**Inspections of educational networks: exploring conditions for their effects in four case studies**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the accountability of educational networks through inspections and seeks to answer the question *How are educational networks inspected, and what are the conditions for their impact on the functioning and performance of networks?*

Four cases of European Inspectorates of Education -England, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, and Northern Ireland – are presented. Each of these has reconsidered their roles and ways of working in the context of network governance in recent years. The case studies build on existing research into networks and their accountability and uses this to offer a detailed snapshot of each. The findings aim to contribute to further research on the accountability of networks, hypothesizing that external accountability of networks is most effective when 1) single member and network-level accountability are well aligned, 2) external inspection and monitoring is responsive to the purpose, properties and the development of the network, 3) inspection focuses on the performance of networks (instead of compliance to regulation), and 4) there is high trust between schools, network, inspector/Inspectorate (and active management of that trust).

# Introduction

Education systems have become increasingly more decentralized over the past decade as many governments recognize the limitations of centralized policy in ensuring quality and equity in education. Given the ‘messy-ness’ of education reform, where improvement of student outcomes is entangled with addressing other social problems (poverty, crime etc), hierarchical ‘command and control’ types of coordination are no longer seen to be effective in responding to the myriad of local problems and demands in education (Burns and Köster, 2016). In many countries, decision-making is therefore shifted to the local level in an attempt to offer schools and stakeholders more flexibility in responding to local needs; OECD data collected in 2017 reveal that the largest share of decisions is taken at the lower secondary school level among the 38 countries and economies with available data (OECD, 2018).

Wilkoszewski and Sundby (2014) explain how this decentralisation process has resulted in an increased sharing of tasks and functions between multiple actors located on different levels of the system and the involvement of multiple actors and stakeholders (teachers, parents and students) in the organisation and provision of education. The result is a complex system comprised of dynamic relationships between the various actors who are dependent on one another in various ways, and where power is shared across the levels of governance.

Such a system is rooted in what scholars in the field of public administration describe as ‘network governance’, a third form of coordination that emerged in the 1990s as an alternative to markets or hierarchies (Meuleman, 2008). In network governance, actors (such as schools, youth centres) are interdependentand trust, diplomacy and collaboration are the principles underlying this type of coordination. In education, the development towards network governance has taken two basic forms. On the one hand, schools have increasingly looked for opportunities to form *voluntary networks* to enable them to increase their effectivity, efficiency and legitimacy. On the other hand, governments have sought to bring schools together to form networks in order to achieve policy goals and, in that process, have even introduced *mandatory network cooperation* with sometimes a set of prescribed network outcomes*.*

Examples of this mandated type of networking can be found in the Netherlands where mainstream schools and schools for special education are required to work together to provide inclusive education. In Northern Ireland, voluntary area learning communities are considered to be a valuable forum for planning and collaboration to meet the needs of pupils and offer a wide range of subjects. Both types of networks are at the core of ensuring a high quality education system and of coordinating educational improvement.

Reliance on collaboration between schools, or between schools and other service providers to coordinate education systems, has far-reaching consequences for existing accountability structures. Current accountability systems were primarily developed to support hierarchical control of individual school quality by inspecting schools’ compliance with legislation or measuring their performance on a centralized framework through high-stakes testing (OECD, 2013). This type of accountability of individual schools arguably contradicts the very core of network governance as it discounts the fact that collaboration involves lateral relationships which are built on non-hierarchical structures, often outside of central government control (e.g. Bovens et al, 2008; Hooge et al, 2012). Centralized accountability arrangements of individual organizations may even be counterproductive to the aims and purposes of network governance, as the emphasis on individual schools’ performance targets gets in the way of them working together and may hinder cross-cutting work. If governance in education shifts to more localized network governance this is likely to have implications for the way schools are held to account; external accountability needs to move away from centralized approaches to quality control, to more agile and contextual methods of evaluation.

This paper specifically looks at the accountability of educational networks through inspections to understand the types of approaches that may support the development of networks and explore the conditions under which such inspections are effective. Given the lack of evidence in this area, this paper seeks to contribute to further theory development on external inspections of networks. We present four cases of Inspectorates of Education (England, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, and Northern Ireland) that have reconsidered their roles and ways of working in the context of network governance, answering the following research question:

*How are educational networks inspected, and what are the conditions for their impact on the functioning and performance of networks?*

# Conceptual framework

Our conceptual framework draws on the literature on inter-organizational networks to understand the structure and outcomes of networks and how inspections can improve these. Jones and Van de Ven (2013, p.123) define such networks as ‘a set of organizations related through common affiliations or through exchange relations’. Here we are interested in what they call ‘human services networks’ of education and welfare in communities, and particularly (mandated/contracted) networks of schools and other service providers, including parents and students.

Kenis and Provan (2006) and Hu et al (2015) explain how most research on organizational networks can be broadly characterized by two basic approaches: the ‘network analytical’ approach and the ‘network as a form of governance’ approach. Network analytical approaches focus mainly on micro-level, egocentric aspects of networks, using concepts such as density, centrality, and structural holes to understand relational configurations and how these configurations relate to certain outcomes. Education scholars (e.g. Daly, Moolenaar) have used these concepts to understand school staff networks and the type of structure and relationships that support or constrain school improvement.

In contrast, the ‘network as a form of governance’ treats the entire network as the unit of analysis, viewing the network as a mechanism of coordination, alternative to markets and hierarchical control (e.g. Meuleman, 2011). Networks are treated as discrete forms of governance, characterizing them as having unique structural characteristics, modes of conflict resolution, and bases of legitimacy. Recent studies in education that fit this approach are for example Greany and Higham’s (2018) work on Multi-Academy Trusts in England and Hadfield and Ainscow’s (2018) study on regional school improvement consortia in Wales. The unit of analysis is not a node (ego) or a dyad to depict relational configurations, but the complete network, or set of networks in a country.

Evidence of positive effects of network governance in education is mixed at best, according to a recent reviews by the OECD (2018) and West (2010); understanding the causality of networks and network activities to changes in the classroom and student outcomes is difficult and making strong causal inferences is also constrained by the great variety in types of networks we find across countries. Inspections of networks will aim to improve outcomes in areas of teaching and learning and the structure and governance of the network that would support such outcomes. In our four case studies we therefore explored if, and how inspections change network outcomes, structure, and governance. Below we’ll describe these concepts in more detail.

