Reinstating national school inspections in Sweden


This article explores the reintroduction of national school inspections in Sweden in 2003 with reference to the problems they were intended to resolve, by applying an approach used in order to uncover representations of policy problems to official policy texts and by drawing on theories of governance. The problem was represented as a need for additional state control in order to uphold equivalence and quality in education. It is concluded that state steering by an extensive inspection scheme means that the reins have been tightened, in line with the theoretical state-centric approach to governance, and that values of educational quality and equivalence are being re-embedded in a regime of external scrutiny and control.

Keywords: School inspection · Sweden · problem representation · governance

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Inspections, as a part of the wider audit society, tend to become increasingly important to politicians and governments (Power, 2000). 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 largely been kept 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 and that values of educational quality and equivalence are being re-embedded in a regime of external scrutiny and control.

With the revived direct school inspections in 2003, the state resumed itself the instrument of control it had previously largely 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, p. 101, p. 11), and the number of inspectors employed has increased dramatically since the 1960s and 1970s, when Sweden had one of the most centralized education systems in the world (Daun, 2004, p. 326).
The last steps of this process are still being taken: inspection efforts have been further intensified and are now conducted by a separate national agency, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, and an intensified inspection scheme with a sharper scope was introduced in 2009. At present, policymakers appear confident in the utility of inspections as a means of steering, and the Inspectorate is repeatedly presented as a problem solver for diverse perceived problems. For example, the Inspectorate is now responsible for evaluating teachers’ assessments of national tests (Skolinspektionen, 2011), and it has been suggested that it should also be responsible for assessing the quality of Independent schools as part of the process of evaluating their eligibility to derive profits from public funds (Riksdagen 2010/11:UbU7). But why did school inspection reappear on the political agenda in the early 2000s in the first place? What problem(s) were originally intended to be resolved by reintroducing this policy lever?

Sweden’s education policy is interesting in light of its specific national circumstances and history. Certain ideas and objectives in education policy have been described as propagating in an «epidemic» fashion (Levin, 1998); these include decentralisation, market orientation and a focus on accountability and results, as well as other ideas influenced by the New Public Management philosophy. However, when these ideas are adopted in a specific national context, they still have to be adapted, revised and implemented to suit that particular context. Sweden appears to have moved from an extensively decentralised system in which the evaluation of schools was primarily conducted on the municipal level to a national educational surveillance regime overseen by the educational inspectorate that is highly intense, even by historical standards.

Aim, questions and outline
In this article, the rationales and political objectives that motivated the re-introduction of the Swedish national school inspection system in 2003 are discussed with reference to the problem(s) they were intended to solve. The discussion focuses on the formal decision-making process and the policy documents that were produced; the official arguments and motives for the change are thus clarified and analyzed. The following questions are posed:

What problem(s) is school inspection supposed to be targeting?

What arguments and underlying assumptions are invoked when the problem is framed in this way and what issues remain unproblematised?

The Swedish national school inspection system was reintroduced in 2003, and since then only a few scholarly investigations of these changes have been published (e.g. Rönnberg & Segerholm, 2011; Rönnberg, 2011; Blomgren & Waks, 2009; Ekholm & Lindvall, 2008; Sahlin & Waks, 2008). Even if some research has been conducted in this area, there is still a need for an analysis of the factors that prompted the resurrection of national inspections, as an understanding of the motives behind their reintroduction is required to properly understand their implementation and effects. Equally important, this analysis also contributes to the understanding of contemporary developments in education policy and the role of the state, particularly in terms of the rise of national control, assessment and evaluation, and their potential impacts on professionals, students and systems.

The following sections first outline the theoretical approach and the framework used for analysing the policy texts produced during the decision-making process. This is accompanied by a brief discussion on gov-
ernance, placing the role of the state in a wider theoretical context, as well as the use of inspection, evaluation and control. After a few words on the history of inspections in Sweden, the empirical parts present and analyse the political motives, arguments and unproblematised assumptions that were invoked when restoring school inspections. The main findings are summarised and discussed in the final section.

Approaching the revived inspections

Michael Power (2000, p. 114) argues that processes used to evaluate performance are more than just «neutral acts of verification». Auditing and other forms of checking shape the representations of the problems that those activities are perceived to resolve. Thus, decisions to employ certain policy instruments, such as inspections, are by no means an objective or neutral and the lines of thinking underlying such choices need to be examined and discussed (Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007).

