disciplining function (Perryman, 2006; Raab, 2000).

The introductory quote states that inspections, as a part of the wider audit society, tend to become increasingly important to the operations of politicians and governments. Looking at Swedish education governance, this appears to be the case. The Swedish government decided to reintroduce national school inspections in 2003, after they had been swept off the agenda for more than a decade. The extensive decentralisation reforms of the 1990s meant that the state trusted the municipalities to evaluate schools under their authority as they saw fit. With the revived direct school inspections in 2003, the state resumed itself the instrument of control it had previously disposed of and handed over to the municipalities. Since then, there has been a drastic increase in both resources and personnel inspecting individual schools. In fact, Swedish schools are now exposed to “the most thorough inspection and checking in modern times” (SOU 2007:101, p. 11). The last step in this process is far from taken: Inspection efforts will be further extended and placed in a new national agency. By doing this, an even larger inspection scheme is put into force from 2008 and onwards.

It appears as if Sweden has moved from a system based on municipal evaluation of schools to an, even historically, intense national educational surveillance regime carried out by the educational inspectorate. What were the arguments and motives underlying this turn? In this paper, the motives and arguments underlying the reintroduced Swedish school inspections will be discussed with reference to the problem(s) they are intended to resolve. For the scope of this paper, I will focus on the formal decision making process and the policy documents that were produced, thus unveiling the official arguments and motives in this regard.

2. Governance in the audit society

During the last decades, the nation state has been exposed to several challenges encompassing social, economical and political dimensions. These challenges have originated from different levels; international, national and local transformations and demands have put national governments under pressure in several different ways. Neo-liberal influences entailing choice, accountability, efficiency, privatization, marketisation and ideas of new public management have all set their mark on domestic politics and policy. Overall, these transformations have resulted in questioning of the nation state’s ability to govern. The shift from government to governance,

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2 The state is indeed a “much-debated concept” (Raab, 2000 p 26). In this paper, I employ a rather narrow definition of the state, i.e. to include the parliament and government, its ministries and central state agencies (Rothstein, 2002 p 113). By the state, I thus refer to formal political arrangements and institutions located at the national level, and the municipal and local arenas are therefore not included in this hierarchical definition of the state. Even so, I agree with claims that the state can not be considered as a unitary entity, and that the conceptualization of the state needs to be made with caution (Taylor et al, 1997, p. 29f; Ball, 1990, p. 19f).
emphasizing the role of networks and interactions between multiple public and private actors involved in policy making, has been used to grasp some of the changes the state is undergoing (Peters & Pierre 2001; Pierre & Peters, 2005; 2000; Sundström & Jacobsson, 2007).

The forces and developments mentioned above have indeed affected the state, claimed to contribute to the state being hollowed-out, as the state no longer exercise the same authority and control as it used to. However, more nuanced writings have increasingly questioned the “governing without government thesis” (Davies, 2002) and the hollowing out of the state. The state has been active in the processes of change that, it is argued, are challenging it and the state appears to have retained its capacity to govern (Pierre & Peters, 2000). As such, the state is still “a critical player” (Davies, 2002). It appears as if simultaneous forces are at play, resulting in both hollowing out and filling-in of the state, for instance by processes of centralisation. According to Cope et al (1997) this can be pictured in two, oversimplified, scenarios: The hollowed-out state has a severely reduced capacity to steer society. Processes of decentralisation pushes policy making authority downwards in the system, privatization outwards and increased Europeanization upwards. On the other hand, the filling-in state is strengthening its capacity inwards, by processes of centralisation, i.e. to transfer authority and responsibilities back to the centre (Cope et al, 1997, p. 448, c.f. Sundström & Jacobsson, 2007). Furthermore, the centre is increasingly employing other means of steering (Jordan et al, 2005; Taylor, 2005; Raab 2000). As a result, the “iron fist may now be clothed in a velvet glove” (Hudson & Rönnberg, 2007 p.17), as instruments connected to output steering become more and more important.

2.1 Output steering: Evaluation, audit and checking as instruments to retain state control

Governance theorists have argued that contemporary states are forced to use new techniques of government, due to the fragmented and network based society of today. In order to retain control, output oriented measures such as evaluation, audit and checking become central tools, both for “the operations and identity of governments and politicians” (Power, 1999, p. xiv; c.f. Bowerman et al, 2000). These tendencies, involving a reinforced control function of the state, have been labeled as both an “audit society” (Power, 1999), the “evaluative state” (Neave, 1998), an emerging “new regime of scrutiny” (Taylor, 2005) or “evaluation culture” (Eurydice, 2004).

In a follow-up discussion to his book The Audit Society, Power (2000) placed the rise of auditing, evaluation and inspection as being related to three overlapping pressures; Firstly, to ideas of New Public Management, secondly, to political demands for accountability and transparency expressed as demands from citizens, taxpayers, pupils etc., and thirdly, to changed quality assurance practices and a transformed regulatory style, involving indirect regulation of organizations and not by command and control. Instead, there is an emerging “control of control”, i.e. an audit of self-control arrangements (Power, 2000, p. 113). Others have pointed to similar imperatives underlying this development: corporate globalization, the neo-liberal movement, fiscal crisis of
the state, efficiency discourse, the rise of new managerialism and public distrust in political ideologies (c.f. Taylor, 2005; Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). Expressed in a principal-agent terminology, the extent to which the principal can trust its agent is of course a crucial point in this regard. As Power simply but clearly puts it: ”Trust releases us from the need for checking” (1999, p. 1).