## *Network outcomes*

Network-level outcomes are defined by Provan and Kenis (2008, p.230) as ‘the attainment of positive outcomes that could not normally be achieved by individual organizational participants acting independently’. Outcomes might include open communication, strengthened network capacity and production of knowledge to solve common problems. Ehren and Perryman (2017) build on Gray et al (2003) categorization of network outcomes, and Popp et al (2014) levels of inter-organisational network analysis to provide examples of network-level outcomes in education. These outcomes go beyond the remit of each individual school by, for example, addressing low achievement orientation in communities. The categories and examples they provide are:

1. Creating synergy where partnership adds value by combining mutually reinforcing interests.

Schools in a network can, for example, benefit from membership by maximizing curriculum range, sharing playgrounds, or sharing professional development.

1. Developing an ideological consensus through a process of transformation leading to, for example, shared views on how to educate children and promote social mobility.
2. Enhancing (financial) efficiency through the maximization of the use of resources across the network partners. Burgess (2016) for example describes how educational networks in England (Multi-Academy Trusts) use available funding more efficiently through value for money procurement, sharing back-office services, or using school infrastructure across a number of schools.

## *Network structure and governance*

Several authors describe *how* inter-organisational networks can be organized effectively to achieve their intended outcomes, describing structures and modes of governance. According to Berthod et al (2016), effectiveness of networks is a product of network properties, such as governance mode, structure and context. Modes of governance can vary from non-brokered shared governance to highly brokered by one organization, and from participant-led to externally led.

Non-brokered, or *shared governance* would see the network governed completely by the organizations that comprise it. Here all member organizations interact to govern the network (Kenis and Provan, 2006). The network would be dense and highly reciprocal and have decentralized decision-making processes. The other end of the continuum would see highly brokered governance with few direct organization-to-organization interactions, except regarding operational issues such as the transfer of information on services. In this type of brokered governance, one single centralized *lead* *organization* would coordinate the network and collaboration between members. Variations on this brokered / non-brokered dimension would include a single administrative organization taking on key governance activities (network administrative organization or NAO), or where members divide governance responsibilities among various network subsets, with no single organization taking on significant governance tasks. Examples of brokered governance are large national Multi-Academy Trusts in England where an administrative back office leads the collaboration. A non-brokered network can be found in Bulgaria where a group of 10 (primary and secondary) schools share joint responsibility for the development and implementation of peer reviews to improve parental involvement across the schools.

According to Provan and Kenis (2008), network governance needs to be adapted to its size and relations between network members. They explain how larger networks will struggle to have effective forms of bottom-up shared governance as members will either ignore critical network issues or spend significant amounts of time trying to coordinate large numbers of organizations, particularly when participants are geographically dispersed. Larger networks often also face problems with the distribution of trust across the network and with ensuring goal consensus. Such large networks are therefore likely to be more effective with brokered forms of network governance, where a separate administrative entity governs the network. Shared governance is the preferred alternative when trust is pervasive throughout the network and provides a strong basis for bottom-up collaboration among (a small number of) members.

## Accountability of networks

Networks are not undisputed and various authors have raised concerns over their behaviour and performance. Janssens and Ehren (2016) for example talk about a diffusion of roles and responsibilities when schools become part of a network, with limited clarity for parents or teachers over where to complain or who to approach when things go wrong. Ehren and Perryman (2017) explain how the competition between schools in Multi-Academy Trusts prevents effective collaboration, or how transaction costs increase when head teachers have to travel to other schools for meetings. An inquiry of MATs by the UK Education Select Committee posed similar questions around the effectiveness and efficiency of Multi-Academy Trusts (e.g. Schools Week, March 11, 2016) and called for the introduction of accountability of these Trusts. The need for external accountability and evaluation of networks is also expressed in the literature on inter-organisational networks. Popp et al. (2014) for example describe how strong ongoing monitoring and evaluation of networks from the earliest stages of their development is an important strategy for identifying and addressing any unintended negative consequences of these networks.

The dynamic nature and complexity of relationships between partners in the network however introduces a range of difficulties for their external accountability. Several authors (Schwartz, 2003; Janssens and Ehren, 2016) explain how the aims and objectives of networks are often not centrally defined, but result from collaborative efforts and fragile compromises between partners with different priorities. Such issues complicate external accountability as most network partners will be ill at ease with being held to account for something they don’t have complete control over. Traditional top down models of accountability will have great difficulty in disentangling how being in the network has impacted on the performance of its individual members, or to what extent each member has contributed to network-level outcomes. As Klijn and Koppejan (2014) point out, most accountability systems are firmly grounded in monocentric, state-oriented models of governance, which presuppose that ‘accountor’ and ‘accountee’ are known entities embedded in a clear-cut governance system. When public policy is produced in complex networks featuring multiple, overlapping coordination mechanisms, the very identification and make up of accountability relationships becomes problematic according to Romzek (2000). An important question is therefore how networks can be held accountable so as to improve their outcomes.

Janssens and Ehren (2016) and Ehren et al (2016) have used Alkin’s (2013) framework of evaluation theories to develop a set of guidelines to inform such an accountability framework that is responsive to the specific structure and outcomes of networks. They give a description of the *methodology*, *judgements* and *user* *focus and involvement* in holding educational networks to account, particularly by Inspectorates of Education. In their description, they juxtapose centralized accountability of networks (using a standardized framework for all networks) to a more bottom-up model which is more fit for the purpose of network governance.

Their bottom-up model includes a qualitative, interpretative and flexible approach of validating good practices of localized and collaborative provision and improvement of education, such as through the use of ‘developmental evaluation’ or ‘participatory evaluation’. In Ehren et al’s (2016) model, Inspectorates facilitate evaluations which are goal-free, flexible and specific to context and to information needs of (a network of) schools and stakeholders. Network members and their stakeholders are involved in all the phases of the accountability exercise, from developing the standards and methods for evaluation, to deciding on how to improve network performance and potential consequences for failure. Such an approach allows Inspectorates of Education to engage network members and their stakeholders in making judgements about what type of behaviour is effective and appropriate in which settings and allows for a deep understanding of how networks operate and are effective in solving local problems. Inspectorates facilitate evaluations and inspect against local targets, instead of making judgements on a centralized framework. Janssens and Ehren (2016) and Ehren et al (2016) hypothesize that a bottom-up model supports networks in setting and working towards locally meaningful purposes, while simultaneously bringing order to the diffuse and sometimes ambiguous nature of collaborative arrangements.

