

## Chapter 2

# Changing Policies—Changing Inspection Practices? Or the Other Way Round?

Kathrin Dederling and Moritz G. Sowada

**Abstract** In many of Germany's states the procedures for school inspections were amended following completion of a first evaluation cycle. This chapter examines the way changes carried out in the course of reform were configured with respect to content and process. It is based on the assumption that school inspections represent an institution whose transformation is also influenced by the specific actions of the professionals involved, and investigates the extent to which a link can be discerned between the concrete actions of school inspectors as professionals involved in the institution of school inspection, and the changes made to that institution. Using documentary analysis and qualitative interviews with stakeholders within the system, five central changes to the formal structure of the school inspection procedure between the first and second inspection cycles are identified, (including process orientation based on core tasks and dialogue orientation based on self-evaluation). Actions of school inspectors in the run-up to procedural changes which point toward such changes are also identified. Against the backdrop of these findings the reform of the inspection process is interpreted as a blend of adaptation to changes in the institutional environment and adaptation to institution-specific processes of school inspection.

**Keywords** School inspection • Evaluation practice • Process of reform • Neo-institutionalism • Document analysis • Qualitative interviews • Policy implementation

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K. Dederling (✉)  
University of Erfurt, Nordhäuser Str. 63, 99089 Erfurt, Germany  
e-mail: kathrin.dederling@uni-erfurt.de

M.G. Sowada  
University of Münster, Bispinghof 5/6, 48143 Münster, Germany  
e-mail: moritz.sowada@uni-muenster.de

## Introduction

School inspection was introduced as a procedure of external evaluation in each German state between 2004 and 2008 as one of several reforms in the field of education (Dederling and Müller 2011; see also Huber and Gördel 2006). Just over ten years after implementation began in the first German states, schools in almost all states have been externally examined. While some states have since abolished or suspended their inspection procedures, others—having revised their procedures—have entered a second assessment cycle.

This chapter focusses its attention on those states which have undertaken reform of their inspection procedures. We take the pioneering role adopted by the state of Lower Saxony (*Niedersachsen* in German) the first German state (aligning with the inspection models of the Netherlands and Scotland) to put a procedure of external evaluation of schools into place (see Dederling and Müller 2011).

From the perspective of institutional analysis, this chapter assumes that school inspection is an institution which, while it represents a permanent regulatory system, is at the same time subject to transformation. We argue that this transformation is not determined solely by changes in the institutional environment (to which the institution adapts through transformation in order to secure its legitimacy), but that the specific actions of professionals within an institution can also exert influence (in such a way that the transformation can also be interpreted as adaptation to institution-specific processes).

Against the background of these assumptions, the chapter examines the extent to which a link can be made between concrete actions of school inspectors as professionals within the institution of school inspection, and the changes undertaken within that institution. In doing so it investigates (1) which changes can be identified in the formal structure of school inspection procedures between the first and second school inspection cycles, and (2) the extent to which certain actions were carried out by inspectors in the run-up to procedural changes and which point to those changes.

In order to answer these questions, we reference empirical findings that emerged out of national<sup>1</sup> research. We begin by defining the theoretical framework of the paper (Section “[Theoretical Framework: School Inspection as a Changing Institution](#)”), we then turn to the methodological procedure (Section “[Methodological Approach: Analysis of Public Documents and Interviews](#)”), empirical findings (Section “[Empirical Findings: The Reform of School Inspection Procedures and Actions of the Inspectors](#)”) and what we can conclude from these findings (Section “[Conclusion and Outlook](#)”).

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<sup>1</sup>In the course of the project “Experience of Lower Saxony School Inspectors”, school inspectors of the German state of Lower Saxony were questioned about their activities during the first round of inspections (see Dederling and Sowada 2013).

## Theoretical Framework: School Inspection as a Changing Institution

In line with specific theoretical perspectives, school inspection is characterised in this paper as an *institution* which is tied to an organisational context and subject to *institutional transformation*. According to a definition by Scott (2014), institutions are relatively stable social regulatory systems or structures. In the case of the institution of school inspection in Lower Saxony, it is also part of a public authority and therefore linked to an organisational form. The stability of institutions is based on the fact that they are supported by regulative, normative and cognitive elements, to varying degrees (see Scott 2014).

*Regulative elements:* These elements refer to those aspects of institutions which constrain or regulate action. Here Walgenbach and Meyer (2008) define regulations, control and sanctioning of behaviour as playing a key role. School inspections possess both a legal foundation and comprehensive procedural guidelines. In Lower Saxony, school inspections were established as an authority answerable to the Education Ministry following a collaborative project with Dutch school inspection authorities in the school year 2002/2003 and a pilot project between 2003 and 2005 (§ 123 a of Lower Saxony's School Law (NSchG), see Kultusministerium 2015). Its objectives and working methods are stipulated by the edict "School Inspection in Lower Saxony", issued 7 April 2006.