In addition, the rise of central output control can be understood with reference to previous decentralisation and transfer of responsibilities from the centre, as “increased local autonomy in the public sector increases demands for external control” (Lægreid et al, 2008, p. 23). Thus, there is a widespread notion that the more local autonomy, freedom and empowerment, the greater need for monitoring, supervising and auditing from the centre (Leeuw & Furubo, 2008; OECD, 2007; Eurydice, 2007; Taylor, 2005; Dahlberg, 2003; Farell & Morris, 2003; Sandberg et al, 2002). Accordingly, somewhat paradoxically though not illogical, reduced central activity tends to be coupled with processes and mechanisms increasing central control (Helgøy et al, 2007). Output oriented means of steering in a decentralised context can thereby be said to provide a tool allowing the centre to control from a distance (Taylor, 2005).

Indeed, decentralisation is a “highly imprecise notion” (Lauglo, 1995, p. 6), and contextual, in the sense that it is given different meanings in different settings, and often in reference to a state before decentralisation took place (Lundgren, 2002). Yet, the concept of decentralisation basically denotes the distribution of authority within a system or organisation, where the direction of authority and responsibility is transferred from the centre to more peripheral units (Pierre, 2001). If increased control is introduced, alongside decentralisation reforms, the scope for local action may be largely circumscribed, resulting in “centralized decentralization” (Hogget, 1997, p. 419). Karlson (2000) discusses this dynamic from the concept of “decentralised centralism” (p. 525), as both decentralisation and centralisation occur simultaneously, facilitating the multi-faceted nature of decentralisation as a political and ideological strategy. Andersson (2006) portrays these simultaneous tensions by a process of “back door centralism” (p. 112).

2.2 Accountability and evaluation systems in education – a comparative perspective

As reforms increasing school autonomy have become more and more widespread throughout Europe, this has been accompanied by efforts to develop systems designed to hold schools to account. Even if accountability arrangements are highly dependent on their administrative and political contexts and structures, they share the common denominator of being linked to some form of retrospective control (Erkkilä, 2007). In particular since the mid-1990s, school evaluation and accountability measures has been intensified. Eurydice (2007) distinguishes three main alterations in this regard: Firstly, those already existing bodies traditionally responsible for school evaluation (often inspectorates, national as well as regional) have received increased responsibilities. This is often coupled with increased standardisation of evaluation criteria
countries such as England, Portugal and Czech Republic). Secondly, for a group of countries in which schools mainly are being accountable to local authorities, this has often been followed by developing national standards and national tests of student assessment. This is implying increased accountability towards the national level as well (for instance in some of the Nordic countries and Hungary). Thirdly, some countries appear to be less affected by the school accountability trend (for instance Italy and Bulgaria), even though the number of countries resisting the main developments is decreasing.

A common pattern, however, visible in all three groups, is the development towards multi-accountability. Not only are schools being held to account to national ministries, local and/or regional councils etc., in addition, they are also increasingly subjected to answering up to external partners, families and parents, not the least in the context of school choice. As a result, the number of countries publicly publishing evaluation findings is increasing. Sweden, UK, Portugal, Denmark, Iceland, Belgium, Netherlands, Czech Republic and Bulgaria publish findings from external evaluations in individual schools (Eurydice, 2007).

When it comes to external evaluation, undertaken by actors not directly involved in the activities of the evaluated entity, the bodies responsible for this task vary across Europe. It can be a regional body, such as local governments, an independent body or agency or the Department of Education at the national level. The most common arrangement is a department within the Ministry of Education, often named the inspectorate (Eurydice, 2004). Thus, varying kinds of external educational inspectorates are rather common through Europe, even though their tasks and methods differ considerably. From an international perspective, the English school inspection (Ofsted) is by far the most researched inspectorate (c.f. Perryman, 2006; Weiner, 2002; Gray & Gardener, 1999; Cuckle et al, 1998; Fidler, et al, 1998; Lee, 1997; Wilcox & Gray, 1996) There are also several examples of comparative studies, where the English inspectorate is compared to the situation in other countries (New Zealand in Thrupp, 1998; Israel in Schwartz, 2000; Finland in Webb et al, 1998).

Two thirds of the OECD countries have educational inspectorates (national or regional) performing regular inspections (OECD, 2007). A total of 18 countries have an inspectorate and ten countries do not. In the last group, we find all the Nordic countries, except Sweden (see appendix, Table A3). In most Nordic countries, external evaluation tend to have the municipalities as their basic unit, even if external evaluation of schools currently is emphasised to a larger extent (European Commission, 2005; see appendix, Table A4). Although the education systems in Sweden and the other Nordic countries show several similar features, the Swedish national school inspections have, as of yet, no counterpart in the other Nordic countries. Thus, it appears as if Sweden is changing direction in this respect. This raises the question of what problem(s) the Swedish school inspection is perceived to resolve and what arguments that were put forward when a national school inspectorate was being re-established in 2003.
2.3 Approaching the revived Swedish inspections: Uncovering representations of the policy problem

Processes of evaluating performance are “not neutral acts of verification” (Power, 2000, p. 114), instead, Power continues, “the idea of audit shapes public conceptions of the problems for which it is the solution; it is constitutive of a certain regulatory or control style” (Power, 1999, p. 7). As such, the choice to employ certain policy instruments, for instance inspection, is by no means an objective or neutral decision. The lines of thinking underlying such choices need to be examined and critically discussed, since:

it reveals a (fairly explicit) theoretization of the relationship between the governing and the governed: every instrument constitutes a condensed form of knowledge about social control and ways of exercising it (...) the instruments at work are not neutral devices: they produce specific effects, independently of the objective pursued (...) which structures public policy according to their own logic” (Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007, p. 1).