# Methodology

This study included four exploratory case studies of the accountability of an educational network in England, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, and Bulgaria. The countries were selected to include a variety in types of networks established (mandated versus voluntary; brokered versus non-brokered governance) and various approaches to their external accountability (centralized to more bottom-up): from formal, mandated networks in England and the Netherlands to informal, voluntary networks in Bulgaria and Northern Ireland, and centralized inspections in England and the Netherlands, to more bottom-up approaches to external accountability in Bulgaria and Northern Ireland. In each country we selected one network that had recently been inspected (in England and in Northern Ireland) or was going to be inspected in the time frame of our study (the Netherlands and Bulgaria). As the networks were selected for their participation in inspections, they are not representative for the types of networks in each country. Rather, they should be seen as examples of inspections of networks at the time of our study where our findings serve to contribute to theory development.

Table 1. Selection of four country case studies

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | *Properties of the network* |  |
|  | *Mandated/**voluntary* | *Location and size* | *Governance of the network* | *Accountability* |
| Multi-academy trusts (England) | Combination | National (19 primary and secondary schools) | Brokered, NAO | Centralized inspection and RSC monitoring on standardized framework |
| Cooperatives for inclusive education (the Netherlands) | Mandated | Regional (200 primary schools) | Brokered, NAO | Centralized inspection on standardized framework |
| Area learning communities (Northern Ireland) | Voluntary  | City (40 primary and secondary schools) | Brokered, NAO | Combination: centralized area-based inspection and bottom-up monitoring by district inspector |
| The Sofia peer review network (Bulgaria) | Voluntary | City (10 primary and secondary schools) | Non-brokered, shared | Bottom-up: thematic inspection |

## *Data collection*

The four networks in our study had a different start date and an inspection at different time points during our study. We fitted our data collection to the timing of the inspection event: scheduling interviews pre and post network inspection in the Netherlands and Bulgaria, and interviews after the inspection in Northern Ireland and England. A protocol for data collection across various time points was developed for each of the four cases, describing a set of indicators to measure the inspection of the network, the changes made to structure, governance and outcomes of the network in response to inspections and outlining which respondents to interview and documents/data to collect at each of the time points. As all the cases included interviews with network members and inspectors after the inspection, a shared interview protocol was developed and used to collect data on the impact of the inspection. The protocol is summarized in the table below with further detail on country-specific data collection and analysis below the table.

Table 2. Data collection

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Timeframe** |
| Interviews with the network. The sample included:* The network manager/coordinator, representative of the network authority
* Representatives of committees/bodies functioning on the level of the network
* One representative on the management and teaching level of schools/service providers in the network

Interviews with inspectors (and/or peer reviewers) of the network Questionnaires distributed to those not covered in interviews (as a backup)Data and document analyses (e.g. inspection reports, performance data, self-evaluation/peer review reports, school improvement plan, annual reports)Observation of the network inspection (only in the Netherlands and Bulgaria) | Prior to inspection (1-2 weeks)Immediately after inspection (2-3 weeks after inspection)6 months after inspection  |

In England, data collection and analysis drew on archival material from the creation of the Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) under investigation up to the end of this study, a period of 5.5 years. In addition, interviews were conducted with 6 head teachers, the CEO of the MAT, 6 Ofsted inspectors and the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC). This was done to understand how the MAT was held to account over the 5.5 years of its initiation up to the end of our study, and how it changed in response to the external accountability process. The data generated was used to reconstruct a sequence of events which was used to explore how the network changed in response to its external accountability context.

The data collection in West Belfast followed a concurrent mixed design and consisted of four distinct phases. Phase 1 saw the collation and analysis of external examination results (GCSE and A level) over a five-year period from secondary schools in the network. Data provided by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, the Department of Education and the West Belfast Area Learning Community (ALC) and data sets relating to examination results was analysed for patterns of performance following the area-based inspection. Phase 2 consisted of an electronic survey administered to all school principals in the network (n=28). Phase 3 consisted of a series of one-hour semi-structured interviews with a sample of school principals (n = 18). Finally, the area Inspection report of West Belfast, and the ALC’s response to the inspection was analysed.

In Bulgaria, data was collected in the form of interviews with all the (10) principals and inspectors, document analysis, questionnaires to all the teachers (90% response rate) and all the parents and students (response rate between 30 – 80%) at four different time points: after the school self-evaluation and before the peer review, after the peer review and before the inspection, immediately after the inspection and 8 months after the inspection. The peer review and inspection was also observed.

The Dutch case study concentrated on a large cooperative for inclusive education. It included semi-structured pre and post inspection interviews with two senior-level staff members of the inspectorate and three senior-level staff respondents from (within) the cooperative, (the managing director of the entire cooperative and two coordinators of a sub region within the cooperative). Additionally, the inspection report, the written response of the network to that report, and an internal memo which explained the inspection outcomes to schools in the network was analysed. Furthermore, a survey was sent to a larger sample of cooperatives in both primary and secondary education (response rate 41%), while the inspection reports for a random sample of 25 cooperatives for primary education was analysed to understand potential trends in topics addressed.

*Data analysis*

Each interview and document in the four case studies was coded according to the variables in our conceptual framework; codes were subsequently used to collate a case study file per country that provided a chronological timeline of changes in each of the variables (in six-month time frames) and evidence of how the inspection had changed the structure, governance and outcomes of the network.

Each country wrote a case study report that described the inspection event in terms of the methodology, involvement of users and the assessment of, and feedback to the network. Each report also provided a detailed account of the structure, governance and outcomes of the network, how these evolved over the years of our study and particularly in response to the inspection event. A final report of the study explored common themes across the four cases.

The following section summarizes the main findings for each case study. Detailed reports of each of the case studies are published on <project website>.

# Inspections of Multi-Academy Trusts (MAT) in England

In England, the Department for Education (DfE) has incentivized a number of school-to-school partnerships, particularly the MAT model. In its 2016 white paper, the Department set out the government’s intention to move all England’s schools to become autonomous academies by 2022, and all academies to become part of a MAT (DfE, 2016). MATs are chains of publicly funded independent schools (academies) which are run by a Trust (Board of Directors). The collaboration between schools under the authority of a Trust is thought to be the best long term formal arrangement for the improvement of weaker schools, as the sharing of back office services creates economies of scale and school-to-school support prevents isolation of failing schools. Schools and their Trust must follow the law and guidance on admissions, exclusions and special education needs, but benefit from greater freedom insofar as they can set pay and conditions for their staff, decide on how to deliver the curriculum and have the ability to change the length of school days and terms.

