



Improving the quality of education through self-evaluation in Dutch secondary schools



T. van der Bij^{a,*}, F.P. Geijsel^{b,c}, G.T.M. ten Dam^d

^a University of Applied Science Noordelijke Hogeschool, Groningen, The Netherlands

^b Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

^c Netherlands Academy of Leadership in Education, The Netherlands

^d Department of Child Development and Education, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences of the University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 127, 1018 WS Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

In countries with a governance structure in which responsibility for the quality of education is shared between government and school boards, the past decades school self-evaluation has been stimulated as a way to encourage continuous quality improvement. However, working on the goals of quality assurance and school improvement at the same time is a challenge in general. To make a valuable contribution to both goals, the self-evaluation effort has to be of sufficient quality itself. In this article, we present a research-based framework for school self-evaluation (SSE) composed of both content and process factors that allows to evaluate the quality of self-evaluation in schools. We then used this model to evaluate the experiences in a comprehensive self-evaluation project that has been designed and used to help Dutch secondary schools promote the quality of student care. Our sample encompassed 79 Dutch secondary schools involved in this project. The findings show that the quality of SSE depends on the quality of the instruments (content) and process factors. However, to make a valuable contribution to school improvement and thereby the quality of education in The Netherlands more attention is needed for a balance between internal and external supervision and the role of school managers in the process of SSE.

For future research more insight is needed in the challenges of meeting the content and process conditions of school self-evaluations, the governance and supervision issue at the level of schoolboards, the competence of change management in schools and the effects of SSE on the quality of education.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, self-evaluation has acquired a prominent position in school processes (McNamara & O'Hara, 2008). Starting in the 1980s, in the context of government policy shifting towards decentralization and deregulation of governmental tasks in many Western countries (OECD, 2012), schools and especially their governing bodies have been allocated increased autonomy and hence greater responsibility for the monitoring of the quality of their education (Hooge, Burns, & Wilkoszewski, 2012). Simultaneously, self-evaluation has become more and more important (Ehren, Perryman, & Shackleton, 2015). For schools, self-evaluation can be described as “a process, initiated by the school itself, in which carefully chosen participants make a systematic description and

appraisal of the functioning of the school, with a view to making decisions or taking initiatives for (aspects of) the overall development of the school and school policy” (Van Petegem, 2005, p. 104). The relevant research literature suggests that self-evaluation ideally ought to include both an orientation towards quality assurance (determining *what* is good and *what* should be bettered) as well as quality improvement (providing inspiration for *how* things can be improved). However, realization of this double function appears to be rather difficult in actual practice (Geijsel, Krüger, & Slegers, 2010; Vanhoof & Petegem, 2007). Improving educational quality involves school development: a multilayered interplay of professional learning and leadership of which research has shown its complexity and non-linear nature (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). In an attempt to deepen our insight into school self-evaluation, we therefore asked ourselves what is required for self-evaluation to significantly contribute to both educational quality assurance and school improvement. In line with referred literature, school improvement is used in this article to refer to the combined

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: t.van.der.bij@nhl.nl (T. van der Bij), F.P.Geijsel@uva.nl (F.P. Geijsel), G.T.M.Tendam@uva.nl (G.T.M. ten Dam).

process of educational improvement and school development necessary for sustainable improvement of educational quality with taking into consideration that this process is recursive by nature. After reviewing the monitoring of educational quality in the context of educational governance in The Netherlands, we discuss the strengths and weaknesses of self-evaluation for enhancing the quality of education. We summarize by composing a framework for content and process factors, which may be used to evaluate the quality of self-evaluation in schools. The significance of this model will then be assessed by evaluating the quality of the school-based self-evaluation that took place as part of a comprehensive project designed and used to help Dutch secondary schools promote the quality of student care.

