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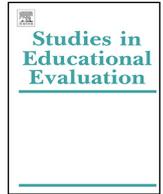
Improving the quality of education through self-evaluation in Dutch secondary schools

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

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.

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, & Sleegers, 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-lineair 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 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 legitimatization of school policy and

encouragement of continuous quality improvement, that is, proximity and trust have been shown to be important preconditions (Ranson, 2011).

A third issue concerns the notification of unwelcome side-effects of external supervision. The extent to which supervision by the educational inspectorate affects the quality of education provided by schools and/or student learning outcomes cannot be proved (De Wolf & Janssens, 2007; Gaertner, Wurster, & Pant, 2013). Research did nevertheless repeatedly point out some unwelcome side-effects of supervision by the educational inspectorate, which are found to include "window dressing," a focus on strictly performance indicators within the school, and the preparation of the team for assessment visits beforehand (De Wolf & Janssens, 2007). Nevertheless, when Gustafsson et al. (2015) tested a theoretical framework encompassing the practices of six European inspectorates, they found the articulation of clear expectations and standards for planned school inspections to be closely tied to the more widespread implementation of self-evaluation and school improvement efforts in schools. School boards and school principals can focus too strongly on minimal inspection standards and thereby fail to articulate sufficiently ambitious educational expectations for their schools. As a result, these schools will only aspire to the maintenance of a minimum of quality instead of continued school improvement (Gustafsson et al., 2015; Nelson & Ehren, 2014). Hence, special attention for connection of SSE with school improvement processes is in order to understand how such unwelcome (side-)effects can be prevented.

3. The use of self-evaluation tools for balancing quality assurance and school improvement

Self-evaluation can play an important role in the maintenance of a balance between the internal and external forms of accountability described above. It can contribute to both forms of accounting by providing the information relevant to evaluate the quality of education (e.g., use of resources, student dropout rates, the guidance of students, and human resource development) (cf. Vanhoof & Van Petegem, 2010). Self-evaluation also creates an opportunity to promote the involvement of students, parents, and other stakeholders from the school environment and can contribute to the professionalization of the education team (Kyriakides & Campbell, 2004; Creemers, Kyriakides, & Antoniou, 2013). Both involvement and professionalization are important for school improvement, which means that self-evaluation can be considered a specific form of quality assurance. For school self-evaluation, the initiative lies primary with the school itself; the school selects the instruments to be used and participants; and the self-evaluation is conducted for school improvement purposes, which makes the commitment of the team critical (see also Janssens & Van Amelsvoort, 2008).

The self-evaluation efforts of schools can take diverse forms. In many cases, self-evaluation is largely concerned with providing external accountability. The framework used by educational inspectorates – which are usually largely based upon measures of school effectiveness – then predominates. Alternatively or in addition, a school's self-evaluation efforts can more directly address school improvement. The content of the evaluation in such cases is then more context- and school-specific than when largely concerned with external accountability and therefore typically concerned with not just the educational practices of the school but also the organizational conditions that can contribute to educational improvement within the school (i.e., aspects of the school as a learning organization or a professional learning community) (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). However, although schools in general recognize the potential added value of

self-evaluation, widespread self-evaluation has yet to occur among schools. In countries where school self-evaluation has been implemented, it can be seen to still be in mostly the development stage (Gaertner, 2013).

Among the possible causes of the limited implementation of school self-evaluation are is the observed lack of a professional culture in schools as a whole (Gaertner, 2013; McNamara, O'Hara, Lisi, & Davidsdottir, 2011; Hofman, Dijkstra, & Hofman, 2009). In addition, the largely introverted school culture has not yet sufficiently geared itself toward communication with the broader school environment (Vanhoof, Van Petegem, Verhoeven, & Buvens, 2009). Quality assurance is further viewed to be largely a management task and only of tangential relevance for the classroom (Schildkamp & Visscher, 2010). In general, teachers do not feel at home with the collection and analysis of data and they typically lack the research skills needed to do this (McNamara et al., 2011). Several studies have also found schools to be incapable of producing satisfactory self-evaluation reports (i.e., a clearly written report) (Blok, Sleegers, & Karsten, 2008). This latter finding suggests that schools must search for the means to conduct and report adequate self-evaluations and be willing to accept guidance in doing this (Blok et al., 2008; McNamara & O'Hara, 2008; Geijsel et al., 2010). In general, it can be concluded that school professionals feel little sense of ownership nor joined responsibility for the system of monitoring the quality of education nor its artifacts.

