



School self-evaluation an international or country specific imperative for school improvement?



Martin Brown^{a,*}, Sarah Gardezi^a, Laura del Castillo Blanco^b, Rossitsa Simeonova^c,
Yonka Parvanova^c, Gerry McNamara^a, Joe O'Hara^a, Zacharoula Kechri^d

^a EQI: The Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection, DCU Institute of Education, Dublin, Ireland

^b Regional Government of the Autonomous Community of Extremadura, Spain

^c Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Faculty of Education, Bulgaria

^d Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, Greece

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

School Self-evaluation
School improvement
Evaluation capacity

ABSTRACT

Using multisite case studies in four European countries, the purpose of this paper was to explore school leaders and teachers views on School Self Evaluation (SSE), its role in school improvement and the capacity of schools to engage with the process. Evidence derived from the study suggests that although there is a consensus among school leaders concerning the potential utility of SSE; across some countries, there were also concerns relating to implementing the process and the potential misuse of SSE outcomes. When this was not the case, it is apparent that governments have driven the process with clearly defined legislation and defining the SSE agenda and outcomes to dispel school leaders' apprehensions regarding the balance between SSE for accountability or school improvement.

Introduction and background

In most education systems, school evaluation has evolved from compliance with school inspection towards an increasing emphasis on internal review or school self-evaluation (SSE) (Brown et al., 2018). Many established school inspection systems around the world, including, for example, the Department of Education and Skills, Ireland (DES), Education Scotland, the Education Review Office, New Zealand, now consider SSE and external Evaluation as complementary processes for school improvement (OECD, 2013). Indeed, SSE and external evaluation are now perceived as mutually beneficial to each other and part of an ongoing school improvement process (Brown et al., 2018; Mutch, 2012; Vanhoof & van Petegem, 2010). For example, Nevo (2001) suggests that SSE broadens the scope of external evaluation, fosters better interpretation of the findings and provides a clear focus to implementation. In this way, responsibility for handling the implementation and consequences of the evaluation rests on both the school authorities and the inspectorate. Research by Macbeath, Schratz, Meuret, & Jakobsen, 2000 and Nevo (2001), among others, also suggests that SSE can bring about a change in the culture of the school by providing a forum to all stakeholding groups to have greater participation in the school improvement process; Schools can develop their own improvement agenda, enabling staff to focus on the areas for improvement relevant to their school con-

text, thus promoting ownership of the process among the school community.

Such a collaborative and focused approach to school improvement can bring about short and long-term benefits for schools (Brown et al., 2021). The short-term benefits can relate to earned autonomy by schools (Blok et al., 2008) since the more valid and reliable are the findings of SSE and the provision of information about the indicators included in inspection frameworks, the longer the school is left on its own without the need for external inspection (Nevo, 2001). The long-term benefits can include organisational change and a mechanism initiated by school leaders through the SSE process (Brown et al., 2016).

Publications such as Looking at Our School (Department of Education and Skills 2016) by the DES in Ireland, How Good is Our School in Scotland (Education Scotland, 2015) are two examples of governments' willingness to decentralise control and move school evaluation responsibility to schools more than would be done so in the past where school evaluation was a top-down process for school improvement in the form of school inspection. However, this critical shift in policy that forms the basis for this research gives rise to a two-pronged question; how well is SSE presently managed in education systems and do those responsible for SSE have the necessary competencies to engage with the SSE process?

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: martin.brown@dcu.ie (M. Brown).

To answer these questions, a series of comparative cross-case studies of SSE implementation was carried out in four European countries (Bulgaria, Ireland, Greece, and the Extremadura province, referred to in this paper as Spain) and consisted of interviews with school principals and teachers from twenty-three schools whose education systems are at different stages of implementing and enacting SSE. The paper at hand presents a comparative analysis of the findings as two overarching themes derived from a review of the literature on SSE.

- SSE as a whole school approach to school improvement
- The capacity of educators to engage with SSE

The first part of the paper provides an overview of school evaluation in each of the participating countries. Next, the methodology used in the study is described. Leading on from this, the presentation and analysis of the research findings are provided. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the research findings derived from the study.

