Linking the Policy-making Capacities of Schools and the Quality of School Self-evaluations. The View of School Leaders.

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1 Introduction

In the last ten years, school self-evaluations have become a common phenomenon in a large number of educational systems. Government, universities, research institutions and schools themselves have developed tools and methodologies that enable schools to evaluate their own functioning. Although many welcome these school self-evaluations, there is considerable doubt regarding their quality (Nevo, 2001; Van Petegem et al., 2005a). The present study is an examination of the educational opportunities policy in Flanders and the role of school self-evaluations within that policy as a case-study for investigating the quality of school-based evaluations and the impact of schools' policy-making capacities on that quality.

The educational opportunities policy was launched in 2002 and allocates additional teacher hours to primary and secondary schools that have a sufficiently high percentage of target group pupils. These additional teachers permit schools to employ teachers to work on equal educational opportunities. Schools enjoy a large degree of freedom with regard to the development of a school-specific policy. One of the few, externally imposed, directive elements is the obligation incumbent upon schools to evaluate their own functioning. Schools were required to examine, describe and assess relevant aspects of their educational opportunities policy (such as pupil counseling, improving pupils' language delay and improving relations with parents) at two points during the process of their implementation of this policy and what follows is a report on a study which investigated the quality of these self-evaluations. We also focused on the school leader's perspective on features of the school's functioning that affect the quality of self-evaluations, which resulted in the following research questions: (1a) Do schools meet the standards of high quality self-evaluations? (1b) How do schools differ in this regard? (2) Which aspect of policy-making capacities during the self-evaluation process might serve as predictors of differences in quality indicators for self-evaluation?

2 Framework

Before embarking on a study of school self-evaluations, the concept of "school self-evaluation" must be defined. We will use this definition to derive certain criteria by which to assess the quality of school

self-evaluations and will then present “policy-making capacities” as an interesting concept to explain the quality of school self-evaluation.

2.1 (Quality indicators of) school self-evaluation

Van Petegem (1998, p. 104) defines school self-evaluation as “the process, generally initiated by the school itself, and involving well-chosen participants, who systematically describe and judge the functioning of the school in order to take decisions relating to general school (policy) development”. This definition furnishes us with certain criteria which can be used to describe and - as we will explain later on - assess (the quality of) school self-evaluations. These are: has the self-evaluation been conducted systematically; were the participants chosen correctly; did the school both describe *and* assess its functioning; and did the self-evaluation result in decisions relating to quality development (Love, 1991; McBeath, 1999; McBeath et al., 2000; Van Petegem, 2001)? We will then go on to present, in the section on dependent variables (see 3.2), three quality indicators relating to (1) the conduct of the school self-evaluation; (2) the results of school self-evaluation; and (3) the feedback of results to the stakeholders.

2.2 The schools’ policy-making capacities in the context of self-evaluation

In order to detect the impact of different aspects of a school’s functioning on the quality of the school’s policy-making capacity, we prepared an inventory of relevant aspects based on the results of the existing corpus of international research on school effectiveness. Empirical evidence suggests the following 8 aspects are crucial: (1) the effectiveness of communication strategies (McBeath, 1999); (2) the personal and professional support extended to members of the school team (Sammons, Hillman & Mortimore, 1995); (3) the participation of stakeholders in decision-making processes (shared leadership) (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis & Ecob, 1988); (4) the extent to which the school attains shared objectives and enjoys a shared vision (Potter, Reynolds & Chapman, 2002); (5) the extent of the school’s response towards expectations and demands from its environment (Griffith, 2003); (6) the extent to which the school is capable of implementing innovations (Geijsel, 2001); (7) the extent to which actions in a particular school policy domain are informed by, and in line with, activities in other policy domains (Wikeley, Stoll & Lodge, 2002); and, finally, (8) the school’s capacity for reflection (Levine & Lezotte, 1990). These aspects can be applied very appropriately to different kinds of activities in schools. For example, this applies both to the implementation of quality control in general, but also to the conduct of school self-evaluations in particular, which means that these eight aspects of policy-making capacities in schools can be proposed as a framework for investigating the quality of school self-evaluation processes. We will label these eight aspects as important factors of promoting policy making capacities in the context of self-evaluations. This is a crucial step. In the

