# Country Background Report Belgium (Flemish Community) on Distributed Evaluation And Planning in Schools

## 1. Introduction and Background

In Belgium, education is a matter that has been federalised to the community level, which means that the Flemish Community is in charge of educational policy. Only some educational issues are under the responsibility of federal authorities: the start and end of compulsory education, the definition of minimum conditions for obtaining a diploma, and the determination of the pensions of educational staff.

Since many years, the Flemish education system is grounded on the general principle of 'freedom of education'. This principle encompasses two implications. On the one hand, this freedom of education leads to a freedom to organise education. On the other hand, parents have the freedom to send their children to the school of their own choice.

These principles imply that schools are granted a large amount of autonomy in Flanders, which has a big impact on the educational landscape in Flanders. A school governing body (or school board) is a key concept in the organisation of schools as they are a legal person or institution that is responsible for one or more schools. Governing bodies belong to one of three 'educational networks' that can be discerned: Community education, Officially subsidised education and Privately-run subsidised education.

The governing body for schools that are organised by the Flemish Community is the 'Community Education Council'. It is established to guarantee the freedom of school choice in Flanders and Brussels. Community Education pursues neutrality and respects all religious, philosophical and ideological beliefs. The operational function of the Flemish Community as a governing body is situated at the level of 'School Groups'. Official subsidised education encompasses schools that are governed by provinces, city or municipality authorities. Privately run subsidised education encompasses 'subsidised denominational schools' (consisting predominantly of catholic schools) and 'subsidised non-denominational schools' (having no affiliation with a religion).

An umbrella organisation is an association that represents governing bodies. It represents schools as partner for the government and the Ministry of Education and Training in policy discussions, and supports schools in their daily functioning.
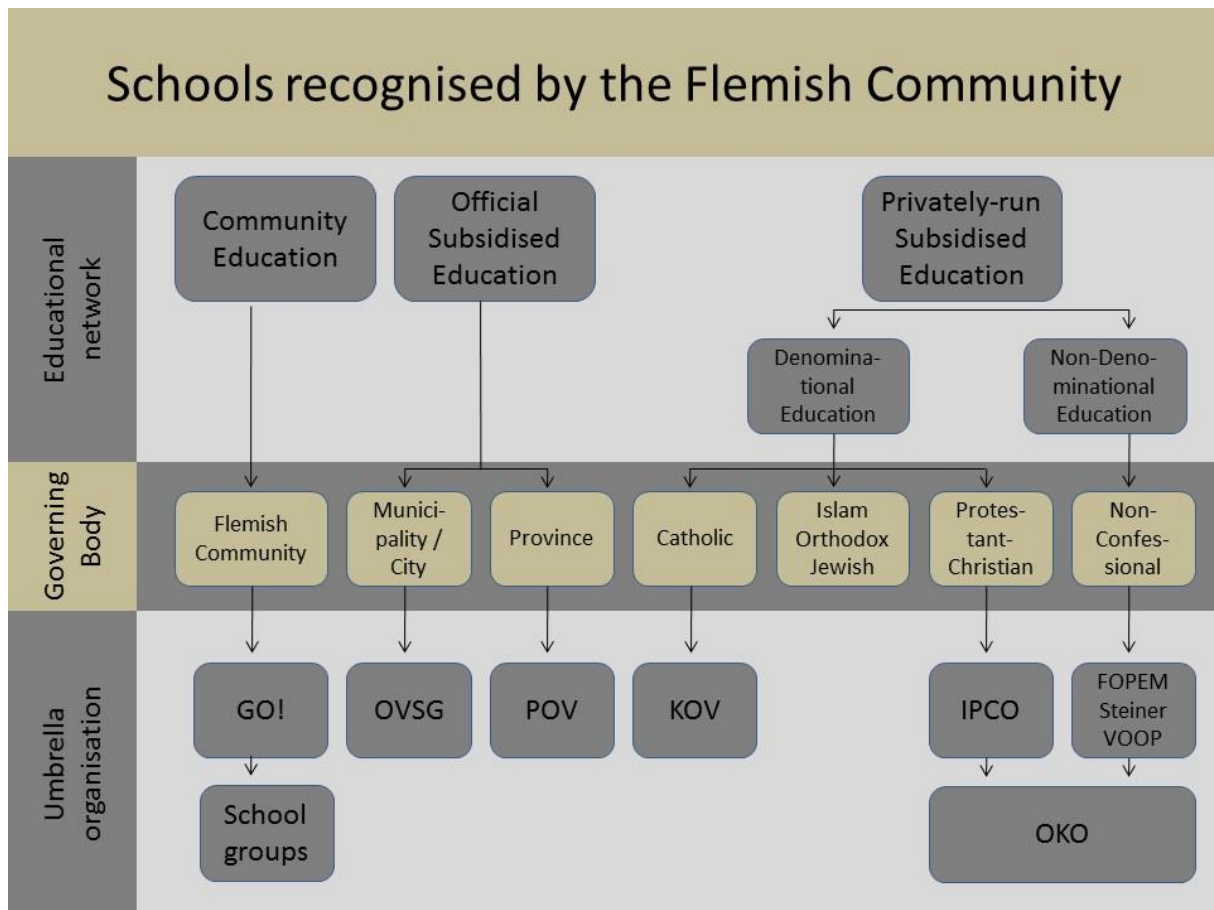
Figure 1 Educational networks, governing bodies and umbrella organisations in the Flemish Community