Overview of school evaluation in Bulgaria, Ireland, Greece, and Spain

The implementation and enactment of school evaluation in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, school inspection has changed with the Pre-school and School Education Act, 2015 (Ministry of Education and, 2015). Inspection has now become a core part of quality management and improvement in the Bulgarian education system. Within this, a new body has been established – the National Inspectorate of Education, subordinated to the Council of Ministers and implements a full inspection of each school at least once every five years. There are also Regional Departments of Education (RDE), subordinated to the Ministry of Education and Science, with a dual role of support and accountability of schools in the region. RDE supports the implementation of guidelines for improvement referred to as the Regulations for managing quality in educational institutions, which includes guidelines for SSE provided by the Ministry of Education and Science. However, schools have resisted this Quality Management Regulation, and in the absence of clear indicators for quality management and the necessary training required to implement such a process, it was later suspended (Simeonova et al., 2020).

The implementation and enactment of school evaluation in Greece

In Greece, the system of school supervision and support has been in a state of flux due to various perceptions of school evaluation by changing governments over the course of the last twenty years (Simeonova et al., 2020). In 1982, the government initiated a support service where School advisors were responsible for providing teachers with scientific-pedagogical guidance and participation in their evaluation and in-service training. (Stamelos & Bartzakli, 2013). However, due to confrontations between the government and the teachers' trade union, their roles were severely limited. This limited support for school improvement continued until the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (MERA) introduced a new Law (4547/12-6-2018) that decentralised the Greek educational system to interdisciplinary scientific teams in regions throughout Greece. It also places the planning and evaluation of schools' work at the regional level, including developing school improvement plans and regionally devised SSE processes.

The functioning of primary and secondary schools is to date, supervised by 13 Regional Directors of Education (RDE) who are supported by sub-regional Directors of Primary or Secondary Education, who are responsible for the functioning of schools within a particular area through Regional Centers of Educational Support ("PEKES"). Every PEKES consists of Coordinators of Educational Work (former School Inspectors/Advisors) who support schools in areas such as literacy and numeracy. At the end of the year, they draw up and send each school an assessment report detailing the areas to be improved together with proposed training courses that reinforce teachers' pedagogical skills (Simeonova et al., 2020).

The implementation and enactment of school evaluation in Ireland

In Ireland, the system of school inspection dates back to the nineteenth century when mass public schooling was introduced, and education and other emerging public services were required to comply with centrally mandated rules and programmes (Boyle, O'Hara, McNamara, & Brown, 2020; Brown, McNamara and O'Hara, 2016a). In 1999 the DES introduced a system of school-based evaluation entitled Whole-School Evaluation (WSE) that laid the foundations for SSE (Brown, 2013). However, for various reasons such as the absence of clearly defined guidelines and the capacity of schools to engage with SSE (McNamara & O'Hara, 2012); with training provided by the support services of the Department of Education and Skills (Brown et al., 2018), it has been replaced with an inspectorate devised framework for school improvement referred to as *Looking at Our School, an Aid to Self-Evaluation in Schools* (Department of Education and Skills 2016). Furthermore, since 2012, all schools in Ireland are now required to engage with SSE (in accordance with DES Circular Nos. 0040/2012 (Department of Education and Skills 2012a) and 0039/2012 (Department of Education and Skills 2012b)).

The implementation and enactment of school evaluation in Spain

In Spain, the Organic Law of Education (Ley Orgánica 2/2006, de 3 de mayo, de Educación) provides a general legal framework for the inspectorate, detailing its aims, functions, and structures. The same law outlines regulations for schools to be supported by inspectors in conducting SSE improvement planning and development. Extremadura, a region in Spain, has an established school inspection system, and the responsibilities and main organizational procedures are detailed in the Extremadura Education Act. The Master Action Plan (MAP) for the Education Inspectorate in Extremadura 2017-2020 is a three-year plan that includes 'supervising, controlling, evaluating and counselling the organisation and operation of schools'. Based on the MAP, annual action plans are developed, which specify actions to be carried out by the inspectors. Presently, in the current action plan, inspectors are required to supervise and evaluate the production of an acceptable plan for improvement by each school and certify that each school has reported the final Evaluation results in the School Annual Report.

As neither the regional education authorities nor the Education Inspectorate in Extremadura has designed its own guidelines or indicators for school improvement, training and guidance given by inspectors use indicators and guidelines designed for other purposes such as CPDEX – a training programme aimed to improve school performance by analysing teaching competences- or CALIDEX – a quality assurance programme for vocational training schools.