following we will focus on how self evaluations are characterized by these eight factors. In other words, we systematically consider policy making capacities in the context of school self evaluation. Our hypothesis is that the quality of school self-evaluations will be better in schools which exhibit these eight factors to a high degree during the school self-evaluation process than in those schools which do not exhibit these aspects or do so to a lesser degree. The greater the extent to which schools exhibit these aspects (cf. the independent variables in our model), the higher the quality of the school self-evaluation (cf. the independent variables in our model) will be. We illustrate the eight aspects in the context of school self-evaluations. The operationalizations of the eight well know factors in this specific context adds to the existing knowledge base. Figure 1 visualizes both the broad conceptual framework and the research frame for this study. The figure stresses the recursive nature of the model. Our research questions are situated within the gray 'research frame'.

<<Insert figure 1 here>>

Effective communication strategies

The role of communication is crucial to understanding the success of self-evaluation processes. A sufficient degree of openness and a willingness to provide feedback are vitally important pre-conditions to create an appropriate context (DeFleur et al., 1993; Leenheer & van Kasteren, 1994). Open communication between participants with regard to motives, ideas, arguments, complaints and queries is fundamental. Indicators as to the effectiveness of communication during school self-evaluations are, *inter alia*: the extent to which schools succeed in coming up with clear communication procedures with regard to the school self-evaluation; the degree of informality with which this intra-school communication takes place; and how successful schools are in creating openness during the school self-evaluation process.

Personal and professional support

Heads and teachers cannot be expected to engage in successful school self-evaluations unless they have the necessary capacities to do so (Onderwijsraad, 2001). These capacities will only develop and be sustained if participants receive a sufficient degree of personal and professional support. Professional support means, in essence, that participants do not have the impression of being left to carry out their (self-evaluation) tasks entirely on their own and involves active follow-up and guidance by colleagues (heads and teachers) and educational counsellors. Personal support means paying attention to the personal experiences and personal development of participants during the (self-evaluation) activities in schools (Little, 1990). That participants feel that their colleagues are working together as a team is a key factor in personal support, which implies that teamwork is seen as something positive and not as a threat to the individual's own autonomy. Successful school self-

evaluations rely on cooperation, support, trust, openness and involvement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). Among the indicators of personal and professional support during school self-evaluations are the extent to which participants work as a team and achieve synergy; and how sensitive schools are to the individual needs of teachers. Other relevant issues are whether schools are successful in building a climate of trust between heads and teachers and whether they can convince all the participants that there are no ulterior motives behind the self-evaluation and that the results of the process will only be used as stated in the official objectives.

Shared leadership

While head teachers clearly have a central role to play in the management of school self-evaluations, leadership during the process is not a matter for the head teacher alone (Smith & Piele, 1997; Harris, 2004). Effective leaders are aware of the importance of investing in other people in order to get the best results from self-evaluation activities (Harris, 2002). With this in mind, there are two distinguishable components to leadership during school self-evaluations: leadership exercised by the head teacher and the participation of other stakeholders in decision-making processes. This does not mean, however, that all the teachers and all the parents need to be involved at all times. It simply means that they should be involved where necessary. Hoy & Miskel (2001, p. 342) stress two key factors in this regard: the expertise of subordinates and their personal stake in the self-evaluation. As such, potential indicators of shared leadership during school self-evaluations are the extent to which schools involve stakeholders in the self-evaluation processes and the extent to which available expertise is tapped and used as a criterion for the sharing of responsibilities.