In addition, as Kooiman (2003, p. 45) points out, “Instruments may become goals in themselves, making it even more necessary to discuss them in relation to the governing interaction they are a part of”. Taylor et al. (1997) suggest that an introductory task when approaching policy should be an attempt to understand the issues which actually constitute the policy in question (c.f. Ehren et al, 2005). In this paper, I will draw on Carol Lee Bacchi’s (1999) What’s the problem? approach. Bacchi argues for the adoption of a specific approach to scrutinise the process of problematisation in public policymaking. While her key insights are not entirely new, nor are they claimed to be, Bacchi presents a framework that gives rise to fruitful empirical applications. The author argues that this approach opens up avenues for questions often neglected in other approaches, such as;

how every policy proposal necessarily offers a representation of the problem to be addressed, how these representations contains presuppositions and assumptions that often go unanalysed, how these representations shape an issue in ways that limits possibilities for change (Bacchi, 1999, p. 12).

The basic tenet of Bacchi’s approach is that every policy or policy proposal in itself contains a diagnosis of the problem. This is referred to as the representation of the problem, and deals with the way policy-makers express, frame and constructs the problem. The Swedish decision to reintroduce school inspections are inevitably connected to implicit or explicit understandings (i.e. representations) of the problem addressed by the policy proposal. Central points of departure for the approach are in highlighting how the policy decision comes to be represented as the best solution to a particular problem, and in uncovering the assumptions made regarding the nature of the problem. By their constructed nature, the representations tend to highlight certain aspects while others remain in the background or are untouched upon. The What’s the problem? approach includes in its frame of reference not just what is said but also what is not said (the silences) and the issues not considered (see also Taylor, 2004).
Bacchi states that the approach can be applied to both specific policy documents and debates in the Parliament, for example. Along this reasoning, this paper draws on both official documents and transcripts from parliamentary debates. The texts have been scrutinised through a descriptive analysis of arguments (Boréus & Bergström, 2005), involving several steps. After extracting the arguments, their contents have been classified according to the type of issue they are connected to. Those issues constituted the base for identifying how the policy problem is represented. The policy texts have also been read in detail in order to uncover underlying assumptions in the arguments, and to take into account the issues that were not touched upon.

3. School inspection in Sweden: From establishing to dismantling – and back to rebuilding

In Sweden, direct school inspections are nothing new, they were first introduced in 1860 (Andersson, 2006). Elementary school inspectors were important actors in the early 20th century (Bruce, 1940). By 1958, inspections became the responsibility of the state led county school boards (Marklund, 1998). At first, the inspections were not prominent tasks of the school boards, but in the 1980s, they were accorded a more explicit supervisory role. However, the school boards hardly had time to begin to find their feet with regard to their inspectional duties before the drastic decision to discontinue the National Board of Education and the county school boards was taken in 1991 (Lander & Granström, 2000).

In the newly established National Agency for Education (NAE), focus was put on disseminating knowledge and information, rather than executing an active control (Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 1995; Sahlin-Andersson, 1995). The NAE was introduced in order to better suit the new system of steering education, characterized by far-reaching decentralisation and management by objectives. As the responsibility to reach national objectives was seen as an undertaking for municipal and professional actors in schools, the NAE deliberately did not intervene. Thus, NAE did not examine individual public schools, and “halted at the municipal level” (Statskontoret, 2005). This was very much in line with the reforms of the 1990s, as the architects behind it strongly emphasised municipal accountability. Overall, this meant that the NAE had ”an arms-length relationship with public schools, taking its main duty to be the monitoring of municipalities rather than of individual schools” (OECD, 1995, p. 127). This agenda set up by the NAE was however criticised, but the question remained unresolved until 2003. By then, the NAE was divided in two agencies, and inspections were given precedence in the new NAE. Individual schools are now visited and inspected by the National Agency of Education on a six-year cycle (see Appendix, Table A1, for an overview of the current inspection procedure).

At present, policy makers put great confidence in the inspections as a means of steering. The government has announced both additional financial resources, as well as an increased intensity in the inspections, from a six-year to a three-year cycle (Prop 2006/07:1; Dir 2007:28). Since
October 2008, the NAE is restructured and inspection is placed in a new agency: The National Agency of School Inspection (Statens Skolinspektion). These overall historical developments are summarised in Table 1 (below).