Research method

In order to get as realistic a picture as possible of the values, beliefs and attitudes of school leaders and teachers towards SSE, a series of multisite case studies was carried out in a sample of twenty-three schools with consideration to the demographics and various school types that exist in each country (Table 1).

The research methodology used in the study was selected for a number of reasons. First, case studies provide researchers with an opportunity to study the phenomena in their entirety and a naturalistic setting (schools in the case of this study), thus fully exposing their complexity. Additionally, the selection of multiple sites enhances the generalizability and the trustworthiness of the findings (Punch, 2005).

The research method used for data collection consisted of Semi-structured interviews with school principals, deputy principals and teachers from the sample. The questions used in the interviews were grouped according to two specific themes. Contained in each theme were a series of conceptual labels that generated different codes for the cross-case analysis (Table 2).

Table 1.
School Profile Characteristics.

Country School Type	Demographic	Student Enrolment	Teachers	Number of Interviews
Bulgaria (School 1): Comprehensive	Urban	1200	82	Principal, Deputy Principal, 6 teachers
Bulgaria (School 2): Comprehensive	Urban	800	58	Principal, Deputy Principal, 6 teachers
Bulgaria (School 3): Comprehensive	Urban	1278	101	Principal, Deputy Principal, 5 teachers
Bulgaria (School 4): Comprehensive	Urban	908	78	Principal Deputy Principal, 6 teachers
Bulgaria (School 5): Primary	Urban	830	60	Principal, Deputy Principal, 4 teachers
Greece (School 1): Secondary	Rural	87	13	Principal, 12 teachers
Greece (School 2): Secondary	Urban	320	60	Principal, 2 Deputy Principals, 38 teachers
Greece (School 3): Secondary	Urban	188	23	Principal, 2 Deputy Principals 38 teachers
Greece (School 4): Primary	Urban	166	19	Principal, Deputy Principal, 17 teachers
Greece (School 5): Primary	Rural	138	17	Principal, 17 teachers
Greece (School 6): Primary	Urban	168	17	Principal, 17 teachers
Ireland (School 1): Primary	Rural	210	7	Principal, 7 teachers
Ireland (School 2): Primary	Urban	235	5	Principal, 16 teachers
Ireland (School 3): Primary	Rural	220	6	Principal, Deputy Principal, 5 teachers
Ireland (School 4): Secondary	Urban	1,000	47	Principal, Deputy Principal, 4 teachers
Ireland (School 5): Secondary	Rural	377	28	Principal, Deputy Principal, 6 teachers
Ireland (School 6): Secondary	Rural	340	24	Principal, Deputy Principal, 3 teachers
Spain (School 1): Secondary	Rural	569	83	Principal, 4 Deputy Principals, 5 teachers
Spain (School 2): Secondary	Rural	92	24	Principal, Deputy Principal, 5 teachers
Spain (School 3): Secondary	Urban	1,260	108	Principal, 3 Deputy Principals
Spain (School 4): Primary	Urban	397	17	Principal, Deputy Principal, 5 teachers
Spain (School 5): Primary	Rural	155	19	Principal, Deputy Principal, 5 teachers
Spain (School 6): Primary	Urban	414	32	Principal, Deputy Principal, 6 teachers

Table 2.
Interview questions and Conceptual labels for Cross Case Analysis.

Theme	Interview Questions	Conceptual Labels
SSE as a whole school approach to school improvement	Is there a whole school approach to SSE in your school? Who oversees planning and developing school improvement processes? Who participates in your school improvement planning, developing, and evaluating processes? In case it is your first time implementing SSE in your school, are there past useful experiences resulting from previous school practices which could help you with SSE? How do you think that SSE contributes to improving in your school? What school data do you use for planning school improvement? and how do you obtain it? Are you provided with any guidelines (either internally or externally) when planning school improvement? If yes, what kind of guidelines? By whom? Does your school have a written plan for school improvement? What are the core areas of school improvement? For example, drop out rates, etc.	School Leaders understanding of the purpose of SSE Leadership of SSE in Schools Participation in the SSE process Contribution of SSE to School improvement Guidelines for SSE
Capacity of educators to engage with SSE	Have you been provided with training on how to carry out SSE and improvement such as setting targets, data analysis, development of SSE plans, etc.? What aspects of the SSE process do teachers find difficult in terms of capacity (time, training, data analysis, setting targets, collaboration, etc.)? How can these areas be improved? What training is required for your school to fully engage and optimize SSE and improvement?	Training provided to schools to implement SSE Aspects of SSE that are challenging for schools Training needs of schools to engage with SSE.