Shared vision

School self-evaluations have to be conducted with a clear objective in mind (Van Petegem et al., 2005a), which means that a clear answer has to be given to the questions: "Who is the initiator?" and "Why are we carrying out this school self-evaluation?" A feature of high-quality school self-evaluations is a continuous monitoring of the relationship between self-evaluation activities and the objectives proposed (Senge, 2001). Obviously, these objectives should be clearly formulated but some also argue they should be endorsed by all the participants and stakeholders in the self-evaluation (Majoor, 2000; SICI, 2003). For example: do teachers take part in school self-evaluation activities simply because it is an administrative requirement or do they think they might learn something from it? Indicators of shared objectives during school self-evaluations are, *inter alia*, how far schools have succeeded in setting clear objectives for the school self-evaluation; the extent to which participants share these objectives;

the extent to which stakeholders share priority topics for self-evaluation; and the extent to which teachers and other stakeholders monitor the linkage between self-evaluation activities and objectives.

Responsive capacity

Schools are expected to respond to the needs and expectations of the various sorts of environments with which they interact: the administrative environment, the social environment, the professional environment and the competitive environment (Hooge, 1998). The nature of the self-evaluation which schools are required to carry out under the equal educational opportunities policy illustrates the importance of each of these four sorts of environment. The administrative environment imposes a number of guidelines with regard to content and administration. Moreover, the central theme of the self-evaluation - the equal educational opportunities policy – cannot be disengaged from the social environment in which the school is embedded. In order to put together an equal educational opportunities policy schools also have to respond appropriately to their professional environment (schools in which the pupils go on to further studies, special needs education, etc), but also to their competitive environment (other schools in the neighbourhood, for example). Responsive schools are careful not to overlook the influence of these various environments when carrying out a self-evaluation and make a point of informing themselves with regard to the requirements and expectations of their environment and draw up possible responses to these.

Indicators of the responsive character of a self-evaluation are the extent to which schools succeed in involving parents in decision-making with regard to pupils; arranging contacts with counselling services so as to enhance the quality of the self-evaluation; seeking external advice where necessary; taking account of general social themes during the self-evaluation; and actively seeking out input from the local community.

Reflective capacity

The reflective capacity of schools is arguably the most crucial factor in achieving a high-quality self-evaluation (Van Petegem et al., 2005a). Self-evaluation is, in effect, a systematic form of reflection. The dominant culture in many schools, however, is one of 'getting things done' with little or no attention paid to reflection and learning. By the reflective capacity of schools we mean the personal willingness of the team members to reflect upon and improve their own approaches and professional practice (York-Barr et al., 2001). This involves a general orientation which is both questioning and critical with respect to participants own performance and a willingness to search out and analyse both the positive and the negative elements in that performance (Bright, 1996). The fundamental assumption is that the quality of self-evaluation is closely related to the extent to which a school team exhibits a reflective

style of professional practice rooted in a reflective approach to individual staff performance, interaction with colleagues, performance as a team *and* performance as a school.

Indicators of the reflective character of a self-evaluation are the extent to which schools succeed in convincing their members of the importance of regular self-evaluation, in order to get teaching staff and policy-implementers to examine their own professional practice critically and to reflect upon their own responsibilities at regular intervals.

An integral and integrated policy

In high-quality self-evaluations the aspects of school affairs to be examined are approached in an integral and integrated manner. This means that the self-evaluation themes are studied in the light of global school policy and that they are evaluated in the context of their interrelationship with other aspects of the school life (Verhoeven, 1986; Hooge, 1998). A high-quality self-evaluation places the themes to be examined in a broader framework and approaches them from a vision which ensures that attention is paid to school life in its entirety. The participants in a high-quality self-evaluation see their own activities as a vital part of a larger (integral) whole made up of interrelated, integrated components, rather than as independent activities (Peters, 1997).

Indicators of the integral and integrated character of a self-evaluation are the extent to which schools succeed in linking the objectives of the self-evaluation to other initiatives, in order to focus on administrative as well as purely educational aspects during the self-evaluation, in order to assume the tasks and responsibilities relating to the self-evaluation as a group rather than as individuals, and in order to ensure that the various work groups involved in the self-evaluation work together in a complementary manner.