The Lower Saxony State Institute for the Quality Development in Schools (NLQ; *Niedersächsisches Landesinstitut für schulische Qualitätsentwicklung*) was established in 2011 as the successor authority to the Lower Saxony School Inspection (NSchI; *Niedersächsische Schulinspektion*) and the Lower Saxony Institute for Teacher Qualification (NiLS; *Niedersächsisches Landesamt für Lehrerbildung und Schulentwicklung*), and has been responsible for school inspection since then. The introduction of school inspections was carried out according to the concept of autonomous schools: underpinned by the idea of allowing schools greater freedom to innovate. In line with this, schools were given autonomy in the areas of financial, personal and organizational matters, but in return had to prove that their work is effective. The relevant decentralisation measures were introduced into law in 2007, when school inspections were already underway.

*Normative elements:* These refer to the prescriptive, evaluative and binding dimensions of institutions, and include standards which serve to evaluate behaviour or norms which stipulate how actions should be carried out (see Walgenbach and Meyer 2008). With regard to school inspections, we turn first to the functions relating to inspection procedures, in which functions are understood to be desirable objectives rather than actual conditions of inspection.

School inspections when first introduced, functioned as an instrument for generating knowledge. They are intended to provide school actors with data-based information on the current level of quality in different aspects of schooling. They are also an instrument of school development: In using the knowledge generated, they are designed to initiate processes of school and teaching development which

serve to compensate for qualitative deficits or to build on strengths. As an instrument of reporting or control, school inspections are intended to provide schools with a credible pool of data with which qualitative work can be justified to political authorities and interested members of the public. Finally, they also function as an instrument for communicating normative expectations of scholastic quality to schools and were expected to function as guidance for school improvement work (see Landwehr 2011).

*Cultural/cognitive elements:* These elements refer to those aspects of institutions which determine the perception of reality. The cognitive processes of the inspectors are co-determined by cultural frameworks. In terms of school inspections, the significant factors in this context include the general orientation towards performance, performance evaluation and performance improvement. The belief in the capacity of inspection to positively affect school performance is fundamental to the cultural legitimacy of school inspection.

Because institutions are essentially seen as relatively stable social entities whose stability contributes to their predictability, there has long been insufficient attention paid to issues around conditions of transformation in institutions (see Walgenbach and Meyer 2008). If change processes then become the central focus—as they are in this chapter—then the theory behind possible institutional transformations needs to be explored (at least in basic terms). However, a basic distinction can be drawn between discontinuous and continuous transformation. Discontinuous change processes can be revolutionary in nature and thereby alter institutional logic, whereas continuous transformation processes tend to represent evolutionary development within an existing institutional logic. Mahoney and Thelen (2010) propose a theory of gradual institutional transformation which operates from the premise that institutions do not remain stable over time. Instead, they believe that institutions are dynamic as issues of power and distribution are implied. Different actors are variously favoured or disadvantaged by institutions and consequently their motivation to contribute to their preservation or transformation varies too.

Mahoney and Thelen (2010) also distinguish between four types of institutional transformation: displacement, layering, drift and conversion. *Displacement* refers to the abolition of previously existing rules and their replacement with new ones. *Layering* describes the introduction of supplementary rules which alter the significance of originally existing ones. Within this typology, *Drift* refers to a transformation in which the institutional rules officially remain the same, whilst their impact nonetheless transforms due to changes in external conditions. With *Conversion*, too, the rules officially remain in place, but are interpreted and implemented differently by the participating actors. Differences between the four types of institutional transformation are summarised and illustrated in Table 2.1.

Mahoney and Thelen (2010) contend that the likelihood of institutional transformation occurring, and which, if any of the four types, are evident in that transformation, depends on the following: the characteristics of the political context, the characteristics of the institution as well as the nature of the dominant type of *change agent* in the actor constellation. With a view to the political context, the authors differentiate between strong and weak veto options which influence the type

**Table 2.1** Types of institutional transformation (after Mahoney and Thelen 2010, p. 16)

	Displacement	Layering	Drift	Conversion
Removal of old rules	Yes	No	No	No
Neglect of old rules	–	No	Yes	No
Changed impact/ enactment of old rules	–	No	Yes	Yes
Introduction of new rules	Yes	Yes	No	No

of institutional transformation. With respect to the characteristics of the institution, the extent of the margin of discretion in the interpretation and implementation of institutional regulations are used as a distinguishing criterion.