With a view to stimulating school self-evaluation, a number of countries have developed specific methods, instruments, and training activities aimed at boosting the professionalism of schools and teachers for self-evaluation. These include Prose, EduBron, and ECEGO in Belgium; OFSTED in England; INIS and ESI at the level of the European Union; Q-primair and Q5 in The Netherlands (see Hutchinson & Young, 2011; MacBeath, 2011). Such instruments and projects are usually largely based on school effectiveness studies and the educational inspectorate frameworks (Schildkamp, Vanhoof, Van Petegem, & Visscher, 2012). Hence, such frameworks function as artifacts of external accountability standards with not necessarily a connection to the communicative, dialogical needs of situated school improvement processes. In opposition to the idea that schools lack professional culture, it might also be the case that available instruments and frameworks do not connect to the available professional culture unless this culture is framed by existing effectiveness criteria.

So, the dilemma of control versus variety regarding the assurance of educational quality and the implementation of educational innovations will not automatically become resolved by the introduction of self-evaluation. In order to decide upon a suitable self-evaluation instrument, schools must be aware of the underlying concepts that the different instruments draw upon and the validity of the different instruments. Moreover, school professionals should also be able to develop and validate professional standards themselves with attention to the nature of the processes to meet these standards, including the communication of concerns stemming from various stakeholders in the school and its environment for the shaping of educational policy (cf. Nevo, 2002). For continuous quality improvement and adequate educational quality, responsibility and accountability must be integrated in the profession of education at all levels of the system (Hargreaves, 2012). Moreover, scientists do and should continue to evaluate the quality of such self-evaluation instruments including the extent to which they match professional practice and school improvement (cf. Hofman, Dijkstra, & Hofman 2005).

The best way to conduct an effective self-evaluation appears to involve having an open framework for the supervision of the evaluation together with explicit support for the improvement

efforts of the school (Janssens & Van Amelsvoort, 2008). Nevertheless, schools differ considerably in their choice of self-evaluation instruments and their actual use. These differences can be seen to stem from different perspectives on the self-evaluation task but also the organization and implementation of the self-evaluation effort (Inspectorate of Education, 2006; Schildkamp et al., 2012). Schools that can be characterized as having a relatively innovative working culture, shared leadership, goal-oriented practices, cooperation, effective communication, mutual support, and reflection are more likely than other schools to introduce a self-evaluation instrument (Bubb & Earley, 2009; Geijsel et al., 2010). In their study of variation in the conduct and quality of self-evaluation in Flanders, Vanhoof et al. (2011) revealed a strong association of the implementation of self-evaluation measures, capacity building, and transformational leadership with improved teaching, student learning, and teacher collaboration. Similarly, the adequate conduct of the self-evaluation and acceptance of its outcomes tend to increase when the participants are convinced that they can personally contribute to improving the quality of education provided in their school and thus committed to the school team (Schildkamp et al., 2012). Which leaves the question of whether school self-evaluation instruments can be designed in such a way that schools with different levels of innovative capacity can all use them for quality assurance and school improvement purposes. Moreover, from a school improvement perspective on SSE, however, not so much the existence of pre-conditions but the development of these pre-conditions is at stake, especially in those schools in which innovative capacity is lacking (Geijsel et al., 2010).