I draw on Carol Lee Bacchi’s (2009, 1999) «What’s the problem?» approach, which focuses on the process of problematisation in public policymaking. Bacchi (2009, p. xii) states that «in order to understand how we are governed, we need to examine the problem representations that lodge within policies and policy proposals». Bacchi argues that the approach can be used to explore questions such as how problems inevitably are represented in policy proposals, what assumptions are built in to the specific representation of the problem and what is left out and not discussed.

The basic tenet of the approach is thus that every policy or policy proposal in itself contains a diagnosis of the problem. This is referred to as the representation of the problem; it is a reflection of the way in which the problem was expressed, framed and constructed by the policymakers. The Swedish decision to reintroduce school inspections is inevitably connected to implicit or explicit understandings (i.e. representations) of the problem addressed by the policy proposal. The key starting points involve determining how the policy decision came to be represented as the best solution to a particular problem, and identifying 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 not touched 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).

This approach has been applied to official policy texts regarding the reinstalled inspections, from government directions to transcripts from parliamentary debates. This article thus investigates the decision-making process that led up to the decision to revive school inspection in 2003, by analyzing the official documents that were produced. These texts have been scrutinised through a descriptive analysis of arguments (c.f. Boréus & Bergström, 2005), involving several steps. After extracting the arguments, their contents were classified according to the nature of the issues to which they were related. Those issues were used as a basis for identifying how the policy problem was represented. The policy texts have also been read in detail in order to identify the assumptions underpinning their arguments and related issues that were not touched upon.

The first document examined was published in August 2001 and describes a review of the performance of the National Agency for Education (NAE) conducted by the Swedish National Audit Office (RRV 2001:24). After this, both a commission report and a
report from the Parliamentary Auditors followed (SOU 2002:14; RR 2001/02:13). These three reports were critical of the NAE and argued that the agency should take a more active and controlling role, particularly in terms of the NAE’s audit of compliance with national regulations. Shortly thereafter, the Social Democratic minority government delivered an educational development plan (Skr 2001/02:188) in which a division of the NAE was announced. 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 national educational authorities, which delivered two reports (Forsell, 2002a, b). 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 (Riksdagen 2002/03UbU1, Riksdagen 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).

**Governance in the audit society**

Management and control reforms, in education and elsewhere, take place in a context in which the nature and policymaking function of the state is challenged. The conceptual shift from government to governance, emphasizing the role of networks and interactions between multiple public and private actors involved in policymaking, has been used to grasp some of the changes the state is undergoing (Bell & Hindmoor, 2009; Pierre & Peters, 2000; Ball, 2008). Although these developments have been argued to contribute to the state loosening its grip in terms of governing and being hollowed out (Rhodes, 1994, 2007), there are other theoretical claims that the state has in fact retained its governing capacity. The state-centric approach to governance asserts that the state still has an important role to play (Bell, Hindmoor & Mols, 2010). Nevertheless, the policy tools used to formulate and give effect to public policy are subject to change. Contemporary states are forced to use new techniques of government, due to the fragmented and network-based society of today (Jordan, Würsel & Zito, 2005). In order to retain control, output-oriented measures such as evaluation, auditing and checking become central tools for “the operations and identity of governments and politicians” (Power, 1999, p. xiv; c.f. Ozga, Dahler-Larsen, Segerholm & Simola, 2011).

Power (2000) described the rise of auditing, evaluation and inspection as being related to three overlapping pressures. The first of these stems from the ideas of New Public Management and the second from political demands for accountability and transparency, expressed by citizens, taxpayers and pupils, etc. The third relates to changes in quality assurance practices and a transformed regulatory style involving indirect regulation of organizations rather than direct command and control. Instead, the emerging approach to regulation involves “control of control”, i.e. auditing self-control arrangements (Power, 2000, p. 113). Other imperatives underlying this development have also been described: corporate globalization, the neo-liberal movement, a fiscal crisis of the state, efficiency discourse, the rise of new managerialism and public distrust of political ideologies (c.f Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). In addition, the rise of central output control can be understood with reference to previous decentralisation and transfers of responsibilities from the centre, since “increased local autonomy in the public sector increases demands for external control” (Lægreid, Roness & Rubecksen, 2008, p. 23).
Thus, there is a widespread notion that the greater the degree of local autonomy, freedom and empowerment, the greater the need for centralised monitoring, supervision and auditing (Leeuw & Furubo, 2008). Accordingly (and somewhat paradoxically, although not illogically), reduced central activity tends to be accompanied by the introduction of processes and mechanisms that increase central control (Helgøy, Homme & Gewirtz, 2007). Output-oriented means of steering in a decentralised context can thus be said to provide a tool that allows the centre to exert control from a distance (Taylor, 2005).