## Methodological Approach: Analysis of Public Documents and Interviews

To answer the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter, we selected a methodology which encompasses two approaches: (1) analysis of publicly accessible documents of Lower Saxony's school inspection authorities which relate to procedure and procedural changes between the first and second phases, and (2) qualitative interviews with central actors of the inspection process and its transformation, at the various levels of the school system.

For (1): This included a corpus of textual analysis which encompasses texts originating from the Ministry of Education and the NLQ (see Section “[Theoretical Framework: School Inspection as a Changing Institution](#)”), an authority answerable to it, and which relate to changes in school inspection procedures in Lower Saxony. A total of 10 documents included: the final report from the first cycle of school inspection, the new principles of class observation and manuals on school inspection procedures.

It should be noted that the documents referenced are available on the internet and were drawn up with this publication medium in mind, along with specific publication objectives. This means that the documents are not created for internal purposes, but rather for external appearances. Here we work from the assumption that it is precisely these documents in which officially sanctioned attempts at creating and justifying legitimacy are preserved. In analysing these documents, the formal/structural changes were identified whilst also identifying reasons given for the changes.

For (2): Two different empirical studies were used to form the data corpus. For the first study, Lower Saxony school inspectors were interviewed about their experience of the first inspection cycle (see Dederich and Sowada 2013).

For the second study, we interviewed individuals from various levels of the school system and who were participating in the process of procedural change (see Sowada and Dederich 2016).

In both studies, the interviewees were regarded as experts who enjoyed privileged access to information as well as knowledge (see Meuser and Nagel 2009). Expert status was linked to certain positions and functions. For the first study, we included a total of 28 of the 40 current Lower Saxony school inspectors, in the second study, we interviewed an employee of the Education Ministry, two employees of NLQ and two school inspectors who had been active in various work groups tasked with amending inspection procedures, as well as a headteacher of a school that had participated in a pilot of the amended inspection procedures and who were therefore familiar with both procedures.

Both documents and interviews were subject to textual evaluation and the analysis was computer-assisted, using the software programme MAXQDA. A hierarchically structured category system was developed with the aim of structuring the amount of data in line with the underlying technology of the programme, with text segments (codings) assigned to its various elements (codes). For the documentary analysis of the official publications, categories were formed inductively on the basis of information contained in the text; for the interviews, they were formed both deductively—on the basis of aspects contained in the interview schedule—as well as inductively, from the data itself. A technique drawing on procedures of thematic qualitative text analysis (see Kuckartz 2014; Mayring 2014) was then applied. This was followed by analysis of the published texts and coded interview transcripts through the collation, paraphrasing and analytical commentary of thematically relevant coding.

At this point it is important to emphasise that the topic of this paper was not the explicit subject of questioning in either of the two interview studies. The interview material was therefore re-analysed in light of the issue of inspectors' methods which differ from the procedural guidelines, already pointing ahead to procedural changes.

## **Empirical Findings: The Reform of School Inspection Procedures and Actions of the Inspectors**

### ***School Inspection Procedures in Lower Saxony Between 2006 and 2012***

Before presenting results of the documentary analysis and interview studies, we begin by outlining conditions prior to formal modifications—the school inspection procedure in Lower Saxony between 2006 and 2012.

In Lower Saxony, school inspection authorities—as is the case in other German states—are responsible for determining the quality of individual public schools as well as the quality of the school system, with the objective of enabling quality improvement measures.

As in every other state, school inspection in Lower Saxony was based on a normative framework with uniform quality criteria. The 16 criteria were drawn

from schools' results as well as their process qualities and were outlined in more detail in 92 sub-criteria (see Schulinspektion 2010). School inspections were carried out after schools were notified—according to standardised procedures and instruments—by trained teams of between two and four inspectors each. The inspection itself consisted of a school visit with interviews and lesson observations carried out in a fixed sequence and was preceded by analysis of school documents. At this point school inspectors primarily directed their attention to the question of whether or not the school was able to submit certain documents (e.g., pedagogical concepts). The procedure was therefore considered “product-oriented”. The extent to which the documents were actually embedded or implemented in the processes of school development was of secondary importance. For example: It was important that a school provided a school programme, but it was not necessarily checked as to what extent the goals and measures fixed in the school programme were the guideline for the actual school development work. The findings were aggregated and transferred to a strengths-and-weaknesses profile which was first reported back orally in presentations to members of the school as well as school supervisors, and then some weeks later also submitted in a written evaluation report to the schools (and the schools' supervisors).

In both oral and written feedback of results, the primary aim was to generate knowledge which could be used by the school itself to initiate development processes (i.e. school development function) (see Landwehr 2011). Elements of advice (recommendations, for example) were deliberately avoided. There were no consequences deduced from the results on the side of education policy and administration, nor were the findings published.