4. Contributions of self-evaluation to school improvement

When it comes to the actual effects of school self-evaluation on the quality of the education provided in a school and learning outcomes, our understanding is just as limited as for understanding the effects of inspection (Demetriou & Kyriakides, 2012; Kyriakides & Campbell, 2004). An insufficient intensity of self-evaluation and implementation of self-evaluation might be one of the causes of the observed lack of empirical evidence (Gustafsson et al., 2015; McNamara et al., 2011). It is has also not been demonstrated that internal supervision (i.e., self-evaluation) actually promotes a better quality of education. The professional conduct and independence of the internal supervision (i.e., self-evaluations) is also open to question (De Wolf & Janssens, 2007). School principals tend to employ familiar, formal criteria and thus adopt the external requirements of the inspectorate for their school's self-evaluation and supervision, which can again lead to window-dressing and strategic behavior when it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of a school's self-evaluation efforts (Schildkamp & Visscher, 2010). In addition, school teams are traditionally more oriented towards action than reflection (Bubb & Earley, 2009; Schildkamp & Visscher, 2010) while it is especially reflection and feedback loops that can provide important insights for quality improvement (Geijsel et al., 2010; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). For quality self-evaluation, it is important that the process is clearly targeted and results in widely supported development items and concrete outcomes that are broadly accepted. The attitudes of the team members, the school culture, and the quality of policy-making within the school are the critical factors (Vanhoof et al., 2009, 2011). When the team has been properly informed of the purpose of the self-evaluation, sufficient time and attention are devoted to its preparation, and the organization of the self-evaluation is made abundantly clear, this will strengthen the team's confidence in the self-evaluation and its outcomes with increased chances of widespread support as a result (Bubb & Earley, 2009). External advisors, 'critical friends', and facilitators can contribute to the quality of the self-evaluation process by helping with the identification of blind spots, interpretation of the data, management of the process), promotion of dialogue with stakeholders, stimulation of both internal and external assessment, and selection of the topics for improvement (McNamara et al., 2011; O'Brien, McNamara, & O'Hara, 2014). But external guidance of the self-evaluation process alone does not guarantee quality improvement. In cases of only external guidance, for example, connection to the daily practices of school managers, teachers, students, and parents may be overlooked with the lack of discussion of such issues representing a missed opportunity to add value to the self-evaluation (Devos & Verhoeven, 2003).

Differences in the results of self-evaluation turn out to be closely related to the attitudes of the respondents toward the self-evaluation and the extent of integration into school policy (Vanhoof et al., 2009). In schools with high scores for self-evaluation, Hofman et al. (2009) saw significant associations with external assessment by the inspectorate for such factors as pedagogy, didactics, and school climate. The schools with high scores for the quality of self-evaluation, moreover, showed many features of a learning organization.

Whether self-evaluation leads to school improvement thus depends on not only external factors such as the nature of the supervision provided by the inspectorate and school boards but also the ability of the schools themselves to feed evaluation results into current developments within the school and draft a development agenda. Even with such an agenda, however, the case studies of Devos and Verhoeven (2003) and Van der Bij and Van der Waals (2007) make it clear that many schools still did not or only partly succeeded with the implementation of the planned improvements one year later. This tallies with recent findings from the Dutch inspectorate (Inspectorate of Education, 2014) showing only 8% of school departments in secondary education to measure and analyze student learning outcomes, set objectives with regard to these learning outcomes in the future, take steps to improve upon the learning outcomes, and evaluate subsequent outcomes. As a whole, that is, self-evaluation has yet to be given a prominent place in education.

5. Content and process criteria for the quality of SSE

To make a valuable contribution to school improvement and thereby the quality of education in The Netherlands, the self-evaluation effort has to be of sufficient quality itself. Drawing upon the literature, criteria of such quality can be seen to concern both the content of the self-evaluation and the conditions under which the self-evaluation is conducted. Moreover, the quality and value of the self-evaluation is also determined by a suitable balance between internal and external accounting factors (Janssens & Van Amelsvoort, 2008; Kyriakides & Campbell, 2004). That is, criteria of the quality of a self-evaluation should refer to both issues of accountability and opportunities for school improvement. Kyriakides and Campbell (2004) already pleaded some years ago for a cooperative model of self-evaluation in which the quality criteria are determined by both the school and external supervisors. This cooperative model can be taken as the starting point for a dialogue between the school and various stakeholders. This dialogue must, of course, also meet a number of requirements (Nevo, 2002): It should be open; based upon mutual respect; and involve a willingness to accept the consequences of the evaluation and discussion.

Combining the aforementioned two perspectives (quality assurance and quality improvement) can help us categorize the criteria for evaluation of the quality of a self-evaluation. In Table 1, we summarize the criteria discussed above as pertaining to the self-evaluation process in general, accountability in particular, or school improvement in particular and then consider the required

content and conditions. In such a manner, a framework for understanding the available criteria for assessing the quality of a school's self-evaluation is provided.