The coding and analysis part of the research used a combination of Creswell’s ((Creswell, 2008) data analysis process and Miles and Huberman’s (Miles and Huberman, 1994) ‘Components of Data Analysis: Interactive Model’ and consisted of two distinct stages. Before each statement was classified, the interview data was read, reread, and examined through a process of data immersion/crystallisation (Borkan, 1999). The next stage consisted of assigning conceptual labels to each unit of analysis to provide an overall interpretation of each theme described in the next part of the paper. The next section of this paper presents the research findings under the two themes and eight conceptual labels derived from the analysis.

Theme 1: SSE as a whole school approach to school improvement

School leaders understanding of the purpose of SSE

In most cases, interviewees from all countries understood that SSE was an evidence-based collaborative process for school improvement that also allows comparisons with internal and external benchmarks. As stated by an Irish participant: “School self-evaluation is about the safe

use of data schools to try and plan for improvement”. Similarly, interviewees from Spain perceived SSE as being a collaborative, systematic process to enhance an aspect of teaching and learning. As stated by one Spanish participant: “I understand that it is a reflection on teaching and the development of the teaching and learning process to improve it and enrich it”. However, in some countries (Bulgaria and Greece), SSE was also perceived as having an accountability and cost-effectiveness function where according to one Bulgarian principal, “SSE is about effectiveness and efficacy”. As with Bulgaria, one Greek participant reflected on the cautious, if not hostile, views of many of the Greek interviewees. “It is a myth presented by the system for control. It is also a matter of accountability towards the social process, the school environment and the people involved”.

Leadership of SSE in schools

In Bulgaria and Greece, most participants were of the view that the school principal and the management team oversees SSE. According to one Bulgarian participant: “This is the school principal. If the princi-

pal does not set the directions and does not provide instructions – little will be done. It is just human nature”. Another Bulgarian principal highlighted the effects of this top-down approach to planning and development. “They are not active, more like waiting to see what will happen and then – if possible – criticise”.

In Ireland’s case, although the school principal was perceived as “being the one that drives SSE”, middle leaders were also perceived as having a leading role in the process. “We have an SSE team consisting of teachers with responsibility for specific areas such as Special Educational Needs”. In the case of Spain, there also appeared to be clearly defined responsibilities for the leadership of SSE compared to other countries. “The management team, the Pedagogical Coordination Committee and the departments. It is gradual planning, with different levels of responsibility”.

Participation in the SSE process

In the case of Bulgaria, the majority of teachers that were interviewed were of the opinion that they had not participated in SSE. Where participation in SSE has occurred, this was due to the previous attempts by the inspectorate to make SSE a regulatory, bureaucratic requirement or in externally funded projects such as the Erasmus+ funded project: ‘Polycentric Inspections of Networks of Schools’. As stated by one participant: “We started developing tools for SSE as required in the Regulation, but then it was suspended, and we stopped the process”. Another participant stated: “I have some experience with SSE in the polycentric inspection project, but it has never become part of the general scheme of things”. For most participants in Greece, there were also negative unintended consequences due to previous state initiatives to implement SSE in schools that most participants viewed as an externally driven regulatory exercise that lacked clarity and was of limited value to schools. According to one Greek participant, “The framework was not clear. There was no guidance/support. Excessive demands!! There was no benefit for teachers. Much work for nothing”.

On the other hand, in the case of Ireland and Spain, almost all participants were of the view that they had participated in the SSE. As stated by one participant from Ireland, “Yes, we have been since it [SSE] became a requirement for all schools”. In the case of Spain, the majority of participants stated that they have participated in SSE, either through the CPDEX programme or the peer review initiative referred to as MUÉVETE (‘Job shadowing in other schools’).

Yes, in the “CPDEX” project that has involved the preparation of questionnaires to evaluate teaching capacity and “MUÉVETE” as well, since we have observed in other schools and we have also been observed by others.