In contrast to inspection procedures in most German states, the Lower Saxony procedure included a fixed minimum standard and identified those schools that fell short of this standard as “school with serious defects”. Where such an assessment applied, prompt follow-up inspections were scheduled. Further state-specific variations in the Lower Saxony procedure include the absence of recommendations for action from result reports and a comparatively high level of standardisation in the procedural sequence as well as the instruments.

Between 2006 and 2012, all 3000 schools in the state of Lower Saxony were inspected using the inspection procedure described above (see NLQ 2015).

### ***The Modified Procedure: Five Key Changes in the Formal Structure***

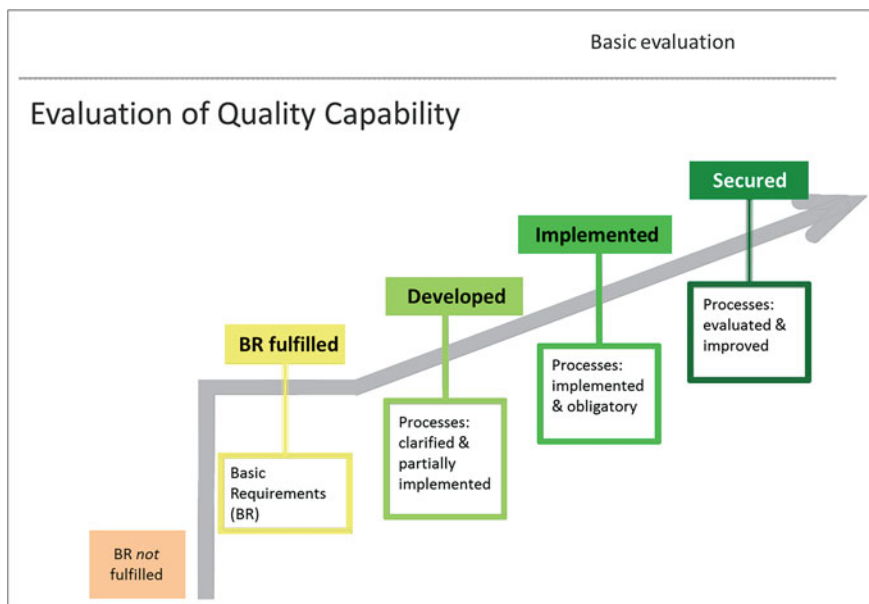
In Lower Saxony, the Ministry of Education sent a development order to the NLQ with a view to revising the school inspection procedure in the scholastic year 2011/12. It formulated concrete targets for the revision which—following a phase

of drafting and piloting—entered into law on 16 July 2014 with the circular entitled “School Inspections in Lower Saxony”. With respect to the orientation and scope of the changes undertaken, Lower Saxony here once again assumed a pioneering role among German states. The following five key aspects can be deduced from the available documents and statements by our interview partners.

### *Process Orientation on the Basis of Core Tasks*

The revised procedure is distinguished by a focus on school *processes*. The form of these processes is accorded central importance for the quality development of schools, therefore they are regarded as core tasks for schools. The core tasks (and their model) are introduced as a new instrument which further references the Orientation Framework School Quality in Lower Saxony (*Orientierungsrahmen Schulqualität in Niedersachsen*), but instead of the 16 former quality criteria, it encompasses just five areas of action (see Fig. 2.1). So with the reorientation of the procedure came a reduction in the inspection profile. This was accompanied by a reduction of the elements in the underlying level, from 100 sub-criteria to 21 core tasks.

The new procedure requires a selection from the core tasks. While five tasks are obligatory and are therefore monitored in every school inspection, two core tasks



**Fig. 2.1** Process stages (after Hoffmeister et al. 2013, p. 39; see also NLQ 2015, p. 12)



may be selected by the schools themselves. This means that only a subset of core tasks is ever considered.

The document “Core Task Model with Instructions and Examples” represents all 21 core tasks (see NLQ 2014b; see for an English summary NLQ 2014e). Each of the core tasks is briefly described and its associated requirements explained, while “Instructions and Examples on the Implementation of Core Tasks” are also provided. There are numerous cross references to other texts. Moreover, interactions between the individual core tasks are indicated. Additionally, the core tasks relate back to each of the relevant sub-criteria from the first inspection procedure. It also contains references to relevant sections of legislation and decrees as well as the qualitative areas of the “School Quality in Lower Saxony Orientation Framework”. These linkages allow the text to be positioned and integrated within a network of current and former regulations and commentary.

In the core task model for the new school inspection procedure there are explicit “References to Regulations and Additional Comments” (NLQ 2014b). The quality assurance and development tasks that are specified there are supplemented with references to School Law.