6. Review of the Dutch self-evaluation instrument student care (SSC)

In The Netherlands, one of the few self-evaluation projects conducted at the school level is the project "Quality of student care in pre-vocational secondary education".[1] The project was initiated in 2003 by teacher trade unions and school board organizations to improve the quality of student care in secondary schools. The development of this project was subsidized by the government and resulted in several instruments including a specific method for the conduct of a school self-evaluation: the self-evaluation framework for student care (SSC, in Dutch *ZEK*), as described by Hoffmans (2012). After completion of this project, the instruments and materials were made more widely available to schools via a website (www.zek-onderwijs.nl). In the period from 2003 to 2007, more than 60% of schools for pre-vocational secondary education participated in the project (Voncken & Schoonhooven, 2006). And given the success of the project with pre-vocational secondary education schools, the SSC was adapted for use with other categories of schools: elementary schools, special education schools and even preschools.

After a brief review of the project, we asked ourselves if the quality criteria suggested in different studies can also be seen to be present in the SSC. And our answer is presented below.

6.1. SSC project starting points

For self-evaluation student care (SSC), student care is defined as a *coherent ensemble of activities and provisions for systematic guidance of students during their school career on the basis of educational needs of these students* (Hoffmans, 2012; p. 4). The starting points for the SSC are the following: support should directly benefit the development of the student; support should be maximally integrated into the teaching and learning processes; learning environment should be supportive and teachers should have high expectations for students; quality assurance and self-evaluation should be components of a cyclic and systematic approach to school improvement; and, finally, pluriformity and alternative views on student care should be respected (i.e., the SSC framework is not normative and both school improvement and quality assurance are presumed to be the concern of everyone – teachers and administrators but also students, parents, and others in the school environment; the SSC endorses the legal Inspectorate framework.

6.2. Method of conduct

Schools register to participate in the SSC project of their own accord. In a part of the schools necessity due to for instance a decrease in the amount of students or a low judgment of the inspectorate may be a precursor or motivation for the self-evaluation. By agreement, an external advisor is assigned to the schools that register. The project has a pool of over 20 experienced advisors at its disposal. The role of the external advisor is to monitor and help with both the content of the self-evaluation and the self-evaluation process. The first talk with school management and the "quality assurance coordinator"[2]; – which almost every school has – is meant to inform the school of the goals of the self-evaluation and gain insight into the experiences of the school with quality assurance and self-evaluation. Next, a working group with school representatives is established for supervising the self-evaluation process. This working group decides upon the core themes and content to be addressed in the self-evaluation the target groups (e.g., professionals and management, parents and students), the type of data to be collected (e.g., a sample or the whole population), and the procedures to be followed. The quality assurance coordinator within the school coordinates the project and is responsible for the school-internal communication. After final registration, the school is given access to a web unit containing the SSC assessment instrument.

On the basis of what had been agreed upon in the working group, the quality assurance coordinator initiates the conduct of the self-evaluation. He/she communicate with the team, parents, and students; looks for current and reliable data; adapts instrument to the specific school situation when judged necessary; plans the data analyses; and oversees the planning and conduct of the self-evaluation process as a whole. After this, digital questionnaires are distributed to all participating groups.

The resulting data are analyzed by the quality assurance coordinator. All groups involved in the self-evaluation are analyzed separately, and the responses then examined for the extent of agreement. The results of the data analysis are discussed with the working group. The external advisor helps with the interpretation of the data and thus plays an important role in this phase of the SSC project. After this, the quality assurance coordinator together with the working group and external advisor prepare for a consent discussion. This discussion is used to agree upon the core topics emerging from the self-evaluation and which questions to present to the school team in conjunction with the results of the self-evaluation.

The consent discussion is organized by the quality assurance coordinator and/or a member of the school management team and conducted using the Socratic method of continued questioning and answering (Nevo, 2002). The aim of the discussion is to arrive at a shared opinion. The participants are encouraged to be curious about the views of others and thus ask questions rather than simply trying to defend a given standpoint. The quality of the arguments in favor or against a standpoint is the deciding factor. And the final objective is to formulate and agree upon a number of improvement items for the development agenda of the school.