Table 1. School inspection in Sweden: A brief historical account

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>The first inspectional unit, the Elementary School Inspection (Folkskoleinspektionen), was established. The number of inspectors was moderate to begin with: 20 Inspectors were employed in 1861 and there were 44 inspectors in 1877.</td>
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<td>1958</td>
<td>The Elementary School Inspection was discontinued and inspectional duties were placed in state led county school boards (Länsskolnämnder). The county school boards were sub-units in the National Board of Education (Skolöverstyrelsen).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>The National Board of Education and the county school boards were discontinued and The National Agency for Education (Skolverket) was established. The National Agency for Education (NAE) did not examine individual schools and the municipalities were trusted to inspect the schools under their authority as they saw fit.</td>
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<td>1998</td>
<td>A Quality Assurance Committee (Kvalitetsgranskningsnämnd) was issued as a division within the NAE. It had resources equivalent to approximately 10 inspectors and made thematic evaluations in a selected number of municipalities and schools. The unit of evaluation was mainly the municipality and not individual schools. It was in operation until 2002 when the decision to introduce extensive national school inspections was taken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>The NAE was divided in two agencies (The NAE and NASI), and individual inspections were given precedence in the new NAE. Individual schools were visited and inspected by the National Agency of Education on a six-year cycle. The number of inspectors were over 100.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>The government announced both additional financial resources, as well as an increased intensity in the inspections. In addition, it was decided that a separate Agency for school inspection should be formed. The National Agency of School Inspection (Statens Skolinspektion) is expected to be in force by October 2008. It will probably have more than 200 employed inspectors. The inspectional duties of the NAE will be placed in the new agency and NASI will be discontinued but some of its tasks will be performed by the NAE.</td>
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The Swedish education system has witnessed both the establishment of an inspectorate, back in the 19th century, as well as its drastic dismantling in the early 1990s. By 2003, the Inspectorate was rebuilt again and intensified to an extent not displayed in modern Swedish educational history (SOU 2007:101). In fact, the number of employed inspectors are now doubled compared to when Sweden had “one of the most centralized education systems in the world” in the 1960s and 1970s (Daun, 2004, p. 326; Ekholm, 2006).

Taken together, the NAE has been heavily transformed during the last decades, and, according to Nytell (2006), shaken to its foundations. The fundamental principles the NAE was built on in the early 1990s, including its role in a decentralised system, its methods of operating and the dominating task to disseminate information and build knowledge have been replaced by an “agency for control (…) exercising an active, direct control in the inspections” (p. 117). As the inspectional duties now have been transferred from the NAE to the new The National Agency of School Inspection, the role of the NAE has apparently changed in this regard. But, even so, the
direction towards direct and active control through inspection has been even more intensified, both in monetary terms and by the very fact that the inspections are conducted in a separate agency.

4. Tightening the reins: Steering by inspecting

4.1 2001-2003: The process of reintroducing comprehensive national school inspections

In the following, I will focus on the decision making process leading up to the decision to revive school inspection in 2003, through the official documents that were produced. In short, the process began in August 2001, when the Swedish National Audit Office had reviewed the NAE (RRV 2001:24). After this, both a commission report and a report from the Parliamentary Auditors followed (SOU 2002:14; RR 2001/02:13). In short, those three reports delivered severe criticism to the NAE, and urged for a more active and controlling role by the agency and thus increasing central state involvement, especially regarding the NAE’s audit of compliance with national regulations.

Shortly thereafter, the Social Democratic government delivered an educational development plan (Skr 2001/02:188) in which the division of the NAE was announced. Here, it was also stated that individual school inspections were to be given precedence in the new NAE. A commission was appointed (Dir 2002:76) to further outline the tasks of the two national educational authorities (NAE and NASI), which delivered two reports (Forsell, 2002a; 2002b). The NAE and NASI and their tasks were discussed in a government bill (Prop 2002/03:1), two reports from the Parliamentary standing committee on Education (2002/03UbU1; 2002/03UbU3) and in two parliamentary debates (Prot 2002/03:35; Prot 2002/03:66). In addition, parliamentary motions were submitted, as well as additional reports from the Parliamentary Auditors (RR 2002/03:3; RR 2002/03:21). (See Appendix, Table A2, for a chronological overview of the documents included in the study).

4.2 Representing the problem as “Insufficient state involvement in order to retain and improve nation-wide educational quality and equivalence”

The basic line of reasoning upon which the problem is represented originates from the state “strengthening its role in the decentralised system of steering education” (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 15) and thereby upholding the values of providing equivalent education of high quality throughout the entire country. According to the arguments in the studied texts, the revived inspection is directed towards the need to reinforce national control in order to promote and ensure nation-wide educational quality and equivalence.
When it comes to equivalence, the Education Act states the right to obtain equivalent schooling irrespective of gender, social, economic or geographic origin. Regardless of the school’s geographic location, all pupils should experience equivalent education (SFS 1985:1100). There is an extensive discussion on the concept of educational equivalence in the Swedish context, focusing on its actual content and meaning. The NAE has identified three areas to in order to assist the conceptualization of equivalence: equal access to education, equivalent education in terms of processes and equal value in terms of results (c.f. Nicaise et al, 2006, p. 30f).

Furthermore, it appears as if the concept educational equivalence has changed its content over time, from a strong emphasis on uniformity to also incorporating the possibility for individual choices and individualized instruction as well as the the right to obtain equal educational results. This changed conceptualisation can be understood against the background of decentralisation and the weakening of the central state steering that has taken place (c.f. Englund, 2005; Quennerstedt, 2006).