MATs are held accountable by both the English Inspectorate, Ofsted and RSCs who act on behalf of the DfE. Ofsted and the RSCs evaluate both the quality of individual schools and the Trust. Ofsted regularly inspects schools and evaluates MATs through a ‘batched inspection’ and review. A ‘batched inspection’ includes coordinated visits to all the schools in the Trust within a period of two weeks, and interviews with central staff of the Trust to understand issues surrounding school improvement and governance. The outcomes of the batched inspection and MAT review are summarized in a public letter. RSCs have an important role in the establishment and monitoring of academies and MATs. They negotiate and monitor the funding agreements between Trusts and the Department for Education (DfE) via school visits and term meetings with representatives of the Trust, looking at assessment data and Ofsted inspection outcomes. RSCs have the power to place schools under the authority of another Trust, for example when schools are failing; this process is called ‘rebrokering’ and is preceded by a ‘pre-warning notice’.

*Structure and governance of the network*

Our English case study included a nationally operating MAT with a head office in the South-West of England. The Trust started with one secondary academy and grew over time to a peak of 19 schools (both primary and secondary) in its third year. Schools are dispersed across the country in several different counties, with some in the same county as the head office, while others are located over 150 miles away.

Our case study MAT is an example of a formal, mandated network; the centralized governance by the Trust and back office staff is regulated through a funding agreement between the Trust and the DfE. Schemes of delegation between the Trust and member schools introduces elements of hierarchical control where the external accountability of both the Trust and its schools follows a similar vertical logic.

*Accountability of the network*

Although schools were regularly inspected by Ofsted, the accountability of the Trust only began in its fourth year and took the form of termly meetings with the RSC, a batched inspection and MAT review. The RSC discussed outcomes of individual schools and the Trust’s support systems for failing schools in his meeting with the CEO of the MAT. The MAT was one of the first to receive a batched inspection where these inspections were, at the time of our study, prioritized for MATs with an above average of failing schools. The batched inspection included visits of a selection of schools over a period of two weeks, looking at common issues across all the schools and discussing these in the MAT review at the end of the inspection.

The batched inspection resulted in reports of each individual school inspection as well as an outcome letter which set out strengths and weaknesses in how the MAT supports school improvement. In several single school inspection reports, comments were also made on where the Trust needed to improve its structures and support of individual academies. The outcome letter of the batched inspection included recommendations on the gathering and analysis of pupil outcomes and attendance, alterations to the headteacher performance management system to include targets on the performance of vulnerable groups, and the development of a coherent cross-trust strategy to improve the support of, and provision for, these pupils.

Over the course of the study, individual schools were also monitored by RSCs, particularly when schools were put in a ‘failing’ category by Ofsted. The outcomes of individual school inspections signalled increased monitoring of the Trust by the RSC who commenced quarterly meetings with the CEO of the Trust halfway through our study. These were used to discuss the Trust’s improvement plans for its failing schools and offer support and training to the CEO.

*Impact of network accountability*

The MAT changed substantially during our study, both in how schools are governed as well as in the size and membership of schools. These changes reflect the wider changes in the system and the maturing of the MAT-model where the monitoring of the RSCs and the batched inspection served to communicate some of the good practices of more successful MATs. Most of the changes seem to be motivated by the need to better coordinate the preparation for single school inspections and ensure schools perform well on the Ofsted framework. As one head teacher explains:

 *“well obviously it’s a benchmark isn’t it, it’s a marker for them [the Trust] to know how well their schools are doing. It’s…I’m going to say a status symbol but I don’t…well I do mean it, they do like to say we’ve got X amount of Outstanding schools, X amount of Good schools, of course they do, that’s how they are viewed by the outside world. So it’s important to them.”*

Changes included increased centralized control over, and monitoring of curriculum, assessment and school improvement; a pause in the growth of the Trust and the establishment of a regional structure of school collaboration with an executive head who acts as an intermediary between the Trust and the schools in that particular region.

The high stakes nature of single school inspections also shaped the MAT’s internal structure in key operational areas. Examples are:

* support from the Trust and Ofsted ‘outstanding’ or ‘good’ schools were allocated to schools judged to ‘require improvement’ or schools in ‘special measures’, creating a culture of short-termism which constrains the development of more sustainable mechanisms for internal quality control to monitor, support and improve all schools over time
* distribution of resources was (until year 6) tied to Ofsted school inspection grades where schools in special measures had to pay a higher membership fee
* head teachers’ performance targets were set around Ofsted grades as well as specific standards in the inspection framework
* the allocation of schools to regional hubs relied significantly on their Ofsted grade, ensuring a mixture of schools with good and failing grades as an indicator of available and required support capacity
* Governing bodies of schools with failing Ofsted grades were replaced by Improvement Boards with Trust representatives who have a school improvement background.

These examples indicate how internal quality control in the MAT is focused on the performance of individual schools as measured in Ofsted frameworks. We found little development of network-level outcomes that go beyond what is measured and contributes to single school outcomes (such as transitioning of students from primary to secondary).

# Cooperatives for inclusive education in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, new legislation was implemented in 2014 requiring schools to work in partnerships to provide inclusive education for all children under 152 new education authorities (77 in primary education, 75 in secondary education). Each new education authority now governs a set of regular and special needs schools and ensures that these schools collaborate in the provision of care and high-quality education to each individual pupil. The Inspectorate of Education developed a new (centralized, standardized) inspection framework to inspect the quality and functioning of these cooperatives. The new framework and inspection method was put in place from 2015/2016 onwards and followed a risk-based approach, looking at available performance data such as the number of pupils referred to special needs education, and the number of pupils out of school. Where an initial analysis of data indicates risks, the Inspectorate would undertake a full inspection of the network, using the inspection framework for cooperative chains to assess three areas: outcomes, management and organization, and quality assurance. Outcomes here are understood as a cooperative carrying out its tasks according to legislation, providing a consistent set of support facilities for all schools to ensure that all pupils receive the educational support they need.

*Structure and governance of the network*

The Dutch case study included a cooperative for inclusive education in primary education with over 200 schools, governed by over 20 school boards. Under the new legislation, the budget for inclusive education (which was now set on the network-level, instead of for each individual school) was cut which meant that the network started with a deficit. As the size of the network was considered unmanageable, a substructure was introduced of three regional subnetworks, to allow for more effective collaboration. The board of the cooperative consisted of representatives of the school boards from each sub-region. In addition, a managing director had been appointed for the cooperative, and it established working groups to coordinate exchange of support services, prepare central policy, and exchange information and good practices. The cooperative had decided to adopt the ‘school model’ of budget allocation, where the available budget was transferred directly to schools, instead of using available resources for the centralized provision of support and services for inclusive education.