A written report of the self-evaluation and consent discussion is drafted by the working group. The participants in the consent discussion are given the opportunity to point out any factual errors. The final version of the consent report is then presented to the school management and provides the foundation for items to be included in the school development agenda.

6.3. Outcomes of SSC project

The SSC instrument was developed in consultation with various experts in the field of education. This, together with the possibility of adopting the instrument to the specific situation of the school, strengthened the willingness of schools to use the instrument and undertake a self-evaluation) instrument (Van der Bij & Van der Waals, 2007). In practice, the schools made few changes, which

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[1] In the Dutch education system, pre-vocational secondary education is the lowest general track of secondary education and the complement of general secondary education. Students generally enter secondary school at age 12 in the Netherlands. Fifty percent of all students follow a pre-vocational secondary education track. The central aim of a pre-vocational secondary education is to continue to develop general competences (e.g., language, mathematics) and prepare the student for senior secondary vocational education/training.

[2] The "quality care coordinator" is the person responsible in the school (e.g., teacher or some other staff member for the implementation and monitoring of a school's quality management plan).

Table 1
Framework for criteria of quality of school self-evaluation based on literature.

	Content criteria	Process criteria
Overall	User-friendliness of instruments and procedures	Availability of external support for self-evaluation Dialogue *in* school and *between* school and stakeholders
Accountability	Use of standards covering quality of education Harmonization with inspectorate's assessment framework Sufficient reliability and validity Relevance for several types of stakeholders	Necessity and added value perceived by all participants Transparency of procedures
School improvement	Possibility of harmonization with school situation	Growth towards professional, learning-oriented school culture
	Development in cooperation with practitioners	Team involvement and ownership Cyclic approach Process supervision with an orientation toward learning and expertise in change management

largely concerned the incorporation of school-specific issues into the questionnaire). The schools were free to decide how many quality standards to include and the target groups to be approached, and they indeed did this (i.e., varied along these lines). The information provided by the self-evaluations was primarily used by the schools themselves for quality assurance and school improvement purposes (Voncken & Schoonhooven, 2006).

The schools differed in the amount of attention devoted to the evaluation of their teaching and the quality of the self-evaluation that they conducted. The presence of a quality policy and a professional school culture proved to be important conditions for successful self-evaluations (Van der Bij & Van der Waals, 2007). External guidance also contributed to a positive self-evaluation process. The involvement of an external advisor to watch over procedures and appointments was reported to increase the commitment of the school team to the self-evaluation process (Voncken & Schoonhooven, 2006). Sometimes the motivation to undertake a self-evaluation arose from the inspectorate (i.e., external assessment); sometimes the motivation arose from other signals (e.g., from parents); and sometimes the motivation stemmed from a perceived need on the part of the school management to put the quality of education and student care on the school agenda (Van der Waals & Kamphof, 2007).

The evaluation of the initial SCC project performed by Voncken and Schoonhooven (2006)[3] showed the schools to be satisfied with the initial contact and registration process, the consent discussions, and the drawing of conclusion for a school development agenda. The schools were nevertheless *less* satisfied with the SCC instrument. Especially irksome were some technical problems with the installation of the program. Many of the schools were not sufficiently equipped or able to deal with web units and digital instruments. To deal with this problem, training days were organized for the external advisors and internal quality assurance coordinators.

The schools were highly satisfied with the guidance provided by the external advisors who they perceived as knowledgeable and professional. Nevertheless, in particularly the schools for elementary vocational training, – which is a specific stream of pre-vocational secondary education, the schools would like to have seen the instrument more attuned to their specific situations. A striking point was the comparatively long span of the self-evaluation process from school intake to producing a development agenda for the school: This period varied from 10 to 15 months. Among the factors found to contribute to this

extended timespan were not being accustomed to the program, the phenomenon of self-evaluation, the cyclic approach to be followed, and the handling of feedback within the school. Schools chiefly made use of the self-evaluation instrument with teaching personnel and management but also used the instrument with students and parents. The evaluation showed parents and students to only rarely be included in the consent discussions. As Voncken and Schoonhooven (2006) concluded, schools appear to regard quality assurance and school improvement as chiefly a matter for education professionals.