The contribution of SSE to school improvement

Despite negative perspectives relating to previous attempts to introduce SSE in schools, almost all participants were positive towards the contribution of SSE to school improvement. In the case of Bulgaria, interviewees referred to the contribution of SSE in terms of: “improvement of every aspect of schoolwork and results”; “constructive development, cooperation among staff”; “better partnership with parents”. In the case of Greece, participants believed that: “SSE can contribute to better goal setting and planning”. Another Greek participant stated that: “SSE can contribute positively only if it is a collective approach”. For Ireland, interviewees were of the view that “SSE gives teachers a chance to reflect on practice and look at how they could do things differently”. Spanish participants also shared how SSE has improved teaching and learning and relationships with other members of the school community more generally. As stated by one participant: “Big improvement of the results of the teaching and learning process as well as the improvement of relationships with other stakeholders”.

On the other hand, with limited experience of SSE, in the case of Bulgaria and Greece, some participants were apprehensive about its im-

plementation on a regular basis, particularly as it related to the accountability focus of Evaluation. In the case of Bulgaria, one participant stated that: “If SSE is implemented on a regular basis as an obligatory activity, it will be more formal then and thus not as positive in impact”. This was also the case with most Greek participants who believed that “SSE can offer hope for positive changes. However, it should be connected better with improvements rather than penalties”.

Guidelines for SSE

The most dominant observation in this regard, except for Ireland, is that there are limited resources available to guide and support educators with SSE implementation. In the case of Bulgaria, some guidelines (“a manual from the Centre for inclusive education”) was mentioned. This was also the case with Greek participants who stated: “No, we are not supported with any guidelines”.

In the case of Ireland, all participants stated that they use “Looking at our School ”. Although the provision of existing guidelines was also highlighted by Spanish participants who were involved in the CPDEX programme, for the most part, Spanish participants were of the view that: “We have no guidelines; sometimes the counselling teacher helps”.

Theme 2: Capacity of educators to engage with SSE

Training provided to schools to implement SSE

In three of the Bulgarian schools, teachers and school management referred to some SSE related training that they received while participating in school inspection and similar projects. As stated by one participant: “Two trainings we did related to SSE – about the attestation of teachers and about working with parents”. However, as with Greece, the training provided only related to a small number of schools. Indeed, according to all interviewees in Greece, school communities have not been provided with any in-service training on carrying out SSE. One of the principals stated: “No, what we know is from our experience and from the Ministerial Circular”.

Although all principals in Ireland stated that they had received some training on SSE, they were also aware that more training is required now that they are familiar with the overarching concept and philosophy of SSE. A widely repeated view was summarized by one principal; “Yes, we’ve gotten training alright but need a lot more on how to use different types of data and to set targets for improvement”. As for the SSE capacity of Spanish educators, the majority of participants agreed that no specific training had been offered or given to the schools to assist with SSE. Interviewees from two schools mentioned some limited participation of staff in the CPDEX programme where the idea was to cascade that training to the rest of the staff. However, according to one Spanish participant, “this kind of training was not worthy, since it was given to many different schools and implementation in each was not easy”. Indeed, in all four cases, participants expressed their need for further capacity building as it relates to SSE.

Aspects of SSE that are challenging for schools

In terms of difficulties in implementing SSE, teachers in Bulgaria were of the view that “to remain unbiased and objective in an SSE process”, where there were attempts to implement SSE, “data gathering and analysis” proved to be difficult. This perspective resonates with Spanish participants who were also of the view that: “The most difficult aspect would be to define qualitative and quantitative “fine-tuned” indicators and find out the correct process to extract data”.

Referring to the aspects of the SSE process that are difficult to Greek teachers, most participants referred to several issues: “the frequent changes in personnel”; “the lack of in-service training, and no history of a culture of cooperation”. As stated by one Greek Principal: “the current socio-economic problems that make teachers insecure, gives rise

to a lack of SSE culture". Another Spanish Principal stated: "... a big proportion, around 50%, of teachers don't stay at the school longer than a school year". The time required to fully implement the process of SSE was also an issue for all partner countries. As stated by one Irish Principal: "If it is meant to be a collaborative, ongoing process and the average teacher is on a full timetable, it is almost impossible to engage with SSE fully".

