

## **Implementation of Polycentric Audit Approach in Different Countries**

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### **Introduction**

This paper will report on the development of the Polycentric audit approach to school inspection developed as part of the EU Erasmus+ Project ‘ Polycentric Inspection of Networks of Schools’ (PINS) which ran from 2014- 2017. The paper will begin with an overview of the study looking at different elements at a systems level before providing some methodological background and a deeper analysis of the individual systems as they existed during the lifetime of the project. The paper will finish with some of the outcomes of the project and an exemplar as to how they were developed in one particular case, that of Northern Ireland.

### **Background to study**

This study looked at three countries (the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Bulgaria) which have, in various ways and degrees, seen the establishment of networks to coordinate educational quality and improvement, such as networks for inclusive education in the Netherlands, area learning communities in Northern Ireland and a peer review network in Bulgaria.

This study analysed the ways in which educational networks can be held to account effectively; it provided an overview of models of inspections of educational networks across Europe and reported the findings of three case studies which provide evidence of effective ways to hold networks accountable for their performance and functioning.

The project was divided into four phases:

- 1) describing three cases of polycentric school inspections,
- 2) literature review for ex ante evaluation,
- 3) scoping good examples across Europe,
- 4) studying the impact of three cases of polycentric school inspections.

Each phase included development, dissemination and evaluation activities which had designated partners with specific responsibilities that match their expertise and background. The entire project team met frequently during each phase of the project (online and face to face) to discuss progress and ways forward. Within each country, researchers also met frequently with key user groups (inspection organisations and networks within each country) to discuss findings and project activities, while specific dissemination of research findings was implemented to a broader group of stakeholders (e.g. through presentations at SICI’s assembly, online narratives, scientific papers, a MOOC and an international symposium, and participation of the lead partner in the OECD SEG advisory group).

The project saw a number of discrete activities undertaken in order to assess the extent to which the emerging data was seen as being both relevant and useful. This included, for example, a process to develop and incorporate evaluation pop up surveys in the project website (asking visitors about their background (e.g. academic/school/inspection), and how useful and insightful the information provided is to them and suggestions for improvement). Additionally, we collected key statistics on number of visitors and country of origin of these visitors. Both types of quantitative and qualitative information were summarized at the end of each phase and provided to our external evaluators to inform their report. The information helped us improve the relevance of the data being generated as well as identifying pathways for the dissemination of findings.

In addition we interviewed chief inspectors from the three countries involved in our case studies about their views on polycentric inspections and how the project is informing their work. In Bulgaria, the Inspectorate is further developing standardized frameworks for inspections where the participation in this project and an exchange visit to the Inspectorate in Northern Ireland has supported the development of these frameworks. In Northern Ireland, our case study work is informing discussion on whether to reissue area inspections and how to allocate inspection capacity across single school inspections and area-based inspections. In the Netherlands the lead researcher was commissioned to support the development of a new inspection strategy and is continuing the work with the Dutch Inspectorate in developing their regular inspections of school boards.

A preliminary scoping exercise indicated that particularly the Netherlands and Northern Ireland have seen recent shifts in education systems towards more polycentric settings that have had implications for their Inspectorates of Education.

### **System characteristics**

Northern Ireland has also seen a number of reforms aimed at enhancing collaborative arrangements between communities of schools in a geographical area. One such example is through the establishment of (voluntary) ‘Area Learning Communities’ (ALCs) which are clusters of schools who plan collaboratively to meet the needs of pupils in an area and to focus on sharing good practice. ALCs work together to provide a broad and balanced curriculum and to deliver on the statutory requirements of the ‘Entitlement Framework’<sup>1</sup>. The Entitlement Framework requires schools to provide pupils with access to a minimum number of courses at Key Stage 4 (24 courses) and a minimum number of courses at post-16 (27 courses). At present there are 30 ALCs in Northern Ireland (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2010, p.4).