6.4. Summary of SSC instrument according to quality criteria for school self-evaluation

In Table 2, an overview of the comparison of the use of the SSC instrument with recognized quality criteria is presented. For each criterion it is expressed to what extend it has been applicable to SSC. In general, the SSC instrument covers most of the quality criteria stipulated elsewhere for self-evaluation. Applicable key criteria (indicated with + in Table 2) were care harmonization with the assessment framework used by the education inspectorate, involvement of the school team, transparent procedures, and clearly formulated school improvement recommendations. Less but still applicable criteria (indicated with +/− in Tables 1 and 2) were those concerned with implementation of the development agenda (i.e., a cyclic approach to the process of self-evaluation), the reliability and validity of the SCC instrument itself, and some of the technical problems.

7. Conclusion

Since the 1980s, the education policies of many Western national governments have been aimed at decentralization and giving educational institutions greater autonomy while concurrently introducing or intensifying accountability measures (Ranson, 2011; OECD 2012). School boards have been given greater responsibility for the maintenance and improvement of educational quality, as well the 'playing field' changed rather strongly. In addition to formal accountability to the government, the local environment is playing an increasingly prominent role in judgements of the quality of education. This development in the governance of education calls for new forms of evaluation, forms that speak to both internal and external stakeholders in the quality of education and thereby contribute to school improvement. School *self*-evaluation presents a valuable means for involving students, teachers, parents, and others from the school environment in the process of quality assurance and school improvement. Based on the literature, we were able to identify a number of

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[3] This study was conducted in 2006 with 119 schools. Not all self-evaluations were completed in 2006 and therefore only 119 schools included in the study.

Table 2
Degree of presence of recognized quality criteria in SSC instrument.

	Content criteria	Findings	Process criteria	Findings
Overall	+/− User-friendliness of instruments and procedures	*Schools were satisfied except with technical problems pertaining to installation of the program*	+ Availability of external support for self-evaluation	*Presence of external support for set up of self-evaluation*
			+ Dialogue *in* school and *between* school and stakeholders	*The consent discussion is one of the key factors of the SSE approach*
Accountability	+/− Use of standards covering quality of education	*Focus on student care*	+/− Necessity and added value perceived by all participants	*Necessity is one of the reasons for participating in SSC*
	+ Harmonization with inspectorate's assessment framework	*Attuned to the criteria used in inspectorate's framework*	+ Transparency of procedures	*Involvement of management and education professionals from start of self-evaluation*
	+/− Sufficient reliability and validity	*Quality varies from weak to strong*		
	+ Relevance for several types of stakeholders	*Participants are school professionals, students, and parents*		
School improvement	+ Possibility of harmonization with school situation	*Attune criteria to school-specific situation*	? Growth towards professional, learning-oriented school culture	*Depends on the participating school*
	+ Development in cooperation with practitioners	*Evaluation instruments developed with education experts and school*	+ Team involvement and ownership	*Team involvement throughout entire process*
			– Cyclic approach	*School follow-up after formulation of development agenda*
			+ Process supervision with an orientation toward learning and expertise in change management	*External advisor supervises process from beginning (registration) to setting of development agenda*

conditions for successful self-evaluation (see Table 1). The identified quality criteria concern the content of the instruments to be used as well as the self-evaluation process itself. The identified criteria concern both school accountability and school improvement. And the identified quality criteria could then be used to critically evaluate a Dutch self-evaluation instrument initially developed for use in pre-vocational secondary education and assessment of the quality of student care provided there.

Looking back, we can conclude that the SSC (self-evaluation of student care) instrument includes most of the quality criteria put forward in different studies for school self-evaluation (e.g., Hofman et al., 2005; Kyriakides & Campbell, 2004). The SSC instrument was designed by education experts in consultation with teachers and other school professionals to provide – in the long run – a widely accepted, quality framework for the guidance of students. The instrument is partly attuned to the evaluation framework of the education inspectorate in that it contains items concerned with the guidance of students and the professionalism of teachers. The SSC instrument also includes broader education items that concern, for example, the provision of a stimulating learning environment, a secure learning climate, encouragement of student participation, customization of the curriculum, and having sufficiently high expectations for students. As the SSC instrument is meant to be used for self-evaluation purposes, it can also be adapted to the specific situation of a school. During the initial phases in the development of the SSC instrument, that is, the instrument was repeatedly adjusted and updated. External advisors also played an important role throughout the development process and are expected to continue to play a role in the use of the instrument.