Indeed, decentralisation is a «highly imprecise notion» (Lauglo, 1995, p. 6); it is contextual in that it has different meanings in different settings, but is often used to refer to a state before decentralisation took place (Lundgren, 2002). 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, 2010). If increased control is introduced alongside decentralisation reforms, the scope for local action may be largely circumscribed, resulting in «centralized decentralization» (Hoggett, 1997, p. 419).

School inspection as an instrument of educational control
School inspection can be understood as an activity in which an individual school unit is subjected to scrutiny by a superior agency or authority. Despite this rather straightforward definition, inspections may be utilized in several ways and serve different purposes. 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 (Helgøy & Homme, 2006). Inspection can also be used to reassure and produce a sense of safety and comfort in the system (Power, 1999), or to convey a sense of being closely watched to those being inspected, promoting self-discipline (Perryman, 2006). Inspections are thus powerful policy tools.

School inspection cannot however be understood in isolation because it is a component of a broader package of policies relating to control and evaluation. In the Swedish education system, compulsory and upper secondary schools are subject to a number of such policies and mandatory activities. Inspections, national tests for young pupils, participation in international tests, individual development plans for each pupil and written individual subject achievements from grade 1 are a few examples of activities that have been introduced during the last decade (Jarl & Rönnberg, 2010). All in all, the large and increased number of control activities in Swedish education can be described as implying a new regime of scrutiny and control (Forsberg & Wallin, 2006).

Governing by inspecting
Swedish inspection history – in brief
School inspections are nothing new in Sweden. They were first introduced in 1860 and 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 made in 1991 (Lander & Granström, 2000).

The National Agency for Education (NAE), established in 1991, focused on dis-
seminating knowledge and information, rather than exercising active control (Jacobs-son & 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. Because the responsibility for achieving national objectives was considered to rest with municipal and professional actors in schools, the NAE deliberately did not intervene. Thus, the 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, whose architects 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). While this agenda was criticised, these criticisms were not addressed until 2003. By then, the NAE had been divided into two agencies, and inspections were given precedence in the new NAE. Individual schools were now visited and inspected by the National Agency of Education on a six-year cycle. The task was to determine whether, and how well a school or activity was functioning (Skolverket, 2005, p. 8).

Even if school inspection had been employed in previous eras of Swedish educational history, it was seen as a municipal undertaking following the extensive decentralisation reforms of the 1990s. In 2003, this situation changed dramatically. A year before, the Swedish Social Democratic government presented an educational development plan in which it was stated that individual school inspections were to be given precedence by a reformed National Agency of Education (NAE; Skr 2001/02:188). By 2003, the Inspectorate was rebuilt and given a mandate that was unprecedented in modern Swedish educational history (SOU 2007:101). The motives and problem representations in this decision-making process are discussed in the following sections.

**Representing the problem as «Insufficient state involvement in order to retain and improve nationwide 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 resumption of inspections is required by the need to reinforce national control in order to promote and ensure nationwide educational quality and equivalence. Intensified state control is thus represented as a way of resolving the problem of lacking quality and equivalence.

The value of supporting nationwide equivalence was thoroughly stressed in the way the problem was framed in studied documents. The issue was articulated by the Parliamentary Auditors, who stated that «[i]f the NAE concentrated on follow-up, evaluation and inspection, it would be significantly easier to verify and ensure that comparable standards of education would be provided across the country» (RR 2001/02:13, p. 73; translation L.R.). Contrary to the previous approach of the NAE, the agency now needed to visit and spend time in individual schools, according to the auditors, who argued 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 develop-
ment 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; translation L.R.). In fact, the government stressed that the state has a central role in ensuring that educational equivalence is provided for every child, young person and adult and that such education is of good quality (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 16). It was proposed that one way of achieving this objective was to exert national control over goal attainment at the school level in order to ensure an equivalent education nationwide (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 26). The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education did not oppose the emphasis placed on this value; in fact, it explicitly sought to stress the importance of educational equivalence (Riksdagen 2002/03UbU3).

There is an extensive discussion on the concept of educational equivalence in the Swedish context, focusing on its actual content and meaning and it appears that the concept of educational equivalence has changed over time. While it once placed a strong emphasis on uniformity, it now incorporates scope for individual choices and individualized instruction as well as 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 (c.f. Englund, 2005).