### *Dialogue Orientation Based upon Self-evaluation*

One new key feature of the procedure is that schools themselves are given much greater scope to describe how they perceive their own quality, and to compare this self-evaluation with the evaluation from the inspection—that is, the external perception, the external assessment. In official documents the term *dialogue* has become a new key concept intended to characterise the new approach (see NLQ 2014d). “Quality Assessment by the School” has been introduced as a new instrument. This is a standardised instrument with which schools are meant to assess the quality with which they fulfil core tasks and the quality of their process of further development. Here they are able to choose between various process levels (not meeting basic requirements; capable of processes; developed; established or introduced; secured and reliable) (see NLQ 2015, p. 12). Consequently, the instruments for feeding back results—particularly the written inspection report—have been redesigned. The procedure for external evaluation of schools now comprises the following steps:

- Assessment of the quality of scholastic processes by the school (self-evaluation),
- Discussions/interviews with school administrators as well as teaching faculty, with the involvement of school staff, parents, pupils,
- Assessment of the quality of scholastic processes by the inspection team/lesson observations (external evaluation),
- Comparison of the assessment of quality of scholastic processes with the school administration,

- Dialogue about the evaluation of processes and lessons with the teaching faculty/school board.

### ***Alignment with Changed Principles of Lesson Observation***

A further change in the procedure can be observed in its alignment with the changed principles of lesson observation. Overall, this reorientation of lesson observation has led to a reconceptualisation of the lesson observation form as a key instrument. The two major changes include a greater focus on observable lesson practice along with the descriptive categories used for this purpose (see NLQ 2014c). Moreover, the aggregation of individual items in the lesson observation form is no longer included. This was justified by stating that such a procedure was considered not to be sufficiently scientific (see NLQ 2014a). Additionally, a dichotomous rating scale (yes/no) is now used (see NLQ 2014c), replacing the three-step scale from the lesson observation sheet in the first inspection cycle.

In the presentation of the new principles of lesson observation, reference is made to their sound scientific foundation (see NLQ 2014a). Here scientific authorities (e.g., John Hattie, Andreas Helmke, Rainer Lersch, Hilbert Meyer) are named as direct or indirect sources of knowledge that led to and justified the revision of the observation form. The use of lesson observation sheets as an instrument across different types of school is justified on the basis that the factors that distinguish a good lesson do not depend on the type of school in question.

### ***Additional Questions and the Possibility of Ongoing Modifications to Procedure***

The revised schedule enables external evaluation on the basis of a core task model which is obligatory for all schools. This can be expanded with *additional questions* which representatives of the Ministry of Education or the NLQ can instigate as required and which are addressed and answered as part of the school inspection (NLQ 2015, p. 11). These additional questions have been introduced as a new instrument. The objective is to promptly provide the Ministry of Education with relevant strategic knowledge to aid oversight and steering of the school system. Furthermore, schools had previously complained “that key areas of their development work lay in areas which were not evaluated and therefore not appreciated” (NLQ 2012, p. 116). Current developments in school policy and practice can now be taken into consideration in the ongoing school inspection cycle upon request by the Ministry of Education. The new procedure consists of a combination of basic procedure and its expansion.

## ***Abolition of Minimum Standards and Removal of Follow-up Inspections***

Finally, “the Ministry of Education decided that failing and follow-up inspections were not compatible with the system which was developed after the first round” (NLQ 2015, p. 10). Therefore, the minimum standards that triggered follow-up inspections were abolished (see NLQ 2012, p. 114).

## ***The Actions of School Inspectors***

We now look at the extent to which school inspectors have taken action in the run-up to procedural changes, a facet which allows the transformation of school inspection to be understood as an adaptation to internal institutional processes.

As mentioned earlier, this issue was not explicitly addressed in the interview schedule whose data is referenced here. Therefore, not all interview partners mentioned the issue. Nonetheless, in our interview material there are numerous statements which describe changes to inspection practices over time. These refer predominantly to the procedural changes regarding *process orientation* and *dialogue orientation* (see earlier sections). As references we use abbreviations for our interviewees, i.e. B05 which represents interviewee number 5.

## ***Process Orientation***

As previously mentioned, in the first round the inspection procedure was distinguished by an orientation towards the products of school work. The precondition for the positive evaluation of relevant sub-criteria was that the school was able to present certain documents (such as the school’s own work plans).