Innovative capacity

We have identified three lines of approach which can be regarded as reflective of innovative capacity in relation to self-evaluation: how the self-evaluation is approached; the content of the self-evaluation; and the outcomes of the self-evaluation. A self-evaluation inspired by innovation depends on an approach which shows openness to new ideas and ways of working and of a vision focused not only on current functioning, but also on the future. This implies using methodologies which permit the input of innovative lines of approach, arguments and ideas. In order to derive appropriate action plans from a self-evaluation, schools have to be ready to risk proposing innovations and possible experiments in the self-evaluation process (Geijsel, 2001, p. 45). Innovative, inspired self-evaluation means daring to break away from the traditional frames of reference, where necessary.

Indicators of the innovative character of self-evaluations are: the extent to which schools succeed in arriving at a continued improvement of the policy; the drawing up of a specific plan of action derived from the self-evaluation; getting teaching staff to adopt a positive attitude with regard to innovations relating to the self-evaluation theme; encouraging teaching staff to experiment with (self-evaluation) strategies; and avoiding resistance to innovation among teaching staff.

3 Purpose of the study and methodology

The aim of this study is to generate valid and empirically based statements with regard to how high-quality schools have conducted the self-evaluation *and* the extent to which this quality is determined by the factors promoting school policy *making capacities*. To this end we have collected data from the head teachers of a representative group of equal educational opportunity schools on the basis of a written questionnaire. In the following section we will go on to discuss the sample and the dependent and independent variables in the study. We have used multiple regression analyses to explain the quality of the self-evaluations.

3.1 Sample

The study distinguished between three educational levels from which separate samples were taken throughout: primary education (PrE) (N=1801, n=317), the 1st grade of secondary education (SE1) (N=371, n=190) and the 2nd and 3rd grades of secondary education (SE23) (N=119, n=91). Within each educational level – or target population - a stratification was drawn up according to schools network and degree of urbanisation of the school catchment area.

In each school the head teacher was asked to complete a written questionnaire. Non-response was highest in primary education, yet even in this sub-population some 84% of the head teachers surveyed took part. In the SE1 and SE23 93% and 85% respectively of the schools surveyed took part in the study.

3.2 Dependent variables

The quality of the self-evaluation was operationalized by means of three indicators which were based on scale scores. The items of these scales were all prefaced by the phrase 'To what extent has your school succeeded in ...' and were scored by the head teachers using the following evaluatory scale: (1) not at all, (2) quite badly, (3) neither well/nor badly, (4) quite well, (5) completely, and DK/NA (don't know/not applicable).

Indicator 1: The conduct of the self-evaluation. This first quality indicator is concerned with the conduct of the self-evaluation. The indicator reveals to what extent the self-evaluation was implemented in a planned and systematic way. Operationalisations of the conduct of the self-evaluation are: the selection of the themes to be evaluated was carefully considered; the data collection was based on a strategy which had been thought out in advance; the data collection was conducted in a sufficiently systematic manner; the findings of the self-evaluation were described first and then evaluated. A reliability analysis reveals that the internal consistency of this scale is good (Cronbach's alpha = 0.80).

Indicator 2: The results of the self-evaluation. The results of the self-evaluation were analyzed by means of the following example items: the results of the self-evaluation give an accurate picture of the problems of our pupils; the results of the self-evaluation give an accurate picture of the shortcomings in the performance of our teaching staff; the results of the self-evaluation give an accurate picture of our strengths as a school; the results of the self-evaluation have provide us with a basis on which to reformulate our objectives. The scale consists in total of 7 items and has an acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.77).

Indicator 3: The feedback of self-evaluation results. The extent to which schools had given feedback on the results of the self-evaluation was also developed into an indicator. The scale includes *inter alia* the following items: there was open communication in our school about the self-evaluation results; we took steps to ascertain whether the teaching staff agreed with the results of the self-evaluation; the self-evaluation report is available to everyone; and there was honest communication regarding the self-evaluation results. Cronbach's alpha for this scale with 5 items = 0.91.

3.3 Independent variables

In the analyses self-evaluation quality is explained on the basis of a number of background characteristics relating to the school and on the basis of the extent to which the school complied with the factors promoting policy **making capacities** during the self-evaluation. The background characteristics included were: the target population to which the school belongs (PrE, SE1, SE23); the schools network; school size; whether schools had previous experience with equal educational opportunities initiatives and the number of equal educational opportunity hours allotted to the school. The key factors promoting policy making capacities in the context of self-evaluations were operationalized in a battery of items. The characteristics and reliability of these scales are reported in section 4.1.2.