*Accountability of the network*

The external inspection of the cooperative took place in 2016 and reported on the performance of the entire cooperative, the legal entity for the inspection. During the inspection, the existence of subregions was acknowledged as the inspectors organized round tables in which delegates of each subregion were interviewed separately to explain their specific policies and support structures for inclusive education.

Interviewees spoke about the supportive approach of inspectors who were not (yet) rigorously applying the entire set of 18 inspection indicators in their evaluation of the cooperative, acknowledging the fact that it was still developing. One of the inspectors also explained that the Inspectorate was still refining the relatively new inspection framework for inclusive education. Inspectors felt that a supportive role was in order as cooperatives (including this one) were willing to improve and, given the way schools were forced into collaboration, already had a difficult starting position; a supportive inspection role was considered to be more effective according to the inspector, compared to enforcing compliance to all the indicators. Both the inspector and the managing director felt that the cooperative needed time to develop its internal structure for collaboration and to set targets for the provision and outcomes of inclusive education, related to the inspection framework.

*Impact of network accountability*

Our findings indicate that the cooperative primarily increased its internal monitoring with additional reporting requirements of individual schools and school boards in response to the network inspection with little improvement in the actual collaboration between schools towards an integrative offer of inclusive education. The lack of integration of members into the network is not so much caused by the inspection, but by the original set-up and structure of the cooperative.

The managing director of the network, for example, described how there was a lack of collaboration between schools from the start of the cooperative. This was reinforced by the financial structure chosen which saw the budget allocation for inclusive education sent directly to schools, according to pupil numbers (a school-based model of financing) instead of using the budget to develop a set of shared services for inclusive education across schools (e.g. a psychologist working across schools). The delegation of budgets to individual schools implies that schools can continue working in silos under the authority of their separate school boards and have little incentive to integrate into the cooperative.

Some schools faced a budget cut after the introduction of the Inclusive Education Act, which seemed to cause further animosity towards the cooperative. Respondents spoke about energy being spent on discussing the internal structure of the network, instead of focusing on the provision of inclusive education across the cooperative:

“[…] if I look at what we are doing primarily, then it is about bringing [the subnetworks] together […] all these matters are blocking a development of quality at the moment […].We are really very good in first thinking about form and only then about content […].”

A shared understanding and increased willingness to collaborate seemed to emerge only at the level of sub regions, where teachers and head teachers shared trust in one another and had a history of constructive collaboration:

“There is growing preparedness to work together within the sub region and growing cooperation with special education […]. But at the work floor we have found each other. We have the same principles, the same vision, the same way of looking at children, the same vision for teachers.”

This high level of trust and existing collaboration in the sub regions, however, was also judged to be a potential cause of disintegration of the cooperative as a whole. As both the inspector and one of the respondents explained, the cooperative was too large to allow for any meaningful collaboration and they expressed the expectation that the cooperative would formally dissolve, with the sub regions becoming the formal entity for the provision of inclusive education.

Respondents also spoke about how the cooperatives’ management provided little support for the actual provision of inclusive education at the level of the sub regions, and were only interested in (financial) performance data:

“They are really not going to look at quality. They just will look at the number of children you have registered. How many children did you refer? And, that is your financial situation. […] it is only always getting to hear: you are not doing it right, because you have referred to many children.”

Respondents spoke about increasing levels of bureaucracy including having to produce policy and protocols on how the sub region provided inclusive education and to submit data on student drop-out and non-attendance to the cooperatives’ managing director.

Despite the accommodating approach of the inspectorate, the inspection seemed to add to the amount of red tape across the cooperative. For example, the standardized framework for inclusive education included indicators on the implementation of legal tasks across the cooperative, where managing directors were asked to explain performance data and submit schools’ support plans of children with special educational needs.

The fact that the Inspectorate also evaluates the functioning of school boards, where these inspections are considered to be the core task of the Inspectorate, further prevented collaboration of schools from different school boards and imposed additional reporting requirements on schools. Both inspection frameworks (for networks and school boards) have considerable overlap in measuring the provision of inclusive education, creating multiple reporting requirements and confusion over who is responsible for reporting to which inspection division. The two inspection divisions shared little information on how schools, school boards and the cooperative provided inclusive education and how tasks and responsibilities were organized within the cooperative and had an impact on student outcomes and wellbeing. One of the respondents explained how this arrangement created a different set of, sometimes, conflicting targets for schools:

“bizarre […] that the inspection has included in its framework for schools a part that directly addresses the support for children, […while] at the same time that same inspection asks the cooperatives how they monitor that basic support.”

# Inspections of Area Learning Communities in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, ‘Area Learning Communities’ (ALC) were introduced in response to Article 21 of the Education Order in 2006 which required schools to provide pupils with access to a minimum of 24 courses at Key Stage and a minimum number of 27 courses at post-16. To reach these targets, the Order allows schools to secure course provision for students at other institutions within an ALC. At the time of our study there were 30 ALCs in Northern Ireland, consisting of clusters of secondary schools (including special schools). ALCs are voluntary in nature and linked to (geographical) districts.

ALCs and the schools within them were inspected by the Northern Irish Inspectorate, ETI. The work of ETI focuses mostly on the inspection of, and reporting on, the overall effectiveness of single organisations (e.g. schools, colleges). However, ALCs were occasionally inspected through area-based inspections, a new model that had been tested by the ETI since 2005. The purpose of area-based inspections was to assess the relevance, appropriateness, adequacy and effectiveness of the provision of education and training in preparing 14–19-year-old learners to progress to further education, training or employment’ within a given geographical area. The focus of area-based inspections varied, but was, at the time of our study, on strategic planning for education and training within the area, the quality of learning for young people and the effectiveness of the transition arrangements for young people within and across the various sectors.

*Structure and governance of the network*

In West Belfast, about 30 primary schools formed a voluntary area learning networked community (ALNC) following the area-based inspection in 2009. Prior to the inspection there was already an ALC in West Belfast made up of 10 secondary schools. The voluntary primary ALNC and secondary ALC were both strongly focused on tackling large scale inequality in the area and on improving the life chances of children in the area and collaborated under the coordination of the West Belfast Partnership Board (WBPB) which also set up other learning communities (e.g. for nursery schools) and facilitated collaboration with these and other stakeholders such as the Council for Catholic Maintained schools and the Education Authority (Belfast Region). The WBPB was chaired by the ETI district inspector for West Belfast. In 2009 this inspector, who was also the ETI area board coordinator for the Belfast region, led an area-based inspection, which included a team of inspectors who were not involved in the partnership work.