The increased control function of the state is thus represented as a way of resolving the problem of lacking quality and equivalence. Those two terms seem to be interlinked and also considered important in order to, in the long run, maintain the Swedish welfare state, as:

Educational quality is an urgent matter; both with regard to equivalence, founded on principles of fairness and equality, and policies for continuous economic growth, in order to maintain our common welfare. The efforts of quality improvements need to be strengthened both nationally and locally. According to the government’s judgment, it is therefore necessary, not the least for the pupils sake, that the state assume responsibility for ensuring equivalent and high-quality education and to do so in a manifest manner (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 26).

In particular, the value of supporting nation-wide equivalence is stressed in the way the problem is being framed (RR 2002/02:13; Skr 2001/02:118; Dir 2002:76; Prop 2002/03:1; Forsell, 2002b; 2002/03UbU1; 2002/03UbU3; Prot 2002/03:35; Prot 2002/03:66). The issue was brought out by the Parliamentary Auditors, stating that “If the NAE concentrated on follow-up, evaluation and inspection, the requirements to control that equivalent education is provided throughout the country would be significantly improved” (RR 2001/02:13, p. 73). Contrary to previous workings of the NAE, the agency now needed to visit and spend time in individual schools, according to the auditors, by arguing that “the issue of equivalence can be judged on the basis of informed observations in classrooms, schools and municipalities” (RR 2001/02:13, p. 70).

The government also strongly emphasized educational equivalence in their development plan: “The state’s responsibility (...) takes its starting-point from the goal of an equivalent education throughout the country for every child and student” (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 30). In fact, the government stressed that “The state has a central role in ensuring that educational equivalence is provided to every child, young person and adult and that such education is of good quality” (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 16). One way of pursuing this appears to be by nationally controlling goal attainment at the school level “in order to ensure an equivalent education nation-wide” (Skr
The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education did not oppose to the weight carried by that value; in fact, it explicitly wanted to stress the importance of educational equivalence (2002/03UbU3).

By dividing the NAE in two agencies, and thereby separating control from improvement efforts, the national level could take on a stronger and more controlling role. The agency could thereby be transformed into an instrument that allowed the state to take a more active and direct role of surveillance. Earlier, the NAE strategy to deliberately not intervene in school activities, and to “halt at the municipal level”, had reduced the state’s ability to use the NAE as a means of pursuing national policies (RRV 2001:24, p. 71). Indeed, by the decision to reform the NAE “the government has voiced its expectations on the new NAE in explicit terms: It is to be a strong and visible actor on behalf of the state, closely observing and inspecting educational activities and upholding demands of quality and equivalence” (Forsell, 2002a, p. 4).

4.3 Justifying increased state involvement

There are three main lines of reasoning used in order to legitimate a stronger state involvement through school inspections, and thereby pursuing quality and equivalence. Firstly, the increased role of state in educational control is justified by arguments “against the background of unsatisfactory performance” (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 17). Due to lacking educational results and performance, it is claimed to be “necessary that the state strengthens its role and take on a more visible and evident role, by following up and inspecting goal attainment and local quality assurance work” (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 17, c.f. Forsell 2002a; 2002b).

Not only the observed results have been judged as unsatisfactory. Secondly, the local responsibility for evaluation and follow-up has not been performed as intended either. For instance, local evaluation and development work that was to be summarized in the mandatory quality assurance plans introduced in 1997 had difficulties in being implemented. Even though not expressed as distrust in explicit terms, the government did point to the municipal level in this regard, as “municipalities must take on and carry out their responsibility to ensure that schools improve their quality” (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 17). But it is also argued that the state also must take on additional responsibilities, as improvement efforts must be strengthened throughout the entire school system: “This requires an intensified work on quality issues at all levels – in classrooms, in municipalities and at the national level” (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 17).

Thirdly, there are arguments legitimizing further state involvement and control through inspection based on the prospects of collecting relevant and important data on how the system is performing. On the one hand, information collected from on-site school visits can be used to “provide decision makers with relevant information on which to base their decisions” (RR 2001/02:13, p. 70; RR 2002/03:3, p. 5). On the other, by making reports publicly available, other
relevant stakeholders, such as parents and pupils, can also gain from the information being published (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 28). Thus, it is argued that in order to collect comparable and transparent information in a systematic way, the centre needs to take measures of control and inspection.

4.4 Underlying assumptions and rationale

As already mentioned, the problem is being represented as the need for additional state control and involvement in order to uphold an equivalent education of high quality. Those values are portrayed as being at risk, but by increasing the control function of the state, this can be resolved. By representing the problem the inspections are to resolve in this way, it can be argued to serve at least two important functions. Firstly, it can elude possible criticism. Educational equivalence is still promoted as a core value in Swedish education policy in general. In the submitted parliamentary motions and in the Parliamentary Standing Committee, equivalence is actively endorsed, across the political spectrum. In fact, the concept has increasingly become connected to scrutiny and control by focusing on goal attainment, and using the concept in such contexts legitimizes strivings for further national control in Education (Englund & Quennerstedt, 2008). It is thus worth noting that equivalence is not being challenged either politically or by school professionals (in spite of, or more likely thanks to, its changes conceptualization). Arguing against increased control of the state, in turn supposed to improve quality and equivalence, could thereby be avoided by representing the problem as intensifying state involvement in order to retain and improve nation-wide educational quality and equivalence. In addition, the government could hereby portray itself as both receptive and able to act on the repeated criticism put forward by the Parliamentary Auditors. Secondly, the problem-solver can easily be singled out and justified by representing the problem to be resolved in this manner. The responsibility to uphold educational equivalence nation-wide can neither be taken on by schools nor municipalities at the local level. Instead, the right to receive equivalent schooling irrespective of geographic location or background situates the state as the main problem solving actor, thus constituting the entity required to take measures to prevent equivalence being put at risk.