2. Towards shared monitoring of the quality of education in The Netherlands

To better understand the requirements for self-evaluation to significantly contribute to quality assurance and school improvement, we need to place this in the context and history of the monitoring of the quality of education in the country concerned. Decades of the marketization and decentralization of government tasks in The Netherlands as in many Western societies have resulted in a system composed of relatively autonomous school bodies, boards, and districts. The national governments in these same Western societies now face a major dilemma of central control versus variety at the local level when it comes to the assurance of educational quality and the implementation of educational innovations (OECD, 2012). While this dilemma is relatively new for many Western countries, The Netherlands has faced it for over a century already as the autonomy of schools has its roots in the Dutch Constitution. That is, Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution (1917) stipulates that “teaching shall be free” just as the starting of a school and the organization of a school. School autonomy is thus deeply embedded in the history and culture of The Netherlands. And as a consequence of this widespread autonomy, variety at the level of the school is an essential feature of an education system composed of mostly publicly funded but privately run schools. This same Article 23 from the Dutch Constitution nevertheless further stipulates that education should be an ongoing government concern. For example, there are regulations regarding the competence of teachers and the quality of education. Hence, school autonomy must be balanced with government control to insure that basic standards of education are met. For over a century in The Netherlands, thus, tension has existed between local variation among stakeholders and central control/accountability for the quality of the education provided. Or in other words, the history of Dutch educational policy can be seen to be an ongoing balancing act.

While the national government is responsible for the functioning of the Dutch education system in general, school boards must justify their policies, the organization of their education, and the results that they obtain to not only the government but also direct stakeholders (i.e., parents and other interested parties). The Quality Act (*Kwaliteitswet*) of 1998 holds that the boards of schools are formally responsible for the quality of teaching provided. Dutch government organizations, however, supervise whether schools do provide instruction that leads to intended learning results and uninterrupted school careers. The division of responsibilities between the government and school boards was articulated further in the Supervision of Education Act of 2002 (*Wet Onderwijstoezicht*). The new task of the educational inspectorate became “assess the quality of education on the basis of observance of requirements for the type of education concerned” (section 3, paragraph 2 under a). In 2007 the Dutch educational inspectorate developed a risk-oriented model of supervision. In this model, the

intensity of supervision is determined by the outcome of a risk analysis conducted by the inspectorate with an eye to answering the questions if there is a suspicion of risk and, if so, the extent of the risk. All schools were thus to supply student outcome data, annual reports, and financial statements for analysis by the inspectorate and indication of cases of possible risk (cf. Department of Education, Culture and Science, 2012).

Although a decline in the number of schools ‘at risk’ over the past few years could be noticed, the general quality of the education provided in The Netherlands showed less progression, also in comparison to international trends (Inspectorate of Education, 2014). Therefore most recently, the content and process of the external supervision provided by the educational inspectorate has been called into question by the Ministry of Education again (Ehren & Honingh, 2011). In the future the inspectorate needs to provide more differentiated quality assessment and subsequent supervision for even schools with a sufficient or high level of educational quality (Inspectorate of Education, 2015). At the moment, the inspectorate introduces a new framework for the assessment and supervision of the quality of education in The Netherlands with emphasis on the accountability of local school boards for doing this. School self-evaluation will be an important part of this new framework and, indeed, it is laid down by law in The Netherlands that each school board must have a separate supervisory board responsible for the monitoring of the quality of the education provided by the school or schools falling under the auspices of the school board. Both the internal supervision of schoolboards and external supervision by the Inspectorate are geared to assessment as well as school improvement (cf. Gaertner, 2013; Nevo, 2002; Vanhoof & Van Petegem, 2007). Internal school supervisors, more than external ones, can serve as intermediaries between the government, the participants in the school, and the school environment. Such dialogue with the different stakeholders in a school has been shown to be especially important for promoting the learning capacity of an organization (Schillemans, 2011).

Although the upcoming model has some promising features to better connect to school improvement in general, not just for the weakest schools, the shared responsibility of government and school boards for the quality of education nevertheless raises a number of issues.

A first issue is the ambiguous attitude adopted by the government toward schools in the form of continually encouraging increased autonomy while simultaneously restricting educational freedom with the introduction of new rules. The pressure imposed by external regulation and accounting is at odds with the internal desire of schools to pay attention to predominantly the realization of high quality of education (Hooge & Honingh, 2014). Stated differently, the inspectorate should attend to not only the monitoring of schools to promote optimal performance but also the stimulation of quality development (Gaertner, 2013).

A second issue raised by the shared responsibility of government and school boards for the quality of education concerns the relations between the school board, the internal supervisory board and the more general school environment. Mergers resulting in large-scale schools and the introduction of professional school boards, on the one hand, and deregulation of education policy with increased autonomy for the school, on the other hand, are creating greater distance between school governors, school professionals, and others either directly or indirectly involved in school affairs. Dialogue is thus complicated, particular as most school boards are now responsible for the quality of education in multiple schools. Effective communication with the governors of individual schools, internal quality supervisors, school professionals, students, parents, and others in the local school environment is thus impeded. Moreover, for the legitimization of school policy and

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