In the Netherlands, mainstream schools and special schools are, since 2014, required to work in partnerships to provide inclusive education for all children (also children with disabilities) under 76 new authorities for primary education, and 74 for secondary education. These networks were centrally formed by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science according to their regional proximity, number of pupils, existing informal cooperation between schools, and after consultation with the school boards. Each network of mainstream and special needs schools is

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<sup>1</sup> Circular 2007/20 The Education (2006 Order) (Commencement No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 179 outlines the statutory requirements for schools.

now governed by new education authorities who are responsible for ensuring close collaboration between these schools in the provision of care and high-quality education to each pupil. They have a legal ‘duty to care’ which means that they are formally responsible for finding an adequate school place for each pupil in their area, instead of parents who used to be responsible for the placement of their child in a school. The network authority also receives a budget to provide for in-school support of children with learning/physical disabilities; they are required to develop an action plan in which they outline how this support is organized and funded within and across schools in the network. Schools are also governed by a (separate) school board whose portfolio of schools often does not overlap with the schools in the network for inclusive education, creating two distinct collaborative arrangements for schools.

In each of the three systems, Inspectorates of Education inspect a network of schools and include indicators in their framework on how schools are working together to support school improvement and/or provide inclusive education to children with special needs and/or learning disabilities. The systems vary in the extent to which these methods and frameworks are fully developed and implemented. The three systems and inspection models are by no means perfect representations of our conceptual framework, or representative for the types of inspections of networks across Europe, but they are presented here as illustrations of our conceptual framework, allowing us to understand potential challenges and opportunities for other Inspectorates of Education who see their education systems shift towards a more polycentric structure.

The study of the three examples presented here included a documentary analysis and interviews with representatives of inspection agencies (e.g. policymakers/inspectors) and representatives from the educational network in each country to describe the shift in roles and responsibilities of their Inspectorates of Education. The respondents were selected to represent the actors within each country who are part of/in charge of a school network (using a convenient selection of an exemplary network) and those who are responsible for the accountability of those networks. The descriptions present inspection models that were in place in 2014-2015. The analysis of relevant documents and interviews transcripts was used to provide a description of the methodology, valuing and user involvement in inspections as outlined in the previous section.

Table 1 provides an overview of key documents and interviewed participants. The data was analysed and reported for each country separately, and a summary is presented in the following section.

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**Table 1: Overview of data collection**

<i>Education system</i>	<i>Documents analysed</i>	<i>Participants interviewed</i>
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<b><i>The Netherlands</i></b>	Inspection framework and the white paper on risk-based inspections from the Inspectorate of Education, letters from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science about the new Inclusive Education Act, the website about excellent schools, examples of the support plan and websites of several networks for inclusive education.	Inspection agency: Coordinator of the Inspectorate of Education responsible for the development of inspection frameworks for networks of inclusive education Lead inspector of one example network  Educational network representative: Coordinator of one network for inclusive education Chair of the board of one network for inclusive education
<b><i>Northern Ireland</i></b>	Inspection frameworks and cross-case analysis of full area and youth inspections since 2005, the area inspection report on West-Belfast as well as the West-Belfast Partnership Board's response to the area inspection.	Inspection agency: Lead inspector who carried out the area inspection of West Belfast  Educational network representative: Chief executive of the Catholic Council for Maintained Schools (CCMS) Education manager for the West Belfast Partnership board Education officer of the Belfast Education Library Board. Two focus group sessions with members of the West Belfast Area Learning Community Nine interviews with school leaders, principals and deputy principals
<b><i>Bulgaria</i></b>	Framework for self- and peer-evaluation developed by the Sofia network of schools, school records and documents, records of students achievements, data on diagnosis of schools culture and effectiveness	Inspectors from the Sofia Regional Inspectorate of Education Principals from the Sofia network of schools Questionnaires/surveys for evaluation teams, teacher, parents and students from Sofia network of schools

### **Examples of inspections in a polycentric context**

This section describes inspection practices in the Netherlands, Northern Ireland and Bulgaria that fit our theoretical conceptualization of inspections in a polycentric context, following table 1.

#### ***Northern Ireland***

The inspection of area-learning communities are, as with all modes of school inspection in Northern Ireland, managed by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)<sup>2</sup>. Although single school inspections are a priority for the ETI, area inspections are also used to evaluate a particular aspect of education across different stages in a geographical area.