However, in our interviews there are numerous indications that the school inspectors increasingly diverged from this focus on products over time (B05, B06, B11, B18, B25, B27, among others), as this inspector points out:

And I also noticed that the judgement of the inspectors in the last few years tended to change so that they noticed those things as well...And at the beginning some of them really went at them and said: ‘They do it, but they don’t have it in writing, they don’t have a concept: Minus<sup>2</sup>. And since then I have also inspected with people who...thought that way. And who now say: ‘No, they have so many different components, all they need to do is write them down, and so we can’t give them a minus.’ (B05)

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<sup>2</sup>The inspectors used a scale consisting of four evaluative categories: (double plus (++) = very positive, plus (+) = positive, minus (–) = negative and zero (0) not possible to evaluate).

Another inspector also highlighted the change in the inspectors' work practices:

Over time it became more relaxed, so that actual processes became the focus more and more...that's what I meant before, that you then have to look and see 'how does this look?' 'Is this a formality at this point and is it...implemented all the same?' (B27)

The idea expressed here of the "implemented concept" is echoed in statements from the majority of interview partners. This indicates that it is supported by most school inspectors. When good practice occurs, even without supporting documentation, this seems to suggest in the eyes of numerous inspectors that the respective documents are—at least under certain conditions—dispensable. Therefore, there is no automatic downgrading on the basis of concepts not being provided, because the corresponding concepts are seen more of an aid to and less as an essential precondition for successful school practice.

However, the decision not to downgrade is linked to certain indicators which point to the existence of a concept. The existence of a concept can be regarded as certain, if,

it can be proved that it repeatedly occurs and that it is also recognisable in protocols, for instance, that there is an understanding, so that much evidence has to be there, at least. (B11)

In justifying actions which deviate from procedural guidelines, inspectors mainly point to their intention to do better by, and to value, schools and their work (B05, B18):

So this thought has, I believe, come more and more into focus in the last few years, of acknowledging what they're doing. And not just [using] the red pen and [saying]: ten errors—gotcha. (B05)

In particular, small (primary) schools with small teaching faculties were often unable to carry out the extensive work required to record the (implemented) concepts in writing (B11, B18).

The interviewees also linked the increased process orientation in inspectors' procedures to changing expectations of school inspection with respect to schools: Whereas at the beginning of the inspection round it was sufficient that a school had begun to create its own work plans, by end of the first round they pointed to a less positive view of the matter; there is greater attention to the implementation (B05). Ultimately, the inspectors had increasingly broached this emphasis on process, and so this also became a focus of the revised inspection procedures:

We pointed to it over and over. Precisely: 'What, how is it introduced? How is it implemented?' Those types of questions. (B06)

## *Dialogue Orientation*

The inspection procedure from the first round contained some clear guidelines on the role of inspectors in the context of feedback of results. There was an emphasis

placed on distance between inspectors and schools. There was no room for advisory elements, they were to be “avoided at all costs” (B02).

Numerous inspectors clearly stated that either they or their colleagues had deviated from this procedural guideline in recent years (B02, B03, B04, B05, B06, B07, B08, B10, B12, B13, B21).

In their statements they differentiated between interviews which were carried out in the course of the school visit with school groups, and the feedback events at the end of the school visit. With regard to the *interviews*, the interviewees stated that the inspectors increasingly opened up to school actors if the latter wanted to (B02, B04). In the last two years, particularly, there had been a shift toward discussion on both sides. In these discussions they entered a dialogue “in the sense of: Inquiry is allowed, evaluations won’t be changed.” (B04). They proceeded on the premise that “every interview is essentially a bit of feedback” (B06). The “wagging pedagogical finger [has] significantly reduced” (B02, B08) and consultation “greatly increased” (B05).

In difficult cases the school administrators were asked for their assessment in interviews, and about further work they had planned in problem areas. The aim was to gain an idea of the evaluation which would help them in their standing in the school or their ongoing work. This was then recorded in the report (B13). Where there was ambivalent data, interviewees were confronted with these inconsistencies and asked to explain the situation from their point of view (B26).

In reference to the *feedback events*, too, the interview partners reported a change to their working practices—moving away from a pure “announcement” of evaluation results in the presence of school actors, toward a “dialogue” with school actors, particularly school administrators, on the evaluation results (including the way they were generated and their possible application). The extent to which this represents an exchange of information or a consultation is assessed differently by various inspectors. As one inspector explains:

But...in the last four years perhaps it has increasingly become, an exchange of information. So we have presented our view from outside. We made it clear to the headteachers how we, which perception led us to which results. In this relaxed situation, as relaxed as possible, the headteachers had an opportunity to inquire at any time, to add their own perceptions or evaluations. So it was more of a dialogic process. (B24)

Another inspector, on the other hand, describes how inspectors would take a position at the end of the school visit in the feedback discussion with the school administrators:

Yes ‘message’ is perhaps going a little far...but there was an outlook to quality development, how, from our point of view, this...school could develop. So, there [is] definitely an element of advice in there. (B08).