Looking at the representation of the problem the inspections addresses, it holds underlying assumptions regarding a) control as a means of improvement, i.e. that there is a causal link between inspection and improved educational quality and performance, and b) the belief in control as a means to hold schools to account from the basis of collecting information, i.e. that inspection reports and results will provide valid, comparable and independent information. These assumptions are, furthermore, not challenged or contested in the studied documents.

Firstly, according to the government, inspection would “contribute to systematic quality improvement” (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 28). Thus, there is an assumed positive correlation between increased control and improvement. The intrinsic idea seems to be that if increased monitoring
and control is introduced, the assessed aspect will somehow improve (c.f. Nytell, 2006). This is indeed a problematic assumption (Ehren et al, 2005), not the least since conclusive evidence of inspection actually leading to quality improvement are lacking (DeWolf & Janssens, 2007) or, in the Swedish context, that grades not appear to be improved as a result of inspection (Ekholm & Lindvall, 2007).

Given this underlying assumption of improvement, what mechanism within the control scheme is portrayed as mediating the desired outcome? It appears as if the government places feedback from the inspectors as the intermediate link in order to accomplish school improvement (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 28). All inspected municipalities and schools will be able to discuss the inspection findings and the written report with the NAE inspectors. Feedback sessions can include “giving advice and recommendations to schools and municipalities on their future work on quality and improvement” (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 28). In this way “national inspection aims at development” (Forsell, 2002a, p. 4). As such, the feedback and the reports would create a pressure for improvements in certain desired directions. The areas for improvement are based on judgments and conclusions from the NAE inspectors, influencing the local improvement agenda in the direction set out by the state (c.f. Jarl et al, 2007). According to the Parliamentary Auditors, the prospect of boosting improvement processes has historically given reason for the NAE audit of compliance with national regulations. But, the Auditors continue, “improvement is not at the heart of control, improvement may possibly be the utmost consequence of control but not its primary objective” (RRV 2001:24, p. 74).

Secondly, the assumption is that desired and valid information can be collected by inspection. If inspections are carried out, they will provide “relevant information” resulting from “informed observations” made by the inspectors (RR 2001/02:13, p. 70). In England, for instance, there is an intense debate relating to the reliability of assessment (Marshall, 2008), and assessing education by means of inspection is no exception. Wilcox and Gray (1996, p. 110) draw our attention to that “there is a belief that inspection can provide a ‘true’ picture of the state of things, and, consequently, that this true state can be conveyed in an inspection report. In that sense, inspection can be argued to constitute ‘a naïve form of positivism’”. In the studied documents, there is no discussion regarding the validity or trustworthiness of inspection procedures and data. Are “informed observations” in fact possible to make, and what about the possibilities to make reliable observations between a large numbers of inspectors conducting inspections in municipalities with varying socio-economic conditions? The underlying assumption, that inspection data in its nature will be valid, relevant and useful, is left unchallenged in the texts.
4.5 Unproblematised issues

There are several questions that are left unproblematised in the process of reintroducing the national school inspections. In both Swedish and international literature on inspections, numerous shortcomings embedded in or resulting from this form of educational control are discussed. Ultimately, they centre around "the performance paradox" (Lindgren, 2006; van Thiel & Leeuw, 2002), i.e. that control instruments and measurements such as inspections per se cause unintended effects and outcomes. These unintended effects often concern, first, a risk of de-professionalism and diminished discretion (Taylor & Kelly, 2006; Wallin, 2006; Öqvist & Söderberg, 2004; Lander & Granström, 2000), second, uncritical adjustment of the organisation to the measures used in the inspection, resulting in unwanted conformance (Forsberg & Wallin, 2005; Barrett, 2004; Öqvist & Söderberg, 2004; Lander & Granström, 2000), third, obstruction of innovation or fresh ideas and window dressing (DeWolf & Janssens, 2007; Ehren & Wisscher, 2006; Vedung, 1998) and "panopticon", referring to the self-disciplining function of surveillance (Perryman, 2006).

The studied documents do not discuss the topics mentioned above. This can, of course, be understood with reference to the nature of the documents and thereby the explicit and implicit rules of the political game. For instance, there are limited incentives to discuss potential drawbacks in these types of texts. But, even so, there may still be a desire to avoid potential criticism from the standpoints mentioned above, and thereby forestall or pre-empt counter arguments that may arise. The parliamentary motions could have been another source where the risks to the proposal were brought to the fore. These motions did not oppose the intention of intensifying state control; rather, the non-socialist parties had been promoting an independent educational evaluation agency or school inspection, even before the Social Democratic government suggested to reinstall inspections in their development plan in 2002. In fact, non-socialist members of Parliament contently commented on the non-socialist orientation of educational policy that was put forward by the Social Democratic Minister of Education (Prot 2002/03:66).