Training needs to engage with SSE

In the case of Bulgaria, almost all participants were of the view that there was a need for significant training in various aspects of SSE before it could be fully implemented in schools where according to one Bulgarian participant, there is a need for "practical training about development and implementation of SSE tools and process as a whole". This was also the case with Greek participants who provided a range of training needs for their staff. As stated by one participant: "Not theoretical but serious requirements. To have practical and empirical values". Another participant also stated that there was a need for "in-service training covering all of the necessary stages of SSE (planning, programming, monitoring, feedback, revision, Evaluation)". Although more specific than Bulgarian and Greek participants, Irish and Spanish participants also provided a range of training needs to fully engage with the process of SSE. Indeed, Spanish participants stressed the need for specific tools and frameworks such as "definitions of quality indicators" together with processes "to extract and use data". The use of data to inform practice was also a struggle for Irish participants where according to one school principal: "There is so much data out there and so much data that we collect, that sometimes it is difficult to see what is useful and what isn't".

Discussion and conclusion

Using multisite case studies in four European countries, the purpose of this research was to explore school principals and teachers views on SSE, its role in school improvement and the capacity of schools to engage with the process. However, it must also be noted that the purpose of this research was not to make absolute claims relating to SSE in each of these countries for which the sample size would be too small. Rather, through a series of semi-structured interviews with those members of the school community who are tasked with the implementation of such a process, the purpose of this research was also to explore and, in many respects based on the literature review and presentation and analysis of the research findings, confirm the necessary resources and culture needed to truly harness the potential of SSE as powerful process for school improvement.

Based on the comparative analysis of interviews derived from each country, it is evident that there are two distinct groupings. One group (Ireland and Spain) appear to have conceptualised SSE as a core component part of the life of a school where the focus is on whole school improvement as opposed to accountability. The other group (Bulgaria and Greece) appear to have, at the very most, sporadic exposure to the process. Indeed, it is evident that participants from the former group spoke from their experience with the process of SSE in their schools, while the latter mostly have a largely theoretical perspective on SSE. Yet, despite the varied experiences with SSE, almost all participants spoke favourably about SSE, viewing it as a reflective and collaborative process that leads to school improvement. However, participants also referred to numerous implementation challenges. These included: scarcity of time; SSE as a bureaucratic process; the misuse of SSE for accountability purposes, and the capacity of schools to engage with data.

None of this is surprising, particularly for countries that have only recently begun to explore how SSE can be used in schools. For example, in the early stages of SSE implementation in countries such as Ireland and Belgium Flanders, most schools have found certain aspects of SSE, such as Data-Informed Decision Making, to be challenging (Brown, 2013; Young et al. 2019). It has also been well documented that SSE is not

very popular among school staff (Meuret & Morlaix, 2003; Brown, McNamara, O'Hara, & O'Brien, 2017) because of the pace and demands of daily school routines.

The issue of creating a climate of trust and openness among staff has also been viewed as central to implementing Evaluation in Schools (McNamara and O'Hara, 2008). However, such an environment can only be created in a school if those responsible for leading SSE promote transparency at every stage of the process by ensuring that there is a common consensus among school teams as it relates to the use of SSE and the potential outcomes of the results (Brown et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2018). In other words, as has been shown in this study, an essential element for the creation of a culture of SSE in schools is that there is no ambiguity about the purpose of SSE.

In terms of the training provided, in Bulgaria and Spain, most participants also indicated that they have received very limited or no training in the SSE process, and those who had prior experience found it insufficient or not relevant to their school needs. In many respects, this also relates to SSE implementation when it was first introduced in Ireland, where a considerable volume of articles highlighted the capacity deficit for SSE in schools (McNamara & O'Hara, 2008; McNamara & O'Hara, 2012; Brown et al., 2018). Nonetheless, even where SSE has become embedded in schools such as Ireland, almost all participants found it difficult to interpret data to set actionable targets for improvement. Indeed, the evaluation literature time and again stresses that educators' training on these of data to inform practice is an essential requirement for SSE (Schildkamp, 2019; Young et al., 2018; (Brown, McNamara, & O'Hara, 2016b).