The NAE’s strategy of not intervening in school activities, and of halting 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 deciding to reform the NAE the government voiced its expectations of the new NAE in explicit terms: it was to be a strong and visible actor on behalf of the state, closely observing and inspecting educational activities and upholding demands for quality and equivalence (Forsell, 2002a, p. 4). Quality and equivalence are clearly interlinked and also considered important for the long-term stability and maintenance of the Swedish welfare state:

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 least for the pupils’ sake, that the state assumes responsibility for ensuring equivalent and high-quality education and does so in a manifest manner (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 26; translation L.R.).

Why increased state involvement?

Three main lines of reasoning were used to justify increased involvement of the state in school inspections, and thus in the pursuit of quality and equivalence. Firstly, the increased role of the state in educational control is justified by arguments against the background of unsatisfactory performance (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 17). It was claimed that unsatisfactory educational results and performance made it necessary for the state to take on a more visible and evident role by following up and inspecting goal attainment and local quality assurance work (Skr 2001/02:188; c.f. Forsell, 2002a, b).

Secondly, it was not only the observed results that were judged to be unsatisfactory; the handling of evaluation and follow-up by local authorities was also found to not be performing as desired. For instance, the local evaluation and development work called for in the mandatory quality assurance plans introduced in 1997 was not often conducted correctly. While no distrust of the municipal authorities was expressed in explicit terms, the government did state that municipalities...
must take on and carry out their responsibilities to ensure that schools improve their quality (Skr 2001/02:188, p. 17). It was also argued that the state should take on additional responsibilities, as there was a need to strengthen efforts towards improvement throughout the entire school system, and this required intensified work on quality issues at all levels of the education system.

Thirdly, there are arguments legitimizing further state involvement and control through inspection based on the prospects for collecting relevant and important data on the system’s performance. 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 hand, 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 central control and inspection are required to ensure that comparable and transparent information is collected in a systematic way.

**Underlying assumptions and rationale**

As previously mentioned, the problem was represented in terms of a need for additional state control and involvement in order to ensure educational equivalence, that is, that all schools should provide the same (high) quality of education. This representation of the problem can be argued to serve at least two important functions. Firstly, it can be used to evade potential 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; the use of the concept in these contexts legitimizes efforts towards 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. Arguments against increased control of the state, which is supposed to improve quality and equivalence, could thus be avoided by representing increased state involvement as a way of maintaining and improving nationwide educational quality and equivalence. In addition, this representation enabled the government to portray itself as being both receptive and able to act on the repeated criticism put forward by the Parliamentary Auditors. Second, this representation of the problem can be used to identify problem-solvers and justify their actions. The responsibility for upholding educational equivalence nationwide cannot be undertaken by either schools or municipalities. Instead, the right to receive equivalent schooling irrespective of geographic location or background necessarily positions the state as the main problem-solving actor and the only entity able to ensure that equivalence is not at risk.

The representation of the problem addressed by inspections is based on assumptions regarding (i) control as a means of improvement, i.e. that there is a causal link between inspection and improved educational quality and performance, and (ii) the belief that schools can be held to account on the basis of collected information, i.e. that inspection reports and results will provide valid, comparable and independent information. These assumptions are 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 cor-
relation 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, Leeuw & Scheerens, 2005), not least since conclusive evidence that inspection leads to quality improvement is lacking (Gaertner & Pant, 2011; DeWolf & Janssens, 2007). Given this underlying assumption of improvement, what mechanism within the control scheme is portrayed as mediating the desired outcome? The government argues that feedback from inspectors is a necessary intermediate link that plays an essential role in improving schools.

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, for instance, giving advice and recommendations to schools and municipalities on their future work on quality and improvement (Skr 2001/02:188). In this way national inspection aims at development (Forsell, 2002a, p. 4). As such, the feedback and the reports would create pressure that would compel schools to improve in certain desired directions. The areas to be improved are identified on the basis of the inspectors’ judgments and conclusions. According to the Parliamentary Auditors, the NAE’s audits of schools’ compliance with national regulations were primarily motivated by the desire for continually improving school performance. 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 «informed observations» resulting from «informed observations» made by the inspectors (RR 2001/02:13, p. 70). In England, and elsewhere, there has been 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 the fact 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 if so, do they remain reliable when made by a large number of inspectors conducting inspections in municipalities with varied socio-economic conditions? The underlying assumption that inspection data is inherently valid, relevant and useful is left unchallenged in the texts.