*Accountability of the network*

The 2009 inspection focused on and reported back to a wide range of stakeholders on the aspects of strategic planning for education and training, the quality of learning for young people, and the effectiveness of the transition arrangements for young people within and across the various sectors in the area. A representative sample of education providers was visited, which included three pre-school centres, ﬁve primary schools and four secondary schools, Alternative Education Provision (AEP) in two centres, a special school, a training organisation, the Belfast Metropolitan College, and four youth settings. Evidence was also gathered from a range of other organisations in the area, including the Curriculum Advisory Support Service, the Department for Employment and Learning and the WBPB. Various documents such as student attendance, performance in external examinations, and the results of previous inspections were analysed, as well as self-evaluation reports of each organisation (a required part of the area-based inspection).

At the end of the area-based inspection, oral feedback was provided in a public forum to all stakeholders and interested individuals. Judgements on the quality of educational provision were provided via the production of 1) individual organisation and 2) composite area inspection reports which outlined both the strengths and weaknesses of each single organization, as well as overall inspection findings relating to the themes inspected. A detailed description was included in the composite report on the specific roles and responsibilities of each member to reach the identified targets for improvement, such as by:

* providing more opportunities for staff to share good practice and expertise across phases, particularly between staff involved in teaching at key transition stages;
* developing more effective self-evaluation arrangements within individual organisations and across the geographical area, focusing on improving further the quality of education and training provision and the standards achieved by learners.
* developing a shared approach to curriculum planning and support across organisations and phases, focusing on providing continuity and progression for young people in their learning, and on the dissemination of the most effective approaches to learning and teaching

*Impact of network accountability*

Over the course of our study, the ANLC and the ALC collaborated under the guidance of WBPB (coordinated by the ETI district inspector) to address the recommendations in the composite inspection report. At the core of these collective actions was the aim to enhance the educational provision in schools via joint evaluation and development of specific subject areas (e.g. mathematics and literacy), curriculum and assessment, learning about good network practices, developing a joint programme of continuous professional development, and sharing community workers, support services (e.g. school psychologists) and teachers across the network.

The ETI district inspector regularly attended and gave evaluative feedback at the various stakeholder meetings. He was described by teachers and head teachers in the network as ‘a trusted colleague that guides the process’, ‘who supports and challenges schools’, particularly by continuously asking schools about evidence that improvements were having an impact on children’s learning outcomes, supporting schools in their school self-evaluation and use of student achievement data to track student performance and monitor school improvement.

A key factor in the development of the various ALCs and other improvement focused working forums, was the idea of starting with ‘quick wins’ and moving towards collaboration on more contentuous issues (e.g. shared curricula and assessment) once initial levels of trust and a shared vision were established. Quick wins were made by starting the collaboration between those involved in the primary process of teaching and learning, instead of middle managers or head teachers who are often more restricted by their school-organisational responsibilities, and the context and external lines of accountability. Teachers and subsequently curriculum coordinators collaborated initially on low-key issues such as the development of joint CPD for classroom assistants, where the collaboration expanded towards the end of the project in ‘concentric cycles’ to include middle managers and head teachers. The analysis of student achievement data suggests that this strategy was successful in raising learning outcomes as GCSE and A-level results show a consistent and marked upward trend between 2010 and 2015.

However, as our findings indicate, more time and a sense of community cohesion was still needed to table issues that would see an even greater integration of schools into the network such as joint timetabling to allow students to take a variety of subjects across schools. As one of the respondents explained:

*Collaboration may start positively, but then schools get back into competitive mode with each other in a locality. Schools competing with each other, being suspicious of one another, different sectors working together, e g., will a grammar school wish to be assessed alongside a non - grammar school?*

The role of the district inspector over the years and the relative low-stakes setting of the area-based inspection was seen as a key factor in the success of the network. Particularly the district inspector’s role in continuously quality assuring and validating the schools’ self-evaluations, where the area-based inspection in 2009 provided a more formal check of the quality and functioning of the network and set out a set of target areas the network needed to continue working. One of the respondents explained the success of the collaboration as ‘the effective and ongoing   links, good working relationships and mutual trust between the WBPB, and the district inspector and area board coordinator for ETI who acted as a key link in all of this between the various players’.

However, inspection resources were an issue in Northern Ireland as inspections of individual schools are seen as the core task of ETI. As a result, area-based inspections were discontinued and, after the retirement of the district inspector, the continuous linking of the area focused work and the individual school inspections, informed by a combination of external challenge and linked support was not so evident anymore.

# Inspection of the peer review network in Sofia, Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, a voluntary network of 6 primary and 4 secondary schools in Sofia was established with the aim of sharing good practice to improve parental involvement in schools, a problematic area across all network schools. The participating schools, supported by a research team and the regional Inspectorate of Education in Sofia, developed and implemented school self-evaluation and subsequent peer reviews to evaluate and improve existing practices. In addition, the Sofia Inspectorate inspected the involvement of parents in schools’ decision-making and teaching and learning in one thematic inspection. The Inspectorate also developed a standardized framework of inspection standards on parental involvement and guidelines on the use of school self-evaluation and peer review outcomes in inspection data collection.

*Structure and governance of the network*

The schools developed a format for self-evaluation and peer review which informed the development of a structured protocol and framework for a thematic inspection by the Sofia Inspectorate who joined all of the meetings of the network throughout the course of our study. The network broadly conformed to the non-brokered shared governance format but at different times individual stakeholder groups took the lead in its organization and structuring.

*Accountability of the network*

The accountability of the network was organized around each school’s self-evaluation and the peer review in the network which informed the thematic inspection of the Sofia Inspectorate. School self-evaluations included a survey to all the teachers, parents, students, and the management team and an analysis of documents. They were implemented in all the ten schools in January 2016 to understand how, and the extent to which, parents are involved in their child’s education and their school’s decision-making. These evaluations informed a peer review in March 2016 where teams of representatives of two schools, including a principal, deputy principal and/or one to two teachers visited each other’s school to evaluate parental involvement and share good practices. Parallel to these school evaluations and the peer review, the Sofia Inspectorate developed a framework for the inspection of parental involvement in schools, using their legislative remit of ‘thematic inspections’ to do so. All three evaluations focused on the same four standards: 1) school-parents communication supports the educational process and students’ progress, 2) parents participate in school life, 3) school-parents interaction contributes to students’ progress and to the sustainability of students’ success, and 4) parents participate in setting priorities for school development.