The only potential shortcoming mentioned in the texts derive from one of the commission reports, where it was brought up that “with a predominant focus on school inspections, in which municipalities and schools are individually scrutinized, there may be a risk that less attention is devoted to monitor the overall development of the system as a whole” (Forsell, 2002a, p. 15). As a result, the NAE should still uphold a national evaluation function, alongside the intense focus on individual inspections. Other than that, there is no discussion on how the inspection scheme may influence or affect professionals and schools, except for in the direction of improving quality assurance processes and results.
5. Concluding discussion

To sum up, the perceived problem the reintroduced school inspections are directed towards is represented as need for additional state control and involvement in order to uphold an equivalent education of high quality. By increasing the role and control function of the state, those values can be protected and defended. Thus, we appear to be witnessing yet another account of what has been previously pointed to; i.e. that processes of transferring responsibilities from the centre to other actors are accompanied by a notion that there is greater need create systems for external control (Lægreid et al, 2008). Although, in the Swedish inspection case, there was a significant lag in this regard, as more than a decade passed between when the extensive decentralization efforts took place and when the national school inspections were reintroduced. Intensified state involvement is legitimized by arguing that a) school results and performance, b) quality improvement and evaluation efforts at municipal and school levels and c) systematic information from school site visits are lacking or unsatisfactory. Further, increased control and central state involvement in education is assumed to bring about improvement and to act as a tool to collect valid information, but several issues are left unproblematised in the discussions leading up to the revived Swedish school inspections. Overall, the reinforced central state through employing school inspections is neither challenged, nor discussed politically or ideologically (c.f. Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). It can be argued that the results indicate that traditional values of educational quality and equivalence are being re-embedded in a regime of external inspection and scrutiny, accompanied with and justified by accountability claims and strivings. Further, it is also interesting to note that Auditors themselves appear to have influenced the decision to a large degree, pointing to the strength of this group of professionals and their increasingly powerful position in the contemporary “audit society”.

Given the representation the problem, to reinforce state involvement in order to safeguard quality and equivalence, school inspections as a means to help solve the problem is not self-evident. Earlier, the value of equivalence has been upheld by employing other means as well, such as detailed national regulations and specific guidelines for finances, thorough prescriptions on how to use and allocate school time and course content, as well as other mainly input oriented means of steering. But, by decentralising many of these means to municipalities and schools, the state has disposed several of its previous instruments, which were employed in the name of upholding educational equivalence. In fact, the central state has few remaining policy levers when it comes to education (Ekholm & Lindvall, 2007; Bergström, 2003; Lundahl, 2005). To set goals and disseminate information are important such policy levers still in the hands of the state. The central educational agency and its operations is another. Thus, the state may have been forced into a corner due to extensive decentralisation of previously available means. By reviving national school inspections, the state utilizes one of the few remaining policy levers (Nicaise et al, 2006). Accordingly, the question of why the government decided to revive the inspections may be answered with another question, namely: What could the state do to address the perceived
problem of deteriorating quality and equivalence, given that there are few remaining policy levers to steer and control education from the centre?

From a Swedish horizon, Lindvall and Rothstein (2006) argue that “the most obvious sign of the strong state’s decline is the weakening of central administrative institutions” (p. 51) and the closing of National Board of Education in 1991 is put forward as a spectacular example of this. From this viewpoint, how should we interpret the contemporary role of the NAE and, along with it, the reintroduced school inspection efforts? From being a rather small agency with responsibilities to disseminate information and to promote development, the NAE has steadily increased both in size and scope since it was introduced and at present it also entails a strong inspection and control scheme. Actually, it appears as if the state has gradually strengthened its central administrative institution in education since it was dismantled in 1991 in order to pursue national policies. This could, however, not easily be translated into a ‘rise of the strong state’ in education, as the rationalistic reform paradigm based on central planning and regulation not has been reincarnated. More likely, it can be interpreted as a sign of the state taking an even stronger hold on the output side of the system. In this sense, the reintroduced and intensified school inspections may indicate that the state is re-emerging in education policy, although not announcing its presence as it formerly did during the centralist era. In any case, by introducing inspections and other forms of output control, the state has conveyed an impression that the reins indeed have been tightened.

Contemporary Swedish education policy thus appears to be somewhat contradictory. There seem to be coexisting tendencies of promoting local decision-making, school autonomy and choice, and, at the same time, measures are imposed to increase state authority and control. This forms a dynamic mixture of simultaneous movements in both decentralist and centralist directions, or as simultaneous deregulation and re-regulation. Current developments are indeed indicating a shift towards intensifying the role of the state by displaying powerful external control through, for instance, inspection and national tests (Karlsson Westman & Andersson, 2007; Lundahl, 2006). As noted in an assessment by the OECD:

> The Swedish education system has developed an increasingly hybrid nature: on the one hand, deploying the philosophy and means that support local autonomy and the operation of a quasi-market situation while, on the other, adopting greater measures of supervision at the centre through quality assurance and control mechanisms (Nicaise et al, 2006, p. 33).