4 Results

In this section, we present the descriptive results of the indicators developed (see research question 1) before going on to explain the quality of the self-evaluation (see research question 2).

4.1 The quality of self-evaluation described

The descriptive results were primarily focused on the three indicators of self-evaluation quality and thereafter on the characteristics of the self-evaluation as an act of policy.

4.1.1 Indicators of self-evaluation quality

Indicator 1: The conduct of the self-evaluation. Table 1 shows the descriptive results for this scale with the accompanying variance analysis of differences between the target populations reported. The average score on the scale in each target population is high. The respondents rated the conduct of the self-evaluation in their school as of a considerably high quality. Primary schools score somewhat higher than secondary schools. However, the effect size (d) of the difference between primary schools and the 1st grade of secondary schools is only 0.33. There are no other significant differences according to background characteristics of schools.

(Insert Table 1 here)

Indicator 2: The results of the self-evaluation. The average score on this indicator is 3.81. Head teachers thus reveal themselves to be quite pleased with the results of the self-evaluation in their school. The results spread is smaller than in the case of the other indicators. The only background characteristic that appears to coincide with the results of the self-evaluation is the educational level to which the school belongs. Here too primary schools score better than secondary schools. The greatest effect size ($d = 0.48$) is observed in the difference between primary schools and the 1st grade of secondary schools. However, this difference is also quite limited. There are no effects due to network, school size, number of equal educational opportunity hours and whether or not schools have experience with ZVB (Care Expansion Policy) and/or OVB (Educational Priority Policy).

Indicator 3: The feedback of self-evaluation results. The average score is the highest for this indicator ($M = 4.15$). This high score is largely attributable to the considerable degree of feedback on the self-evaluation results in primary schools. Primary schools score statistically significantly higher on this indicator than secondary schools. The effect size for the difference between primary schools and secondary schools with a 2nd and 3rd grade reaches as high as .68. The other background characteristics of schools do not appear to coincide with statistically significant differences between schools.

4.1.2 Predictors of self-evaluation quality

For each scale we have used as an independent variable, a number of descriptive results are given in table 2.

(Insert Table 2 here)

The most striking result is the low average score on the responsiveness scale. The respondents indicated on average that their school had not successfully managed to involve parents in the self-evaluation and to pay attention to input from parents. There is a considerable spread in the results of schools on this scale ($SD = .90$). The average scores on the other scales are appreciably higher and situated between 3.56 and 3.80, although these average scores also conceal a considerable variation between schools.

We investigated the unique contribution of a number of background characteristics to the aspects of policy making capacities in relation to self-evaluations. In addition to schools network and target population we also included the school size and whether or not the school had prior experience with government initiatives in the field of equal educational opportunities (in dummy form throughout) in a regression analysis for this purpose (see table 3).

(Insert Table 3 here)

The average score of primary schools in the free subsidized educational sector without prior experience in the area of equal educational opportunities can be read off in the 'constant' row. Primary education head teachers reported more often than their colleagues in secondary education that their school has been successful in implementing the various fulcra which we distinguished in the conduct of a self-evaluation. With the exception of the degree of responsiveness and the integral approach, primary schools consistently score statistically significantly higher than secondary schools. In addition to the educational level only one background characteristic was studied which had an effect on the self-evaluation. The professional support during the equal educational opportunities self-evaluation appears to be greater in inverse proportion to school size. The score on the 'professional support' scale dropped a tenth of a point per 100 pupils.

We conclude the descriptive results with an exploration of the relationship between the various fulcra. Table 4 includes both the bivariate (bottom left) and the partial correlation coefficients (top right). The partial correlation coefficients were checked throughout for all other fulcra. Only statistically significant correlations ($p < 0.05$) are reported.

