

**Navigating between protocols and principles;  
An evaluation of the impact of Dutch school inspections**  
*extended abstract*

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**Problem & methodology**

Inspectorates aim to safeguard school quality by visiting schools and providing school boards with a report of their findings. However, school quality is a notoriously diffuse concept, and research has shown that boards have limited control over educational quality (Honingh et al., 2018). In this project we adopt a group model building approach (Vennix, 1996; Richardson and Andersen, 1995) to evaluate the effects of inspections on Dutch schools. We start by asking school boards and teachers how they perceive the system that results in educational quality. Only after this system has been made explicit, we ask the next question: How does the Inspectorate affect the system that results in educational quality? By starting from the perspective of educational quality we enhance the identification of unintended effects that would remain hidden when reasoning from the perspective of inspections from the start, and we allow for the option that inspections have little effect on quality.

**Preliminary results**

Our preliminary results show that inspections only affect educational quality *indirectly*. Even the most direct path consists of three variables, which confirms the precarious situation where the Inspectorate depends on various actors including school boards, teachers, and students to influence educational quality for the better. The inspectorate cannot influence educational quality directly, it can only try to guide the educational quality *system* in the right direction. The strong reinforcing effects in that educational quality system, with many feedback loops that work through the school's reputation,

show that small actions by the Inspectorate can have huge consequences. If a bad inspection report leads to a lower school reputation, this can have long lasting effects through changes in the constitution of the student population, the workforce of teachers, as well as changes in the motivation of its current students and teachers. Schools reported a strong preference for principle based inspection, as this comes with increased autonomy and increased honor, two important factors affecting educational quality. Rule based inspection on the other hand has the danger of setting in motion a vicious cycle of increasing levels of bureaucracy and formal quality evaluation.

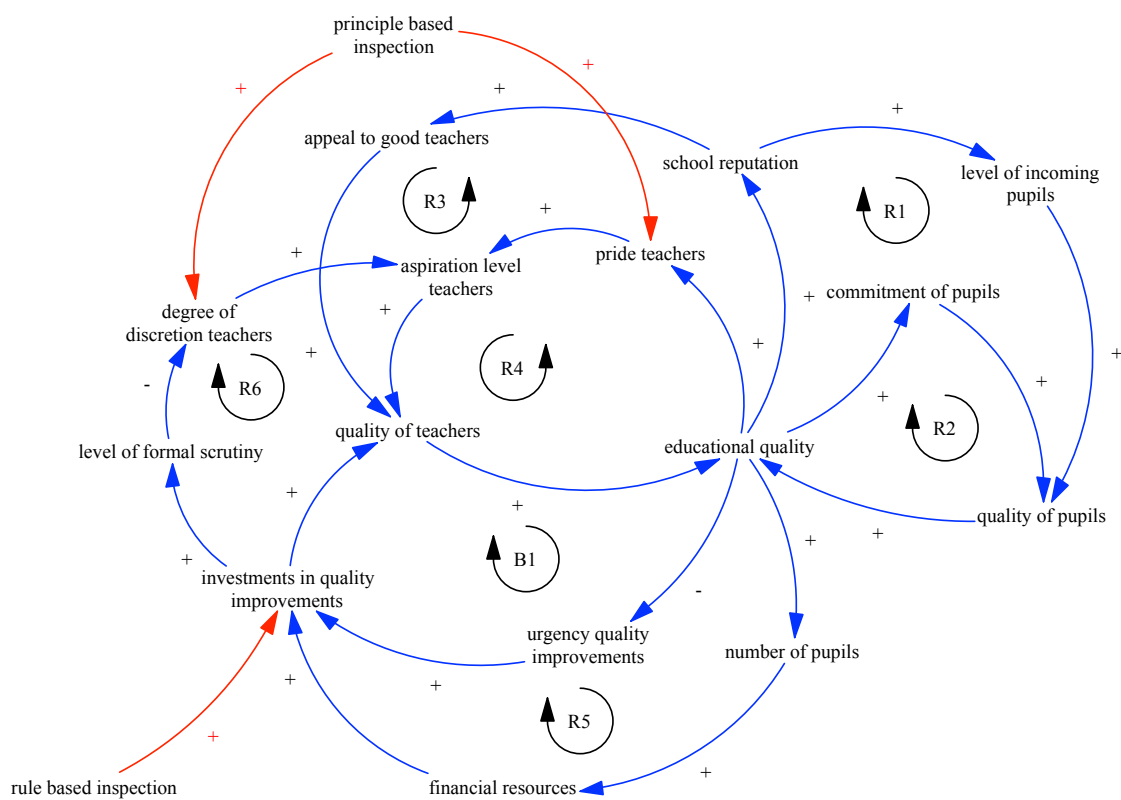


Figure 1: Rule based versus principle based inspection

### Next steps

So far, we have finished one wave of group model building sessions. These results have been used to design a survey which has been sent to other Dutch schools, in order to obtain a quantitative assessment of the prevalence of the mechanisms we found. In addition, a second wave of twelve group model building workshops (revisiting the three schools in the first wave and visiting nine new schools) will allow us to further test and expand our insights.

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