*Impact of network accountability*

As the various evaluations focused on parental involvement, the impact of the network inspection naturally is within this area and included changes in how schools engaged with parents, such as including parents in the development of the school year plan and the school development strategy. However, the collaboration between schools and the Inspectorate in developing self-evaluation, peer review and thematic inspection frameworks also led to the development of evaluation literacy and capacity across the network. This included the Sofia Inspectorate who, for the first time, developed and used a standardized framework and published inspection reports.

The practice marks a significant culture shift in how the Inspectorate evaluated schools and engaged with stakeholders (particularly parents), as well as in how schools opened up their practices for peers and parents. Momentum for these changes was created by new legislation being developed around school self-evaluation and the opportunity for schools to participate in this study where a university would support them in the development of evaluation frameworks and the commitment and collaboration of the Sofia Inspectorate. The involvement of the Inspectorate provided further legitimacy to the collaborative work and strengthened ties between the schools. The format of a thematic inspection which is not tied to a pre-set standardized framework, allowed the Sofia Inspectorate to be flexible in developing standards with schools and incorporate the outcomes of the schools’ self-evaluation and peer review in their data collection.

However, it is questionable to what extent these changes, as well as the cycle of evaluations will be sustained. Following the end of the project, and the involvement of Sofia University, there was little follow-up from the Inspectorate who considered the thematic inspection a one-off activity. New legislation, implemented late 2016, also led to the restructuring of the regional Inspectorates into regional departments of Education with responsibility only for ongoing, thematic and risk-based inspections. The new national Inspectorate of Education is, by law, only required to inspect all (single) schools once every five years on a standardized framework. Having said that, head teachers from the 10 network schools established their partnership as a new NGO to continue the work and allow them to have a separate budget for network-level activities (e.g. introducing other innovative practices, sharing knowledge through training with other schools outside etc.), something they felt limited their collaborative work throughout the study. Unfortunately, the Civil Servants Act doesn’t allow the school inspectors to be a formal member of the network, which means that there was no longer a formal basis to further develop and implement thematic (network-level) inspections.

In this case, the lack of legislation on educational networks and their inspection therefore seemed to initially have created beneficial conditions for schools and the Inspectorate to collaborate in a low stake setting and develop a shared set of evaluation practices to improve parental involvement in schools. The lack of legislative framework in the end, however, also seemed to limit the sustainability and continuation of these practices as the Sofia Inspectorate didn’t have the resources or obligation to continue their thematic inspection and had to revert to regular inspections of single schools.

# Conclusion and discussion

This paper presented findings from four countries (England, Bulgaria, the Netherlands, and Northern Ireland) that have seen the introduction of a range of educational networks - ranging from mandated/formal to informal/voluntary- as a strategy to improve educational quality and address inequality. These networks were held to account through external inspections, which varied in the manner by which they validated school and network-internal evaluations from centralized top-down approaches to more horizontal approaches. We were interested to learn about the variety in external inspection methods and about the conditions under which these inspections can improve the development and performance of the networks they inspected. Here we present some common themes from the four case studies in an effort to contribute to further theory development on the accountability of networks.

*Impact of network inspections*

Effects of inspections of networks are context-dependent in that they vary according to the standards the Inspectorate uses to evaluate the network (e.g. assessing parental involvement in Bulgaria to inclusive education the Netherlands), as well as the maturity of the network in integrating members into a shared structure and practice.

Examples of positive effects range from changes in the structure and decision-making in the network, and of the collaboration between schools, as well as (in Northern Ireland) improvement of learning outcomes and teaching practices, and (in Bulgaria) improved evaluation capacity and literacy and increased involvement of parents in schools. In some cases (particularly the Netherlands and England) we also saw side effects, such as increased bureaucracy and red tape, the reduction of the professional autonomy of (head) teachers, and stricter hierarchical control of individual school improvement in the network where targets (often related to single school inspection frameworks) were set and primary processes around curriculum and assessment were standardized. We consider these examples to be ‘side effects’ as they contradict the original purpose of network governance, which is to solve complex problems through decentralized decision-making and collaboration and high-trust lateral relations which inform collective action.

*Inspections cannot repair ineffective network structures*

A key understanding across our four cases is that external accountability cannot repair initial ineffective structures of networks, such as when the network is too big or geographically dispersed to allow for meaningful collaboration (e.g. in the Netherlands and England), or when there is little trust within the network to support information-sharing and joint decision-making (e.g. the Netherlands). External inspections can signal such ineffective structures but are unlikely to have further impact until more effective modes of network governance and collaboration have been implemented.

*Alignment of single member and network-level external accountability*

In the Netherlands and England, existing structures for single school and school board accountability also seem to discourage the integration of members into the network. In both countries, these separate frameworks were considered highest stakes, where key stakeholders (e.g. parents, school staff) were most familiar with, and used to responding to these parallel frameworks. The framework, inspection targets and judgements of (single) school quality are clear and well established whereas the framework for inspections of MATs and cooperatives was either non-existent or still under development. In England, the batched inspection and review of the MAT was also largely informed by single school inspections.

The focus on single school outcomes seemed to provide little incentive for members to contribute to common goals, beyond those that directly benefited their own school performance and led, in England at least, to both the introduction of hierarchical control, targets and monitoring mechanisms around the Ofsted school inspection framework within the network. In the Netherlands confusion was created by the fact that there were three frameworks for inspections, one for individual schools, one for school boards and one for networks which were implemented by separate divisions within the Inspectorate. This resulted in an ongoing debate over how to structure monitoring within the network and complaints over the duplication in information that had to be sent in to the Inspectorate.

An integrated and balanced approach to the inspection of schools and the network they are part of was particularly visible in Northern Ireland where area-based inspections looked at the performance of the entire network addressing the responsibilities of each of the member organizations in improving outcomes across the region, and where the district inspector continued to coordinate and support school and network-level evaluation around these recommendations. The strong alignment ensured that there was a clear focus on a shared set of outcomes and where the responsibilities lay for meeting these outcomes.

These findings suggest that how networks develop and the outcomes they aim for is to a great extent a reflection of where the incentives are for collective action, and the types of outcomes (either single member or network-level) that are regulated and rewarded through governmental policies, financial structures and accountability incentives. Having different inspection frameworks in place for school versus network-performance, particularly when performance indicators and incentives predominantly incentivize school-level outcomes limits the development of collective action towards outcomes that go beyond individual school performance.