(Insert Table 4 here)

The mutual bivariate correlation coefficients of the various characteristics of the self-evaluation as an act of policy are noticeably high. Only in the case of the characteristic 'responsiveness' are these systematically under 0.50. The partial correlation coefficients are either a good deal lower or are not statistically significant. After conducting checks, shared objectives and professional support still appear to coincide with the other fulcra.

4.2 The quality of the self-evaluation explained

In the preceding section we developed and described three indicators for the quality of the equal educational opportunities self-evaluation. This section presents the results of regression analyses in which we have systematically sought the most suitable model to explain the variance in these indicators. Two groups of predictors were included in the analyses: (1) the background characteristics of the school (target population and network, school size, whether or not the school had prior experience with equal educational opportunities policy, number of equal educational opportunity hours) and (2) the eight factors promoting policy **making capacities** in relation to self-evaluation. Table 5 summarizes the results of the three multiple regression analyses. Only those predictors which play a role in one of the regression models have been included in the table. The percentage explained variance (R^2) is between 41% and 51%.

(Insert Table 5 here)

The regression model which sets out to explain the quality of the **conduct of the self-evaluation**, is revealed as strong model. The three characteristics of the self-evaluation as an act of policy can be used as a basis for explaining 44% of the variance between schools. In order of importance these characteristics are: communication ($\beta=0.35$), shared leadership ($\beta=0.30$) and innovative capacity ($\beta=0.13$). The more effective the communication in schools during the self-evaluation, the more leadership was shared and the more positive and flexible attitudes were with regard to innovations in the self-evaluation, the higher the quality of the conduct of the self-evaluation was.

41% of the variance in the results of the self-evaluation can be explained on the basis of the regression model found. The innovative character of the self-evaluation plays a very important role ($\beta=0.50$). The non-standardized regression coefficient is also almost 0.5. This means that schools differ per point difference on the 'innovative character of the self-evaluation' scale a half point on the 'results of the self-evaluation' indicator (both scales range from 1 to 5). The other predictors are of a mutually comparable, but more minor, importance. The communicative and integral/integrated character of the self-evaluation and also the extent to which leadership is shared have a standardized regression coefficient throughout of around 0.15. The results of the 'shared leadership' predictor are noteworthy although the regression model indicates that there is a negative relationship to the results of the self-evaluation. This shows us that respondents reported less positive results when all stakeholders were

involved to a lesser extent, when responsibilities for the implementation of the self-evaluation were borne less by single individuals and when the particular strengths of the various participants were taken into account. A possible explanation may be that the answers given by respondents on the scale 'shared leadership during the self-evaluation' are all fairly high. This means that in the regression analysis the differences between respondents who score 3 on the scale and those respondents who score 4 or 5 on the scale were assumed. In the theoretical framework we advocated striking an appropriate balance between participation and personal responsibility of the participants during the self-evaluation. The criteria on which these choices were to be made were involvement and expertise. It is possible that in schools which scored very high on the leadership scale the search for an appropriate participation was again out of balance so that there was too much participation. This may have been prejudicial to the viability of the self-evaluation with consequently poorer self-evaluation results.

A regression model can also be drawn up for the scale 'feedback of the self-evaluation results'. This model explains 51% of the variance between schools and includes the following four predictors: communicative capacity; shared leadership; reflective capacity; and innovative capacity. The communicative character of the self-evaluation appears to be the most important ($\beta=0.44$). The greater the communicative character of the self-evaluation, the higher schools score on the scale 'feedback of the self-evaluation results'. A smaller, but still statistically significant effect is revealed in the innovative character of the self-evaluation ($\beta=0.15$). Finally, it is also apparent that the degree of reflection and shared leadership contribute to the prediction of how schools score on the scale 'feedback of the self-evaluation results'.