The framework for area based inspections is similar to that of inspections of single schools in that quality indicators, areas for improvement, etc. form part of the framework. According to an inspector in Brown et al. (2015) ‘the framework in itself is just like an inspection framework but is more wide-ranging than for a school’ (p.40). In the case of the Area inspection of West Belfast, the overarching theme for the area inspection related to: ‘strategic planning for education and training within the area; the quality of learning for young people within the area; and the effectiveness of the transition arrangements for young people within and across the various sectors’ (ETI, 2010, p.4). The network sets specific objectives for each of these topics and these become the organizing point for the self-evaluation of the network and for each organisation within the network, as well as for the area inspection by the ETI.

Area inspections include a random sample of education providers in the area who are visited within a specific time frame. The ETI asks these providers to send in relevant documents in preparation for the visit, such as student attendance, student performance in external examinations, and the results of previous inspections. The ETI also requests that each organisation complete a self-evaluation report on the strengths and areas in their organisation prior to the inspection taking place.

As Brown et al. (2015) explain, during the inspection, each inspector in the team evaluates a representative sample of education providers relating to their own specialism, such as pre-school centres, primary schools, post-primary schools, alternative education providers, special schools, and further education or youth settings. Data collection (observations, interviews, analysis of examination data, minutes of meetings) during the visit would typically include a range of organisations in the area such as the Education and Library Board and the curriculum advisory support service<sup>3</sup>, and stakeholders in these organisations (students, parents, teachers, members of the middle and senior management team, and members of Boards of Governors). Self-evaluation reports of each of these organisations on the topic of the inspection (e.g. transition of students), as well as of the entire network are an important starting point for the inspection as it will inform the data collection and analysis during the visit.

When the inspection is complete, each organisation receives its own inspection report, detailing the quality of educational provision and areas for improvement relating to the focus of the inspection in their organisation. Additionally, an area-based report is issued which provides an overall judgement of the collective performance of the inspection area (ranging from unsatisfactory to outstanding), the main strengths and areas in need of improvement, and a quantitative description of the extent to which the objectives of the network have been reached (ranging from ‘almost/nearly’ to ‘very few/a small number’).

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.eti.gov.uk/index/what-we-do/types-of-inspection-amended-2.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> From the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2015, the newly established Education Authority took over all of the roles and responsibilities of the Education and Library Boards in Northern Ireland.

There are no formal consequences resulting from an area inspection. Rather, Brown et al. (2015) describe how area inspections in West Belfast are predicated on supporting stakeholders in their ongoing improvement through the promotion of rigorous self-evaluation.

Respondents from the key stakeholder, the ALC, the Inspectorate but also schools and other providers are overwhelmingly positive about the potential of this approach to inspection. In brief three key themes emerge in interviews. The first is that this type of networking enables and improves collaboration and reduces competition between organisations, facilitating initiatives such as better transition between primary and secondary schools, shared curricula in key areas of literacy and numeracy and joint staff training initiatives. The second theme is the extent to which this type of evaluation has shifted the emphasis in inspection from accountability to encouraging improvement and in particular to the use of self-evaluation based on first hand evidence to inform both school and network activities. The third theme is the way in which a network can facilitate strategic planning or ‘joined-up thinking’ in a new way but that this process is helped by external support from both the ALC and the Inspectorate.

### ***The Netherlands***

The networks for inclusive education are relatively new in the Netherlands and the Dutch Inspectorate of Education only recently developed a new framework for the inspection of these networks<sup>i</sup>. The coordinating inspector explains how these frameworks were developed in close cooperation with school boards and the new education authorities and includes indicators on:

Outcomes: the extent to which each school in the network and the network collaboratively provides adequate support to all pupils and has facilities and structures in place to provide such support.

Management and organization: the achievement of the network’s mission and goals within the requirements set by legislation, the internal communication and management of the network and the collaboration between schools to achieve these goals.

Quality assurance within the network, and its implementation of systematic self-evaluations to assess strengths and weaknesses and implement improvements.