*Negotiating the need for standardized frameworks with the diffuse and dynamic nature of networks*

Networks, by nature, change over time when members get to know each other, share ideas and develop their internal structures for collaboration and decision-making. All four cases reflect this dynamic nature, albeit in different ways. In our conceptual framework we argued that inspection frameworks need to be able to respond to these fluidities in order to support the development of networks. We argued that the premise of network governance is to improve local outcomes which cannot be standardized from the top down. Our case studies provide illustrative examples of how the four Inspectorates negotiated their organisational routine and institutional structures to accommodate the differences in structure and outcomes of the networks they inspected.

In Northern Ireland, the Inspectorate standardized the process of inspection and how results from school and network evaluations were to be validated and included in the external inspection. This allowed the network to set and monitor its own goals with constant feedback from the external district inspector. In Bulgaria, the Inspectorate chose the format of a thematic inspection to allow inspectors to develop standards with the network of schools. In the Netherlands, inspectors used their professional discretion to assess the cooperative, adapting their data collection to the local setup and being lenient in assessing the network against the eighteen inspection indicators. The approach was considered to be fair by the cooperatives’ managing director and inspector, given the age of the network and the fact that schools were forced into the collaboration and needed time to develop their internal structure of monitoring and provision of inclusive education. However, the existence of a standardized framework didn’t allow for a more locally meaningful set of targets and resulted in the introduction of centralized monitoring within the network where each school was required to report performance against the indicators in the inspection framework. We found similar examples of the introduction of centralized (Trust-level) control in England in an attempt to respond to the Ofsted school inspection framework.

*Focus on network performance, not compliance*

The purpose of networks varies according to their objective. In our conceptual framework we described three types of outcomes (creating synergy, transformation, enhancing efficiency) which could be identified to some degree across all our four case studies. A logical starting point for external inspections are these outcomes, and whether networks and their members manage to meet these outcomes.

Examples of inspections prioritizing such network-level outcomes- were particularly vivid in West Belfast where the continuing focus on, and monitoring of, the performance of children across the region in school self-evaluation, network internal reviews, area-based inspections and monitoring of the district inspector ensured that all the members of the area-learning community focused on the collective good. The continuous monitoring of the district inspector also acted as a constant reminder of shared values and goals of the wider network.

The formation of shared values and goals was much more difficult in the Netherlands where the standardized inspection framework particularly measured the compliance to legislation and the cooperatives’ (financial) performance and functioning against a set of strict targets and risk indicators which did not match the internal organization of the cooperative. The focus on compliance seemed to result in the implementation of bureaucratic quality control systems across the network and a preoccupation around negotiating the implementation of internal structures for collaboration and quality control. The lack of a shared understanding and purpose of outcomes of the entire network (with allocation of finances to support those purposes) meant that schools, existing subgroups of schools and school boards stuck to their own organizational agendas, prior loyalties and preferences in how to provide inclusive education. Similar examples were found in the English case study, where a focus on school-organizational goals was particularly enforced by the high stakes accountability of individual schools, and the fact that Ofsted did not have the legislative remit to inspect MATs.

*Bottom-up approaches to inspection require trust and a culture shift*

One of the challenges Inspectorates face when inspecting a variety of networks, each with its distinct structure and set of outcomes, is how to accommodate their practice of using standardized frameworks to a more accommodating and flexible approach. ‘Accountability’ and ‘inspection’ are often synonyms for standardization and top down control, where a centralized framework is assumed to be conditional for transparent, valid and reliable inspections of school quality. Changing this way of working towards an approach that starts with outcomes defined by the network, shifts ownership over inspection measures towards the object of inspection.

Such a change requires a shift in culture and mindset of both inspector and those who are inspected, and a high degree of trust. This was particularly evident in Bulgaria where principals, teachers and inspectors initially had frequent discussions as to who was authorized to set the agenda for the inspection, network-internal peer reviews and school self-evaluations. Deciding on the framework for these evaluations was initially considered the sole remit of the Inspectorate where schools and the Inspectorate only developed a more collaborate approach after a number of meetings and the development of trust. In Northern Ireland, high trust between the district inspector and schools in the area-learning community underpinned their interactions and collaborative approach to evaluation and inspection. School staff considered the district inspector to be ‘a trusted colleague’ and this allowed for open discussions about the outcomes of the network and how to use the various evaluations to improve those.

*Regulatory capture*

The close relationships between the inspectors and the networks in Bulgaria and Northern Ireland may however create other trust-related dilemma’s, particularly in the relationship with other stakeholders such as parents or other schools. Näslund and Hallström (2017) explain how close relationships between inspector and inspectee may threaten the integrity and thereby the authority of the inspector in the eyes of third parties. External stakeholders, such as parents or other schools, would expect social and cognitive distancing between those who inspect and those who are inspected. They may come to distrust the inspection outcome, or even the inspection organization when they perceive the inspector serving the interest of the network, instead of the public. Our case study design did not include a measure of such ‘regulatory capture’, but the example of West Belfast, where schools and the district inspector collaborated on ‘quick wins’ and apparently ignored more contentious issues might suggest that relationships are perhaps too close.

Having said that, it must be noted that in both Northern Ireland and Bulgaria there were mechanisms in place to ensure the transparency of the inspection process and a continuous focus on the initial aims of the network. In Bulgaria, the Inspectorate developed a standardized framework for the thematic inspection and published the outcomes of the inspection of the network. In West Belfast, there were separate ETI inspections of each single school in the network against a standardized framework, and the publication of these reports for stakeholders to scrutinize. Such clear and transparent procedures and the internal quality assurance procedures to verify the quality of these inspections would support the credibility and legitimacy of the inspection organization; conditions that are described by Six and Verhoest (2017) as relevant in the trust triangle for regulation between citizen, regulated organization and regulator.

Going back to our conceptual framework, our case studies have provided a range of examples of the methodology, valuing and involvement of users in the evaluation and accountability of networks and their member schools. Although each of the four case studies are exploratory in nature and by no means generalizable, they show how the evaluation and inspection of individual schools and the network needs to be linked and aligned to improve both school and network-level outcomes. Trust, flexibility in the use of inspection frameworks and a focus on network-level outcomes, where quality assurance of the inspection process prevents favouritism and regulatory capture were identified as important conditions for the effective accountability of networks.

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