In 1995, systematic external national quality inspections were implemented in Swedish higher education. This move has been interpreted as an attempt to “re-establish state authority” and as reflecting the “tension between decentralization and centralization” (Stensaker, 2000, p. 307). Focusing on general education, the rapidly rebuilt school inspections may assist a discussion based on the assumption that Swedish educational policy developments entail concurrent forces both hollowing out and filling in of the state. Such a discussion is needed to advance our
understanding of the seemingly simultaneous decentralist or deregulatory versus centralist or re-regulatory transformations and their resulting consequences. Questions of whether these movements exist in an uneasy or easy tension, if the relationships between different organisational levels are affected and how different stakeholders, including municipalities and schools, perceive these developments are issues that remain to be further explored.
References


Dir 2007:28. Översyn av myndighetssystemen inom skolväsendet m. m. Stockholm: Utbildningsdepartementet.


**Official documents**

**Reports from the Parliamentary Auditors:**
RR 2002/03:3. Riksdagens revisors förslag angående statens styrning av skolan.

**Government Commission reports:**

**Government development plan:**

**Government bill:**

**Reports from the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education:**
2002/03U1. Utbildningsområde 16 Utbildning och universitetsforskning.

**The Riksdag Minutes:**
Appendix

Table A1: Aim and procedure of the NAE educational inspectorate.

| Task and aim | The task is to “to determine whether - and how well – a school or activity is functioning” (Skolverket, 2005, p. 8) in relation to national regulations and statutes. Both the municipal and school levels are scrutinized by focusing on a) quality and b) legal issues. Thus, it is not merely an audit of compliance with national regulations, but also an assessment of processes and work related to quality based on the inspector’s judgments. The inspectorate’s overall aim is to “provide an underlying basis for quality development” by drawing “conclusions about which areas should be improved” (Skolverket, 2005, p. 8-9). |
| Phase 1: Preparation | Inspections are announced in advance. A team of inspectors with varying competencies is formed for each municipality. External experts can also be assigned to a team. Already available data, such as statistics, quality assurance plans etc., are collected and analysed at this stage. |
| Phase 2: On-site visits | At least two inspectors visit each school, usually for about two days. Interviews with pupils, parents, all categories of staff and the school administration is carried out, and sometimes complemented with questionnaires. In addition, observations are made as classes are attended and time is spent in staff rooms and student areas, for instance. |
| Phase 3: Analysis | The collected data is put together, analysed and assessed, forming a base for the resulting, publicly available, report. From 2005, all reports include the following topics: Results, evaluation, assessment and grading, quality assurance and improvement work, management and communication and staff. Two types of remarks are used: “Shortcomings to attend to” (concrete requirements) and “areas in need for improvement” (suggestions for action). |
| Phase 4: Feedback | The inspection results are presented to the municipality or responsible authority (independent schools) and staff. Reports are written for each inspected school and municipality and they are publicly available for download on the NAE website. |
| Phase 5: Follow-up | If corrective measures are required (“shortcomings to attend to”), the responsible authority usually has to report back within three months. After two years, or next inspection, the identified insufficiencies (“areas in need for improvement”) are reassessed. |

Source: Skolverket (2005); Skolverket (2008).
Table A2: Documents included in the study, in chronological order.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Document Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 23, 2002</td>
<td>Regeringens skrivelser 2001/02:188. Utbildning för kunskap och jämlikhet – regeringens utvecklingsplan för kvalitetsarbete i förskola, skola och vuxenutbildning [Education for knowledge and equality – the Government’s development plan for quality work in pre-school, school and adult education].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 3, 2002</td>
<td>Proposition 2002/03:1 Utgiftsområde 16 Utbildning och universitetsforskning [Government Budget Bill on Education and research].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 5, 2003</td>
<td>Protokoll 2002/03:66. Onsdagen den 5 mars, UbU3 Kvalitetsarbete och planering för skolan [The Riksdag minutes].</td>
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</table>
Table A3: Existence of a national or regional educational inspectorate (2005) and members of SICI, the Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (2008).

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Austria</td>
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<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Belgium (Fl)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belgium (Fl)</td>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
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<td>England</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>France</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Lithuania</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Norway</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
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<td>Netherlands</td>
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<td>Turkey</td>
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<td>Wales</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(And additional regional inspectorates)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


Table A4: Four main categories of approaches to educational evaluation based on what is evaluated (2000-2001).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools as entities I</th>
<th>Schools as entities II</th>
<th>Primarily teachers</th>
<th>Primarily local authorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are individually evaluated</td>
<td>Teachers are not evaluated on an individual basis</td>
<td>Evaluation of teacher in focus, even if many of these countries are moving towards evaluation of schools as entities</td>
<td>As a result of decentralisation, municipalities are in focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany, Ireland, The Netherlands, Austria, Portugal, Northern Ireland, Latvia, Poland, Czech Republic, Estonia, Slovakia, Liechtenstein</td>
<td>Belgium (Flemish), Spain, Iceland, Romania, Slovenia</td>
<td>To a certain extent: Italy, Malta</td>
<td>Denmark, Norway, Finland,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local authorities also involved: Hungary, UK (not NI), Lithuania</td>
<td>Sweden: Evaluating individual schools as entities from 2003. Teachers are however not evaluated individually.</td>
<td>Belgium (French and German), Greece, France, Luxembourg, Bulgaria</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>