A third interviewee describes his flexible interpretation of the procedural guidelines:

You enter into another discussion, into a, I wouldn’t always say, into an advisory discussion, rather into a discussion, like, ‘If you haven’t really understood me, then ask me

and I'll explain it to you.' And if you understand it the right way; that is...hear the advice, then you can make it out, but I haven't given it away. I didn't say to the school, something like 'you must do this and this, school, then it will work', rather 'there is this route, and this one, and this one, and possibilities and you have to see if you've already considered them all and weighed them up. You have to, you should look and perhaps also consider, at which point does it make sense to begin,' in the sense of what I was saying before, everything is so connected that when you start working at the right point, other things come about automatically and that is an aspect you can take away with you. (B04)

On the one hand, interviewees cite the demands of the school as a reason for their dialogue-oriented procedure: They often receive requests or even (sometimes vehement) demands for recommendations for ongoing work, and with them knowledge about follow-up actions (B08, B10, B27). In some cases, this principle of give-and-take becomes explicit: There have been schools,

who said: 'great, but we...want something out of it as well', almost 'now we can really talk freely' or 'tell us, you have the experience'. The wanted to share in our experience. (B02)

In many cases the inspectors had the impression that the schools had a major interest in cooperation and that there was a significant willingness for change among the headteachers (B04).

On the other hand, in their reasoning interviewees mention their own demands, which consist in a desire to actually have an impact on schools. Here the prescribed method of feedback was not particularly helpful:

And when we were at the schools and we said: 'So, your methodological concepts are no good',... 'why not?' 'Well, we can't tell you.' Great. What good does that do them? None at all. (B05)

Because teaching faculties are left to their own devices once the school inspection is over—as long as their school is not defined as a school below standard and thus falls short of the minimum requirements—the inspectors see it as their obligation to give them at least a minimum of support.

Consequently, they rate the change in their behaviour positively; both the schools and the school inspectors were able to draw benefit from the discussions (B02). The inspectors also talk of an increased acceptance of the procedure from the school side. By responding to the schools' requests, or demands, for advice, they receive a kind of appreciation in return (B08).

Numerous statements indicate that inspectors are aware that they are not complying with the regulations (B02, B05, B06, B08, B16, B26): *"Really we weren't supposed to do it. That was never part of our duties."* (B16). However, they accepted this.

The inspectors state that the change in the school inspection procedure with regard to dialogue orientation does not represent a "real breach" (B03) in the inspectors' actions:

We have already started moving in that direction. I can't remember a single time in the last one and a half years when we just gave feedback, or we were just there with 'knowledge of results', instead it was already heading towards discussion (B03)

It becomes clear that the procedural change reflects a practice which is already occurring, ultimately formalising it as a procedural standard (B03).

### ***Further Factors***

For two of the five procedural changes—process orientation and dialogue orientation—it was possible to identify previous practices of school inspectors that pointed towards those changes. For other modifications—orientation toward changed lesson observation principles, the additional questions and ongoing procedural modifications, the abolition of minimum standards and the removal of follow-up inspections—no such reported practices could be identified. In these cases, there were other factors at work which eventually led to a revision of the inspection procedure. For the sake of completeness, this section will briefly mention the reasons interviewees gave for the procedural changes. These point toward changes in the institutional environment of school inspections to which school inspections have evidently adapted with their procedural changes. In their reasoning, the interviewees begin with the perception of the instrument's relatively low effectiveness in the area of school development. Empirical educational research studies on school inspection in Germany that have since become available, prove, as do their own observations, that it is particularly in the *middle-range*, those schools whose results were neither particularly good nor particularly bad, that school development activities were less likely to take place (see e.g., Wurster and Gärtner 2013). Furthermore, interviewees addressed unintended effects of school inspection by referring to 'window dressing' and the schools' negative reaction to minimum standards and the associated risk of follow-up inspections. The latter, according to statements from our interviewees, had been brought up by teachers' interest groups who were calling for an abolition of this element of the procedure. Interviewees also point to the poor evaluation of a handful of qualitative areas among the majority of schools in the course of the first inspection round, a fact which they believe justifies a more focussed view of school quality in precisely these areas of deficiency instead of the broader view which previously prevailed, encompassing all quality areas regarded as key.

With a view to the reconceptualisation of the lesson observation form, our data indicates that there was previously a perception of an insufficient scientific foundation for the instrument.

The formulation of additional questions is presented as the school inspectors' reaction to criticism from schools that the specific focal points of their work were not being sufficiently considered. Here, however, aspects of education policy play a part. In Lower Saxony, education policy makers had considered introducing incident-related school inspection. While this never went ahead, the instrument of additional questions could well be considered to have evolved out these discussions.