The framework was implemented in 2015/2016 and follows a risk-based approach, which is described in the inspection framework for networks of inclusive education<sup>ii</sup>. A comparison with the framework for primary and secondary school inspections<sup>iii</sup> shows the similarity in approaches where an inspection starts with an early warning analysis of available data to understand potential risks in the functioning of these networks (e.g. looking at number of students out of school, transfer of students between schools). High-risk networks are subjected to an additional expert analysis in which school inspectors analyse the pupil referral and support policy of the network, the annual report of the network and the distribution of support services (including special needs teachers) across schools and other signals of the functioning of (schools in) the network, such as press releases or complaints from parents or other stakeholders. In case this expert analysis indicates potential risks of failing, inspectors schedule interviews with the education authority of the network or its executive manager to discuss risks; a follow-up visit of schools in the network is issued when necessary.

The coordinating inspector explains how the Inspectorate of Education publishes the outcome of the risk-analysis (which can be ‘basic’ when the initial desk research and expert analysis shows

no risks), and the report from visits of the network. The report provides an assessment and overview of strengths and weaknesses on the inspection framework that education authorities are expected to address. Failing networks are, according to the coordinating inspector, subjected to increased inspection monitoring while a regional coordinator can also be appointed to take over some of the responsibilities of the network authority.

The coordinating inspector and the chair of the board of the network talk about a number of issues in the implementation of these new types of inspections. According to both respondents, there is limited alignment between the inspection of individual schools in the network, and the inspection of the network although both frameworks have similar indicators of support of children with learning difficulties. In both types of inspections, schools are judged on the quality of their support to children. However, inspectors involved in both types of inspections are working in different divisions within the Inspectorate and have little communication about their inspections of schools and the network.

The coordinator of the network and the chair of the network board also talk about a mismatch between their own internal structure and the allocation of inspections. Both respondents explain how the network, which is comprised of 165 primary mainstream schools, 6 primary special schools and 9 schools for children with severe disabilities, was split into three smaller and regionally closer subnetworks to streamline the support to children. These three small subnetworks are the main organizing entities for the provision of inclusive education, whereas the Inspectorate only looks at the functioning of the whole. This mismatch complicates the preparation for external inspections and the use of inspection findings for improvement of the network.

### ***Bulgaria***

Dynamic changes in modern Bulgarian society set a number of significant challenges to the educational system, related to young people's education and preparation for social and professional realization. Recent changes in the education law in Bulgaria (Pre-school and school education act, in force since August, 2016) aim at providing an optimal environment for development and education of adolescents.

Polycentric inspection of networks of schools could be implemented in different forms in various social and regulation settings and is an innovative approach to the specific process of school quality evaluation. Bulgarian experience in the application of this model, implemented within the framework of Erasmus+ KA2 funded project titled 'Polycentric inspection of networks of schools' (09.2014 – 08.2017) provided an opportunity for reconsidering existing procedures and practices for school inspection and evaluation, and for realization of more up to date inspections, relevant to the current conditions and needs of the school practice.

Project's main purpose for Bulgaria was to test a new model of inspection, innovative for the Bulgarian inspection practice – inspection of network of schools, conceptualized in the framework of the project as form of 'polycentric inspection'.

Within the project framework a successful cooperation of three different types of institutions was achieved—schools, inspectorate and university, united by a common wish and mission to improve quality of education and school management in Bulgaria.

The project in Sofia was implemented in 3 phases: preliminary (preparation), realization and finalization. During the first phase (09.2014–08.2015), a network of schools was established and conditions for testing the innovative for Bulgaria model of inspection were created through regular meetings of all partners, sharing of good schooling practices, reflecting on similar issues the schools are facing, cooperation for creating common know-how, trainings for professional development, and planning next phase activities.

During the second phase (09.2015–08.2016), a model for polycentric inspection of the network of schools in Sofia was tested and implemented in 3 steps: self-evaluation of the schools within the network; peer-evaluation of the schools within the network; inspection of the school network by Sofia Inspectorate of Education.

During the third phase of the project (09.2016–08.2017), schools within the network continued to cooperate for improving the quality of education they provide by sharing good practices, and for creating common know-how. Self-evaluation, peer-evaluation and polycentric inspection results were further presented to other principals, schools, Inspectorates, and to the Ministry of Education as a successful know-how and an innovative practice, promoting cooperation of all users and stakeholders and contributing to the improvement of quality of education in the region. In January 2017 the 10 Sofia schools decided to establish a legal entity – “Network for innovations in education”—and such to achieve legitimacy of their activities after the ending of the project.