5 Conclusions and discussion

When the current equal educational opportunities policy was drafted the underlying principle was to give schools more room for manoeuvre in terms of policy implementation. For schools this means not just a new way of working but also more responsibility. The introduction of a compulsory self-evaluation was thus, in part, a means of placing the responsibility for quality assurance with regard to the new equal educational opportunities policy onto schools. The results shown give an idea of how high-quality schools carried out these self-evaluations. Based on the assessment by head teachers we conclude that on average schools scored well on the quality indicators developed. These results thus entitle us to answer our first research question in the affirmative. The descriptive results of the three indicators suggest that head teachers declared themselves on average satisfied with regard to quality aspects of the equal educational opportunities self-evaluations. With the exception of responsive capacity the scores with regard to the factors promoting policy making capacities are on average quite high. Yet three observations need to be made with regard to these generally good scores on the various quality characteristics of self-evaluations.

In the first place we have to bear in mind that this is data from self-reporting by principals. An essential aspect of educational quality is that it goes together with both objective and subjective evaluations. In a quality assurance system a distinction has to be made between an expected quality, a perceived quality and an actual quality (Cuyvers, 2002, p. 26). We have reported on the perceived quality of self-evaluations. Yet in order to arrive at a comprehensive picture of the quality of self-evaluations there is a need for a study which links this perceived quality to the expected and actual quality.

In this regard we ought further to emphasize that we have only reported the perception of head teachers regarding the conduct of the self-evaluations. However, there are indications that head teachers and teaching staff hold different views on self-evaluation and its quality. Teaching staff are on the whole not really convinced of the importance of self-evaluation, while head teachers are. Head teachers are more positive with respect to self-evaluation and are more convinced of its usefulness (Van Petegem et al., 2005a). The results may well therefore not be representative for the whole school team.

Thirdly, the above does not permit us to conclude that self-evaluations were conducted to an equally high level of quality in all schools. There is, after all, a considerable variation between schools. We would like to stress that there is an enormous difference between the specific approach to the self-evaluation adopted in individual schools and a description of the approach of all equal educational opportunities schools in terms of averages. What is true of one school, is not true of another. The question as to whether the self-evaluations were conducted to a high standard of quality cannot therefore be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. The differences between schools are too great to permit this.

It is apparent that the background characteristic of schools which most closely coincides with the quality of self-evaluations is the educational level to which the school belongs. Primary schools score significantly higher on the quality indicators than secondary schools. Other background characteristics do not appear to lead to statistically significant differences. It is therefore not the case that schools with prior experience with equal educational opportunities or that schools with a greater number of equal educational opportunity hours have achieved higher quality with regard to self-evaluation. This is not surprising as earlier implementation of the equal educational opportunities policy focused on content-related aspects rather than on self-evaluation. We have also shown that the effect of the educational level disappears when the factors promoting policy making capacities are included in the analyses. This appears to show that the effect of the educational level is primarily attributable to differences with regard to policy making capacities between primary schools and secondary schools, which brings us to the second research question.

This study confirms the importance of the factors of policy making capacities for the quality of self-evaluation. The three self-evaluation quality characteristics proposed depend on the factors promoting policy making capacities of schools throughout the self-evaluation process. One characteristic plays a

statistically significant role in relation to all the indicators: shared leadership. The quality of self-evaluations is higher in schools which have an appropriate participation of teaching staff in decision-making during the self-evaluation. We have shown that this does not necessarily mean that there has to be very much participation. Too much participation appears to have a negative influence on the results of the self-evaluation. By an appropriate participation we mean striking the right balance between expertise and involvement of those involved in the self-evaluation process (Hoy & Miskel, 2001; Van Petegem et al., 2005a).

Other factors such as effective communication, the innovative, responsive and reflective capacity of the school and the integral and integrated character of the self-evaluation also have a predictive value with respect to one or more quality indicators. The results of this study clearly demonstrate that the quality of self-evaluations is higher when teaching staff are better informed about the objectives of the self-evaluation, when the staff expertise the school has at its disposal is used effectively, when more effort is made to obtain input from the local community, when there is a culture of systematic reflection, when work groups in the school work together in a complementary manner and when the school experiments more with innovative strategies. The concept of 'policy making capacities' would thus appear to be a promising tool for studying, monitoring and developing the quality of self-evaluation. The policy making capacities of schools ought therefore to be further developed as a concept and its possible application to other activities in schools should also be tested. Figure 1, for example, suggests that that effective communication, supportive relationships and shared leadership are prerequisites to the other factors promoting policy making capacities. In order to provide useful resources for school development the causal linkage between the various fulcra will have to be investigated in depth.