The procedural changes presented are intended as a response to the stated shortcomings of the first inspection procedure. The interviewees specify that a shift in the primary function attributed to the procedure is intended to help school actors perceive school inspection as an instrument for development rather than one of control. Thereby, it was aimed at securing greater acceptance for the procedure from school staff (see also NLQ 2015, p. 12).

## Conclusion and Outlook

This paper pursued the overarching question of the extent to which a link can be determined between the concrete actions of school inspectors as professionals within the institution of school inspection, and the changes undertaken within that institution. We investigated, (1) which changes can be identified in the formal structure of school inspection procedures between the first and second inspection cycles, and (2) the extent to which certain actions were practised by inspectors in the run-up to procedural changes which point to those changes.

With reference to question 1, five key procedural changes were identified: Process orientation on the basis of core tasks, dialogue orientation on the basis of self-evaluation, alignment with changed principles of lesson observation, the introduction of so-called additional questions and ongoing procedural modifications as well as the abolition of minimum standards and removal of follow-up inspections.

For question 2, practices which point to the resulting changes were identified for two of the procedural changes. With reference to process orientation and dialogue orientation, the inspectors transcended the procedural mandate: a mandate which called for product orientation as well as the neutral communication of inspection results, devoid of advisory character—particularly in the latter years of the first round of school inspection. Their actions were distinguished by an increasing consideration of process and a stronger element of exchange in interview and feedback situations. This provides proof for the opening assumption that the specific actions of professionals within the institution of school inspection can exercise influence on its transformation. The transformation of the school inspection procedure can therefore be understood, in part, as an adaptation to internal institutional processes.

However, from the documentary analysis and evaluation of interviews, we were also able to generate extensive evidence that a number of changes had taken place in the institutional environment of school inspection, to which school inspection had apparently adapted via a series of procedural changes. In this respect, the transformation of school inspection can be regarded as an adaptation of the institution whose aim is to secure its legitimacy. Some of these adaptation trends are addressed next (for more detail, see Sowada and Dederling 2016):

*Trend of alignment with developments in the school landscape:* Process orientation is presented as an adaptation to schools' more extensive experience in the



area of quality development. The option of choosing two of the core tasks to be reviewed indicates that the school's local circumstances are being taken into consideration. Finally, the orientation of the new procedure toward dialogue can also be understood as alignment with developments in the school environment; the sometimes negative perception of school inspectors is inconsistent with their own ethos as pedagogues. Doubtless the intention is also to improve the image of school inspection overall.

*Trend of making procedural elements more flexible:* With the new option of choosing some evaluation areas, there is also evidence of more varied practice among school inspectors. The introduction of additional questions also points in this direction.

*Trend of responding to research:* The response to findings in empirical educational research on the effectiveness of school inspections with respect to their development function may have contributed to the abolition of the minimum standard. The increased alignment of the procedure toward dialogue with schools could also be indirectly interpreted as a reaction to empirical knowledge of the limited, or negative, effect of school inspections.

*Trend of convergence with scientific standards:* In the case of reorientation of lesson observation form, there has been an increase in the alignment with science as a point of reference. At the same time interpretation of findings from the observed lesson has opened to school staff. Overall, we consider the revision of lesson observation form to be an example of *scientification* understood as the modelling of the instruments in alignment with recognised scientific standards such as objectification through standardisation. With regards to legitimacy, adopting scientific standards may confer legitimacy rooted in a faith for science to school inspection as an institution.

Overall, the transformation of school inspection in Lower Saxony presented here can be interpreted as a blend of adaptation of the procedure to changes in the institutional environment, and institutional processes that are *internal* to school inspection itself.

Against the backdrop of Mahoney and Thelen's (2010) theory on gradual transformation of institutions and the different types of transformation they define—*displacement*, *layering*, *drift* and *conversion*—the change processes in Lower Saxony can be characterised as *displacement*: through the changes undertaken, previously applicable regulations were revoked and replaced with new regulations. Additionally, the change processes can be understood as *drift*: as the schools' increasing desire for advice indicates, the institutional rules may remain the same formally, but their impact has transformed due to a change in external conditions.

The findings presented from our two interview studies indicate that—particularly in the case of dialogue orientation—this *displacement* was preceded by a phase of *conversion*, in which initially the existing regulations formally remained the same, but were interpreted and implemented differently by the school inspectors. Even before the procedural revision came into effect, school inspectors did not always present results to schools in an impersonal and neutral way—despite procedural regulations to the contrary—rather they opted for a more dialogue-oriented

approach which incorporated elements of indirect advice (see Dederer and Sowada 2013). The transformation processes of the type *conversion*, it can be argued, have led to minor *displacements*; here, the institution of school inspection may have changed, but its essential form remained the same.

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