**Unproblematised issues**

There are several questions that were 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» (van Thiel & Leeuw, 2002), i.e. the idea that control instruments and measurements such as inspections per se cause unintended effects and outcomes. These unintended effects often relate to: (i) a risk of de-professionalism and diminished discretion (Taylor & Kelly, 2006); (ii) uncritical adjustment of the organisation to the measures used in the inspection, resulting in unwanted conformance and obstruction of innovation or fresh
ideas (Forsberg & Wallin, 2005); and (iii) window dressing and other strategic behaviour (DeWolf & Janssens, 2007; Ehren & Wisscher, 2006) 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 represent another source in which the risks and potential drawbacks of the proposals could have been aired. These motions, however, did not oppose the intention of intensifying state control; indeed, the non-socialist parties had been promoting an independent educational evaluation agency or school inspection even before the Social Democratic government proposed resuming inspections in their development plan in 2002. In fact, non-socialist members of Parliament expressed their contentment with the non-socialist orientation of the educational policy put forward by the Social Democratic Minister of Education (Prot 2002/03:66). When the non-socialist government took office after 2006, it intensified inspection efforts even further.

The only potential shortcoming mentioned in the studied texts derives from one of the commission reports, where it was stated 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 monitoring the development of the system as a whole (Forsell, 2002a, p. 15). As a result, it was considered important to uphold national evaluation 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 other than inasmuch as it might improve quality assurance processes and results.

### Concluding discussion

To sum up, the perceived problem that was to be solved by the reintroduction of school inspections was represented in terms of a need for additional state control and involvement in order to uphold equivalent and high-quality education. It was argued that these core values would be protected by increasing the role of the state and its ability to exert control. Thus, we appear to be witnessing yet another account of that processes of transferring responsibilities from the centre to other actors that is accompanied by a notion that there is a greater need to create systems for external control (Lægreid, Roeness & Rubecksen, 2008). In the Swedish inspection case, there was a significant lag in this regard: the reintroduction of national school inspections took place more than a decade after the preceding extensive decentralisation efforts.

Intensified state involvement was legitimized by arguing that school results and performance, quality improvement and evaluation efforts at the municipal and school levels as well as systematic information from school site visits were lacking or unsatisfactory. Further, increased control and central state involvement in education were assumed to bring about improvement and to act as a tool for collecting valid information, but several issues were also left unproblematised in the discussions leading up to the revived Swedish school inspections. The results indicate that traditional values of educational quality and equivalence are being re-embedded in a regime of external inspection and scrutiny, ac-
accompanied by claims of and efforts towards increased accountability. 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».

Although the representation of the problem was framed to legitimize state involvement in order to safeguard quality and equivalence, the validity of the argument that school inspections are the best or only means of solving the perceived problem is not self-evident. In earlier times, the value of equivalence was upheld by other means as well, such as the creation of detailed national regulations and specific guidelines for finances, thorough prescriptions for how to use and allocate school time and course content, as well as other mainly input-oriented means of steering. However, by decentralising many of these means to municipalities, responsible authorities and schools, the state divested itself of several of these older instruments, which were employed in the name of upholding educational equivalence. In fact, the central state had few remaining policy levers when it came to education (Lundahl, 2005).

The setting of goals and the dissemination of information are important policy levers that remain in the hands of the state, as are the central educational agencies and their operations. Thus, the state may have been forced into a corner due to extensive decentralisation of previously available means. The revival of national school inspections can thus be seen as the state using one of its few remaining policy levers. Accordingly, the question of why the government decided to revive the inspections can be answered with another question, namely: What could the state do to address the perceived problem of deteriorating quality and equivalence, given that there were few remaining policy levers at the time that could be used to steer and control education from the centre?

In conformity with the argument in the governance literature on the gradual weakening of the central state, Lindvall and Rothstein (2006, p. 51) claim from a Swedish horizon that the most obvious sign of the decline of the strong state is the weakening of central administrative institutions and the closing of the National Board of Education in 1991 is put forward as a spectacular example of this. From this viewpoint, how should we interpret the role of the national educational agencies and school inspection efforts? Actually, in contrast to declining, the state has gradually strengthened the central administrative institution in education 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 has not 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.

There is growing recognition in the governance literature that current transformations and what has been labeled as the shift from government to governance in public policymaking «has not been at the expense of the pivotal role played by governments» (Bell et al., 2010, p. 859; cf. Goodwin & Grix, 2011; Davies, 2002; Pierre & Peters, 2000). The findings presented and considered in this article indicate that the changes in Swedish education policy during the last decade, and the associated reintroduction of school inspections, are empirical examples that are in accordance with these theoretical claims.

In sum, the reintroduction and increased intensity of school inspections indicate that the state is taking a stronger role in education policy, albeit without announcing its presence in the same way as it did during the centralist era. In any case, by introducing in-
inspections and other forms of output control, the state has conveyed an impression to local school actors and the general public that the reins have indeed been tightened.

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Literature