The conduct of self-evaluations plays a deservedly important role in the government's equal educational opportunities policy and a great deal is expected from equal educational opportunities schools. Yet conducting self-evaluations may not be an activity which schools necessarily want or are able to implement. While this study has indeed shown that head teachers declare themselves to be satisfied with the quality of the self-evaluation which they have carried out, the Flemish educational inspectorate still found that most schools do not take the concept of 'self-evaluation' very far. Flemish policy-makers maintain that schools often return positive evaluations of their own performance while, in reality they are still at the start of a long process of development. In our view the importance of improving the willingness and the capacities of schools to achieve high-quality self-evaluations cannot be overestimated. The findings of the present study clearly show that this is not only a matter of giving them the necessary tools and technical self-evaluation skills. Promoting policy making capacities of schools is also an appropriate strategy in order to improve the quality of self-evaluations.

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Figures

Figure 1: The position of policy making capacities (PMC) of schools in the theoretical and research framework

Tables

Table 1

Descriptive results and ANOVA's for the quality indicators of school self-evaluations

		M	Min	Max	SD	ANOVA
Indicator 1: The conduct of the self-evaluation	<i>Total</i>	4.07	1.00	5.00	.61	
	PrE	4.16	2.17	5.00	.56	F=6.5; p=0.02
	SE1	3.96	1.00	5.00	.63	df (2,478)
	SE23	3.98	2.43	5.00	.66	PrE > SE1, SE23
		M	Min	Max	SD	ANOVA
Indicator 2: The results of the self-evaluation	<i>Total</i>	3.81	1.86	5.00	.55	
	PrE	3.92	2.00	5.00	.52	F=11.6; p<0.001
	SE1	3.66	1.86	5.00	.57	df (2,468)
	SE23	3.73	2.00	5.00	.54	PrE > SE1, SE23
		M	Min	Max	SD	ANOVA
Indicator 3: The feedback of self-evaluation results	<i>Total</i>	4.15	1.00	5.00	.79	
	PrE	4.36	1.00	5.00	.65	F=20.9; p<0.001
	SE1	3.91	1.00	5.00	.90	df (2,436)
	SE23	3.86	1.40	5.00	.82	PrE > SE1, SE23

Table 2

Descriptive results of the key factors of policy effectiveness

Scale	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha	M	min - max		SD
Effectiveness of communication strategies	5	0.82	3.80	1.20	5.00	.69
Personal and professional support	6	0.87	3.60	1.00	5.00	.72
Shared leadership	5	0.81	3.82	1.00	5.00	.74
Shared vision	4	0.86	3.59	1.00	5.00	.74
Responsive capacities	5	0.87	1.91	1.00	5.00	.90
Reflective capacities	6	0.90	3.56	1.00	5.00	.74
Integral and integrated policy	6	0.78	3.62	1.40	5.00	.65
Innovative capacities	7	0.85	3.80	1.86	5.00	.57

Table 4

Bivariate and (partial) correlations of the factors of policy effectiveness

	Shared vision	Effectiveness of communication strategies	Personal and professional support	Shared leadership	Responsive capacities	Reflective capacities	Integral and integrated policy	Innovative capacities
Shared vision	1	(.24)	(.32)	(.10)	(ns)	(.18)	(ns)	(.11)
Effectiveness of communication strategies	.70	1	(.34)	(ns)	(ns)	(ns)	(ns)	(ns)
Personal and professional support	.73	.72	1	(ns)	(.14)	(.17)	(.11)	(ns)
Shared leadership	.54	.55	.58	1	(ns)	(.20)	(.19)	(ns)
Responsive capacities	.20	.16	.28	.18	1	(ns)	(.17)	(ns)
Reflective capacities	.66	.62	.68	.60	.25	1	(ns)	(.28)
Integral and integrated policy	.43	.45	.53	.52	.31	.52	1	(.37)
Innovative capacities	.53	.55	.57	.51	.22	.65	.63	1