In conclusion, whilst attempts have been made to implement SSE in all four case study countries, it is evident that SSE as a whole school approach to school improvement has not been embraced as a potentially powerful process for school improvement in Bulgarian and Greek schools. Indeed, given the varying conceptions of the purpose of SSE, it will take some time to build a climate where trust is seen as central to the process and everyone involved has no ambiguity about the purpose and outcome of the process. Furthermore, it is perhaps noteworthy that it is in Ireland where SSE has been gradually extended over more than two decades. The implementation and effectiveness of SSE in Ireland appears to be most advanced compared to the other case study countries, yet still, there are significant shortcomings as it relates in particular to the use of data for evidence-informed practice. It is clear that consistent policy implementation over an extended time is a necessary element in establishing SSE. Equally required are steps to strengthen SSE by making SSE obligatory while at the same time allowing time for schools to develop the competence and requisite skills through quality professional learning and other supports.

Funding statement

This research was funded via the Erasmus+ project: Supporting Schools in the 21st Century. Digital tools and improvement plans. Project reference Number: 2018-1-ES01-KA201-049937.

Ethics statement

This research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of: Dublin City University (Ireland); the Regional Government of the Autonomous Community of Extremadura (Spain); Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (Greece); Sofia University "St.Kliment Ohridski" (Bulgaria). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge that this research was made possible by funding through the Erasmus+ project: Supporting Schools in the 21st Century. Digital tools and improvement plans. Project reference Number: 2018-1-ES01-KA201-049937.