The fact that Regional Inspectorate of Education considered self-evaluation and peer-evaluation data in their final judgment in the polycentric inspection, is especially valuable. Non-traditional for Bulgarian practice methods for information gathering and evaluation were used, taking into account all stakeholders’ opinions, achievements of schools and of the network were considered as well. The Inspectorate was a partner of the network before the inspection as part of good practices exchange and support within the network and this was appreciated by all partners.

In the Year report-analysis (August, 2016) to the Minister of education, the Inspectorate in Sofia stated about the implemented polycentric inspection of network of schools that:

*Implemented polycentric inspection and the analysis of the results leads to the conclusion for the benefits of such a model of inspection for both participating parties—inspectors and those being inspected. In such a mode of inspection opportunities for support and collaboration within the school network are present, not only regarding particular issue or topic, but in general.*

Case study results in Bulgaria outline the conclusion, that that the lack of relevant inspection regulations doesn’t exclude or limit the options for implementation of the polycentric model in

the present inspection practice. Testing of the model proved that this mode of inspection could be successfully adapted and synchronized with the existing inspection regulations, without contradicting to it.

### **Summary of outcomes**

The study improved our understanding of 1) how educational networks are being developed across Europe and how these form part of a larger trend of network governance, and how they can potentially contribute to improvement of education, 2) how Inspectorates can effectively inspect networks and conditions for doing so (including roles and responsibilities, trust, involvement of stakeholders, specific methodology).

In Northern Ireland, our findings indicate that horizontal arrangements for the evaluation and inspection of the West Belfast ALC improved learning outcomes across the area; in Bulgaria the school network improved parental involvement in schools across the network, while both schools and the Sofia Inspectorate of Education developed their evaluation literacy and capacity through jointly engaging in self-evaluation, peer review and a thematic inspection. In the Netherlands, our findings suggest a lack of impact of inspections of cooperatives for inclusive education, where the framework increases bureaucracy and a preoccupation with the setting of internal organisation of the network and monitoring structures, instead of ensuring inclusive education across the region. Ongoing conversations with the Dutch Inspectorate of Education inform the further development of a more effective inspection framework.

Our findings suggest that inspections can have a positive impact on the development, functioning and performance of educational networks, but only when using bottom-up subjectivist approaches to inspection, focusing on network-level outcomes (instead of those of single schools), where stakeholders are involved in setting the agenda for the inspection and inspections are implemented in an environment of high trust and continuing support. Examples of effective inspections have been shared through our interactive map (<http://www.schoolinspections.eu/interactive-map/>), presentations at SICI (the European Association of Inspectorates of Education), the project leaders' involvement in the OECD's SEG (strategic education governance) advisory board, as well as through the aforementioned publications, teaching and MOOC.

### **Polycentric Inspection – an innovative approach?**

The project was innovative in understanding the effects of inspections of educational networks, which are established across Europe in an attempt to develop more localized and effective ways to improve education. This project complemented existing work in this area by mapping the development of these models across Europe, and studying their impact. The work is innovative in providing Inspectorates of Education with new research insights which supports them in developing more effective models for the inspection of educational networks, particularly as our study suggests that some of these new models have unfortunately only led to an increase in bureaucracy and red tape when failing to use frameworks which evaluate network-level outcomes specific to context, and the properties of networks (e.g. size, relationships and ways of collaborating in the network) that would lead to positive network-level outcomes.

Not only did our study provide innovative outcomes to improve these inspection, our methodology of understanding the functioning and outcomes of such ‘network governance’ was also innovative and complements existing work in this area, which particularly looks at effects of single school inspections, using a one-dimensional approach of looking at cause and effect when explaining impact of school inspections, see for example Allen and Burgess’ (2012) and Hussain’s (2012) analyses of large, longitudinal datasets in England to link findings of an inspection report and student achievement results. Our approach of comparing multiple case studies over time, looking at interactions within networks and between networks and the Inspectorate, offers an example of a research design to look at more dynamic patterns of change.