The majority of content criteria concern accountability while the majority of the process criteria concern school improvement. The question, of course, is whether this dichotomy in the quality criteria makes sense. Maybe we should start thinking of the skills and attitudes needed to implement a development agenda within a school as important school content in light of continued

educational change as one of the largest concerns in education today (Fullan, 2007). For instance, why does all initial teacher training not require at least some knowledge of organizational change and change theory?

The main question remaining to be answered is if school self-evaluation indeed contributes to school improvement and, if indeed it does, to what extent? As already mentioned in the introduction, just how far SSC actually contributes to school improvement and a better quality of education is difficult to determine using only performance data. Many schools have difficulties with the formulation and evaluation of a development agenda (Van der Bij & Van der Waals, 2007; Van der Waals & Kamphof, 2007). After formulating a development agenda, schools generally do not pay sufficient attention to implementation and the identification of feasible targets with clear evaluation points. Those schools that do manage to formulate and implement a development agenda, moreover, can be characterized as schools with a clearly professional and very learning-oriented culture. Schools that do not have the capacity to formulate and implement a development agenda may thus be challenged and then given sufficient care to develop this capacity (Geijsel et al., 2010). Based on the overview that we provided of the SSC instrument in terms of quality criteria, we dare to conclude that the challenge of a school with regard to the quality of student care and the supply of the care needed to subsequently meet this challenge will not be provided by the use of a self-evaluation instrument alone. In addition, greater attention must be drawn to the implementation of the results of self-evaluation in order to effectively use a development agenda once it has been formulated.

It remains to be seen if the SSC instrument produces reliable and valid data on the quality of student care provided by a school and the effects of the quality of this care on the school careers of students. Little evidence is available with regard to the reliability and validity of self-evaluation instruments to date (see Hofman et al., 2005). More research on the quality of self-evaluation

instruments is thus needed. More cooperation between scientists and educational professionals could make a significant contribution to the quality of school self-evaluation.

The use of self-evaluation instruments such as the SSC raises several additional questions for their further use and relevance of school improvement. What is the congruency between the assessments conducted with various stakeholders (e.g., parents, students, teachers, school managers) and how should an observed lack of congruence not only be interpreted but also used to improve the quality of education provided by a school? How can self-evaluation be used for external accounting without damaging the strengths that is brings with it, namely school ownership and individual school selection of the topics judged to be important for evaluation? And perhaps most important, what is the association between the results of a self-evaluation at the level of the school and educational outcomes at the level of the student? These are important avenues for future research.

The results of this type of research are not only of scientific relevance but also of educational relevance. Combining quality assurance and school improvement is a complex process. Given the valuable opportunities offered by self-evaluation for the voicing of concerns and strengthening of educational ownership among parents, teachers, students, and other stakeholders in the school environment, school self-evaluation is probably here to stay. School self-evaluation and use of the SSC instrument can play an important role in the process of combining quality assurance and school improvement or as the opportunities it offers are among the main conditions for realizing sustainable educational quality. Finally, when the policy of the Dutch and other education inspectorates focusses on the quality of quality assurance in schools, the quality of a school's self-evaluation becomes critical. More attention is therefore needed for the development of the capacities of schools for improvement and the use of self-evaluation as a stimulus for all schools and not just those that already have a capacity for improvement. In other words, a combination of school self-evaluation and facilitation of the competence of change management in schools can lead to better student care and a higher quality of education. In this regard, the framework of criteria in the present study is not only useful for assessing the quality of school self-evaluation for scientific reasons, but can function as guideline for strategic action in practice as well. The framework might help school leadership and supervisors to invest in content and process conditions regarding both accountability and school improvement in order to increase the benefits of school self-evaluation efforts.

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