References

- Blok, H., Slegers, P., & Karsten, S. (2008). Looking for a balance between internal and external evaluation of school quality: Evaluation of the SVI model. *Journal of Education Policy*, 23(4), 379–395.
- Borkan, J. (1999). Immersion/crystallization. In B. F. Crabtree, & W. L. Miller (Eds.), *Doing qualitative research* (pp. 179–194). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Boyle, R., O'Hara, J., McNamara, G., & Brown, M. (2020). Ireland' In. In R. Stockmann, W. Meyer, & L. Taube (Eds.), *The Institutionalisation of Evaluation in Europe* (eds). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-32284-7_9.
- Brown, M. (2013). *Deconstructing Evaluation in education: The case of Ireland. Phd Thesis.* Ireland: Dublin City University <http://doras.dcu.ie/19382/>.
- Brown, M., McNamara, G., & O'Hara, J. (2016a). Teacher accountability in education: The Irish experiment. In B. Walsh (Ed.), *Essays in the History of Irish Education* (pp. 359–381). London: Palgrave Macmillan. [10.1057/978-1-137-51482-0_14](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-51482-0_14).
- Brown, M., McNamara, G., & O'Hara, J. (2016b). Quality and the rise of value-added in education: The case of Ireland. *Policy Futures in Education*, 14(6). [10.1177/1478210316656506](https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210316656506).
- Brown, M., McNamara, G., O'Hara, J., & O'Brien, S. (2016). Exploring the changing face of school inspections. *Eurasian Journal of Educational Research*, 66, 1–26. [10.14689/ejer.2016.66.1](https://doi.org/10.14689/ejer.2016.66.1).
- Brown, M., McNamara, G., O'Hara, J., & O'Brien, S. (2017). Inspectors and the process of self-evaluation in Ireland. In J. Baxter (Ed.), *School inspectors: Operational challenges in national policy contexts* (pp. 71–96). London: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52536-5_4. [10.1007/978-3-319-52536-5_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52536-5_4).
- Brown, M., McNamara, G., O'Hara, J., O'Brien, S., Faddar, J., & Young, C. (2018). Integrated co-professional evaluation? Converging approaches to school evaluation across frontiers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 12(1), 43. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2018v43n1.6>.
- Brown, M., McNamara, G., Cinkir, S., et al. (2021). Exploring parent and student engagement in school self-evaluation in four European countries. *European Educational Research Journal*, 20(2), 159–175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904120961203>.
- Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Department of Education and Skills (2012a). Circular 0040/2012, implementation of school self-evaluation [Online]. Available from: http://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0040_2012.pdf. [Accessed 10 August 2019].
- Department of Education and Skills (2012b). Circular 0039/2012, implementation of school self-evaluation [Online]. Available from: http://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0040_2012.pdf. [Accessed 10 August 2019].
- Department of Education and Skills. (2016). *Looking at our School 2016. A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.
- Macbeath, J., Schratz, M., Meuret, D., & Jakobsen, L. (2000). *Self-Evaluation In European Schools: A Story of Change*. London: Routledge.
- McNamara, G., & O'Hara, J. (2008). *Trusting schools and teachers: Developing educational professionalism through self-evaluation*. New York: Peter Lang.
- McNamara, G., & O'Hara, J. (2012). From looking at our schools (LAOS) to whole school evaluation -management, leadership and learning (WSE-MLL): The evolution of inspection in Irish schools over the past decade. *Educational Assessment Evaluation Accountability*, 24(1), 79–97.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Education Scotland. (2015). *How good is our school? 4th Edition*. Education Scotland https://education.gov.scot/nih/Documents/Frameworks_SelfEvaluation/FRWK2_NIHeditHGIOS/FRWK2_HGIOS4.pdf.
- McNamara, G., O'Hara, J., Brown, M., & Quinn, I. (2020). In *Quality assurance in Irish schools: Inspection and school self-evaluation*: 68 (pp. 161–180). Administration. [10.2478/admin-2020-0029](https://doi.org/10.2478/admin-2020-0029).
- Meuret, D., & Morlaix, S. (2003). Conditions of success of a school's self-evaluation: Some lessons of an European experience. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 14(1), 53–71.
- Mutch, C. (2012). Complementary evaluation: The development of a conceptual framework to integrate external and internal evaluation in the New Zealand school context. *Policy Futures in Education*, 10(5), 569–586.
- Nevo, D. (2001). School evaluation: Internal or external? *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 27(2), 95–106.
- OECD. (2013). School evaluation: From complacency to quality. *Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment*. Paris: OECD Publishing. [10.1787/9789264190658-10-en](https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264190658-10-en).
- Punch, K. F. (2005). *Introduction to social research: Quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Regulations for inspection of kindergartens and schools, State Gazette, No. 100/16.12.2016 [Наредба №15 от 08.12.2016 г. за инспектирането на детските градини и училищата. ДВ, бр. 100 от 16.12.2016 г.], <http://www.mon.bg/?go=page&pageId=1&subpageId=25> (Accessed 10 November, (2018)).
- Schildkamp, K. (2019). Data-based decision-making for school improvement: Research insights and gaps. *Educational research*, 61(3), 257–273.
- Simeonova, R., Parvanova, Y., Brown, M., McNamara, G., Gardezi, S., O'Hara, J., Blanco, L. D., Kechri, Z. & Beniaeta, E. (2020). A continuum of approaches to school inspections: cases from Europe. *Pedagogika-Pedagogy*, 92, 487–506. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341333639_A_CONTINUUM_OF_APPROACHES_TO_SCHOOL_INSPECTIONS_CASES_FROM_EUROPE.
- Stamelos, G., & Bartzakli, M. (2013). Good practice' school advisors in Greek education: the difficulty in linking collaborative networks, communities of practice and quality culture. *Teacher Development*, 17(4), 448–464. [10.1080/13664530.2013.825638](https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2013.825638).
- Vanhoof, J., & Petegem, P. V. (2010). Evaluating the quality of self-evaluations: The (mis)match between internal and external meta-evaluation. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 36, 20–26.
- Ministry of Education and Science (2015) Preschool and school education Act, State Gazette, No. 79/13.10. (2015), in force 01.08.2016 [Закон за предучилищното и училищно образование. ДВ, бр.79 от 13.10.2015 г. в сила от 01.08. 2016 г.], <http://www.mon.bg/?go=page&pageId=7&subpageId=57> (Accessed 10 November, 2018)
- Young, C., McNamara, G., Brown, M., & O'Hara, J. (2018). Adopting and adapting: School leaders in the age of data-informed decision making. *educational assessment, evaluation and accountability*, 30(2), 133–158. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-018-9278-4>
- Martin Brown, Sarah Gardezi, Gerry McNamara and Joe O'Hara awork at EQI, the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection, School of Policy and practice, Institute of Education - Dublin City University, Ireland.
- Laura Del Castillo Blanco works at the Regional Government of the Autonomous Community of Extremadura, Spain
- Rossitsa Simeonova and Yonka Parvanova work at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Bulgaria. ZacharoulaKechri works at the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, Greece