### **Next steps – networks and nodes**

The importance of networks to the enhancement of organisational capacity is a concept that has been widely recognised across the public and private sector (Burt et al., 2013). Indeed in the public and non-profit sector, collaboration is no longer simply an option; it has become the new orthodoxy with Hertting and Vedung (2012) suggesting that ‘evaluation and network governance are both among the top 10 trendy concepts in public policy’ (p. 29). It is arguable that one of the reasons networking has become so popular as a guiding principle of organisational development is its definitional malleability. Chapman and Hadfield (2010), for example, argue that ‘the sheer plasticity of the term network means that it has been applied to a wide range of social and technological phenomena’ (p. 310). Feys and Devos (2014) state that ‘it is a growing trend among politicians and school governors to use terms such as network, partnership and collaboration. Azorin (2020:105) drawing on the work of Van Dijk (2006) goes so far as to argue that ‘networks are fast becoming the nervous system of our society and it is no exaggeration to state that the twenty-first century is the age of networks (Van Dijk 2006)’.

As with all innovative theories brought into educational practice, it is important to understand the conceptual foundations underpinning the idea of networks. Scholars of network theory suggest that due consideration must be given to the guiding principles that undergird efficient and sustainable networks, such as ‘network goal consensus’(Provan and Kenis, 2008), ‘purpose and identity’ (Chapman and Hadfield, 2010; Provan and Kenis, 2008), ‘reciprocity’ (see Moolenaar, 2010) and ‘trust’ (Chapman and Hadfield, 2009; Daly and Finnigan, 2012). Daly and Finnigan (2010) describe conditions for successful educational networks identified in the National College for School Leadership’s Network Learning project (Earl and Katz, 2007). They suggest that the key conditions of these successful networks included frequent and pervasive communication, shared understanding and purpose, joint challenging work, and relationships built on trust that enabled the transfer of tacit and explicit knowledge (Daly and Finnigan, 2010: 114). Thus networks are goal driven, rely on good communication are challenging and seek to provide a way for school communities to uncover and transmit that knowledge that helps them ensure effective teaching and learning.

It is interesting to note that while the idea of the centrality of networks to organisational development is prevalent in other disciplinary areas, it is comparatively new in education. Commenting on this in 2010 Muijs et al. suggested that, ‘of course while networking has only recently come to the fore in education, the concept is long established in other fields, with strong roots in social science, psychology, and business studies . . .’ (6). Díaz-Gibson et al. (2014: 180)

in reference to Daly and Finnigan (2010) also noted that ‘the idea of networks in support of educational improvement, while still in its infancy, is gaining momentum in education’. This momentum is perhaps understandable given the emergence of a body of evidence pointing to the benefits of being part of an educational network that emerged in the second decade of the 21st century. The identified positives of networks include improved learning, the efficient use of resources, heightened innovation capacity and system-wide improvement (Chapman, 2008; Chapman and Hadfield, 2010; Hands, 2010; Muijs et al., 2011). As a result, educational networks and, in particular, formalised educational networks began to emerge in countries throughout Europe. These networks had similar functions, for example, peer support and collaborative planning to improve an aspect of teaching and learning among schools in a geographical location (Ehren et al., 2017).

## References

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<sup>i</sup>Inspectie van het Onderwijs. (2013). *Toezichtkader 2013: Integraal toezicht op de samenwerkingsverbanden in het primair en voortgezet onderwijs*. Utrecht: Inspectie van het Onderwijs. Retrieved from <http://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/binaries/content/assets/publicaties/2013/toezicht-op-de-samenwerkingsverbanden-in-het-primair-en-voortgezet-onderwijs>

<sup>ii</sup>Inspectie van het Onderwijs. (2013). *Toezichtkader 2013: Integraal toezicht op de samenwerkingsverbanden in het primair en voortgezet onderwijs*. Utrecht: Inspectie van het Onderwijs. Retrieved from <http://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/binaries/content/assets/publicaties/2013/toezicht-op-de-samenwerkingsverbanden-in-het-primair-en-voortgezet-onderwijs>

<sup>iii</sup>Inspectorate of Education. (2010). *Risk-based Inspection as of 2009 - Primary and secondary education*. Utrecht: The Dutch Inspectorate of Education. Retrieved from <http://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/binaries/content/assets/publicaties/2010/Risk-based+Inspection+as+of+2009.pdf>