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## Distributed Evaluation in Schools: Expanding the Self in Self-evaluation

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*By Jan Vanhoof, Jerich Faddar & Martin Brown\**

Schools are in a constant dialogue with their surrounding environment, which has different questions and expectations regarding school systems. Ultimately, a school is there for its students, their parents and society as a whole. This means that these parties of the broad school community have strong ideas about the responsibilities of schools and how these should be realized. Quality-oriented schools are aware that they cannot ignore these expectations and they are committed to respond to them as adequately as possible. This relationship with (external) parties that belong to the school community is also a central element in quality assurance activities in education such as school self-evaluation (SSE). We consider school self-evaluations as a systematic process in which school leaders and teachers describe and judge aspects of their own functioning with the aim to achieve school and class development.

Although different practices of school self-evaluation (SSE) are found across the different education systems, SSE is generally considered as a major strategic leverage for increasing the quality of provided education (Eurydice, 2015; OECD, 2013). While SSE has traditionally focused on school leaders and teachers, we are currently witnessing a growing tendency to involve other stakeholders as well. Nowadays, in fact, SSE is also advocated as a decisive approach within school policy-making processes because it seems able to involve the local context in which a school operates. As a consequence, SSEs are nowadays expected to demonstrate a sensitivity to external impulses which was less the case previous SSE's conceptualisations: this means, among others, that it should be reconsidered who is evaluating in SSE activities. In other words, the 'self' in school self-evaluation needs to be expanded. In education, many stakeholders can be thought of as possible partners, yet students and parents are frequently conceived as primary stakeholders. Like student voice, parent voice is often championed as an empowering factor to improve educational standards. Empowerment refers to the stakeholders' role in exercising influence within a school, typically through decision-making forums, and usually by recognising to parents some degree of authority and power: if this is the case, then, a 'distributed' approach to evaluation is in place. Such an involvement of stakeholders in evaluation and planning processes is seen as a key, indicating that the distribution of power and agency within an organisation is an important driver for improvement (Hargreaves & Fink, 2012).

SSE enables gathering different perspectives on the functioning of the school. In order to obtain these different perspectives, stakeholders of the broader school community can be actively involved throughout an SSE cycle, on the initiative of the school itself. A school can, for instance, explicitly decide to carefully select those participants who are supposed to be part of the SSE process for their specific points of view or expertises that the school considers useful. Furthermore, this growing attention for the contribution of both students and parents to SSE in classroom as well as at the general school level can be understood from various angles. First of all, teachers and school leaders themselves feel that a better use of the views and experiences of others involved at the core of classes and of school itself can be particularly beneficial in decision-making processes. The plea for distributed evaluation in schools is also consistent with findings from school effectiveness research. In a broad sense, setting up initiatives that appeal to the available social capital in the community appears to show a positive impact on school effectiveness. In particular, the potential of pupil participation and student feedback is well documented. The added value then lies, among other things, in the possibilities of external parties to approach the usual from a different perspective. In this way, “fresh eyes” can uncover insights that otherwise would remain hidden or for which one would remain blind without other external ‘glasses’.

By expanding the self in school self-evaluation, what educational professionals would like to keep hidden about themselves – e.g. sensitive information, doubts and uncertainties – can also become part of a shared knowledge. This also means that the learning process is not a one-way story. Teachers and school managers may learn from and with different stakeholders.

However, this is not an easy process. The unknown attracts us as teachers and principals, but also makes us reserved, even suspicious. We profess that showing openness creates opportunities to learn about others and ourselves, however, showing this openness and curiosity is not self-evident. Sometimes the belief that efforts will pay off is not strong enough. Or there is a fear that what others see will make us and our organizations vulnerable. Sometimes there is a lack of courage, other times instruments and good examples are missing in order to guide this learning process. The literature on stakeholders involvement in education has already identified several challenges that are faced in practical realities. At an organisational level, for instance, it has been reported by teachers that they lack the appropriate resources to engage thoroughly with parents (Addi-Raccah & Ainhoren, 2009). Student voice has by no means become an entirely accepted feature of school life, particularly among teachers. Issues concerning the reliability and validity of student inputs are widely reported. Also at the individual level, principals might fear criticism, and they could even have fears over a potential decrease in professional status and wellbeing (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008). Furthermore, in cases where teachers are indeed willing, and try to increase parents’ voice, there may be other barriers (Brown et al., 2020). Parents and teachers may also have conflicting conceptions of what their involvement could be. Teachers are found to have a narrower view with regard to parental involvement, and think of it rather as a home-school contact, while parents consider attending and participating in school activities – that may also include teachers’ evaluation – as part of their involvement. Furthermore, stakeholders such as parents and students are not always considered to have sufficient knowledge about what it means to be a teacher, the class environment, the organisational culture or the school itself (Dozza & Cavrini, 2012).

In short, the strong belief in the potential of distributed evaluation in schools still has to overcome quite a few practical complications. These complications include but are not limited to the absence of transparent and consensus-based approaches to school evaluation and the acknowledgement that parents, students and indeed teachers need further education and support to meaningfully engage in Distributed Evaluation and Planning in Schools (DEAPS).

This is exactly what the current [DEAPS Project \(http://valuenews.invalsi.it/tk/get.html?0&uid=0&&cid=424&ag=am&newsid=60&exid=0&ui=0&uid=0&&cid=424&linkid=4921\)](http://valuenews.invalsi.it/tk/get.html?0&uid=0&&cid=424&ag=am&newsid=60&exid=0&ui=0&uid=0&&cid=424&linkid=4921) aims to tackle. DEAPS is an Erasmus+ Project which has the objective to study this phenomenon, to develop innovative strategies able to enhance the current practices in the field. Such distributed and participatory approaches to SSE should support schools in finding innovative ways to improve their teaching and learning by actively involving all staff, parents and students in the process.

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\* Jan Vanhoof (in the picture) and Jerich Faddar, Antwerp University, Belgium. Research group Edubron.

Martin Brown Dublin City University, Ireland. The Centre for Evaluation Quality and Inspection.

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