School governing bodies, who manage one or more schools, can develop their own vision on education. While the Flemish government has no responsibility in organising education, it is responsible for the quality that is attained. This implies that there is a tension between preserving the local autonomy of schools and the will to steer on quality. Therefore, the government sets out a regulation framework to safeguard the educational quality, by imposing minimal requirements that students should achieve.

## 2. Compulsory education in Belgium (Flanders)

### 2.1 Early childhood and primary education

In Flanders, compulsory education starts for children on the first of September in the year they reach the age of six. However, this is not the start of primary education for most of the children. It is strongly stimulated that children, before entering compulsory education, to attend nursery school between the age of 2.5 and 6. Nursery school does not consist of official grades, but children are primarily grouped based on their age. Compulsory primary education in contrast, is structured in six grades within three levels. Children are supposed to go through these six grades in six years. Most commonly, teachers do not follow a class group throughout all years of primary education. Some schools are grouping children of different age in one classroom with one teacher. Also, the number of students per class is determined by the school itself. At the end of primary education, students obtain a certificate and make the transition to secondary education. If they do not obtain their certificate of primary education, they can still go to secondary education, based on their age, however, with restricted possibilities.

THEORETHICAL AGE

TERTIARY EDUCATION

Doctor — min. 120 ECTS

Subsequent Master — min. 60 ECTS

Subsequent Bachelor — min. 60 ECTS

Master — min. 60 ECTS

bridging programme

Profession-oriented Bachelor — min. 180 ECTS

Academic Bachelor — min. 180 ECTS

18

HIGHER PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION          ACADEMIC EDUCATION

SECONDARY EDUCATION (2)

4th stage          Vocational (1)

18

| General 7 6 5 | Art 7 6 5 | Technical 7 6 5 | Vocational 7 6 5 | part-time |

16 3rd stage

16

| General 4 3 | Art 4 3 | Technical 4 3 | Vocational 5 4 3 |

14 2nd stage

14

A          2 1          Preparation to vocational          B          2 1

12 1st stage

NURSERY AND PRIMARY EDUCATION

12          years of study
6
5
4
3
2
1

6
6          PRIMARY EDUCATION

3
2
1

2,5          NURSERY EDUCATION

SPECIAL EDUCATION

(1) All students who have successfully passed the 3rd stage or passed an entry test, have access to the 4th stage of vocational education.
(2) Modular education is not divided in stages and years of study and thus is not represented in the diagram.

* In addition to the levels of education included in the diagram, there are also types of education related to lifelong learning (part-time education in the arts and adult education, continuing education, supervised individual study (BIS), and adult basic education).
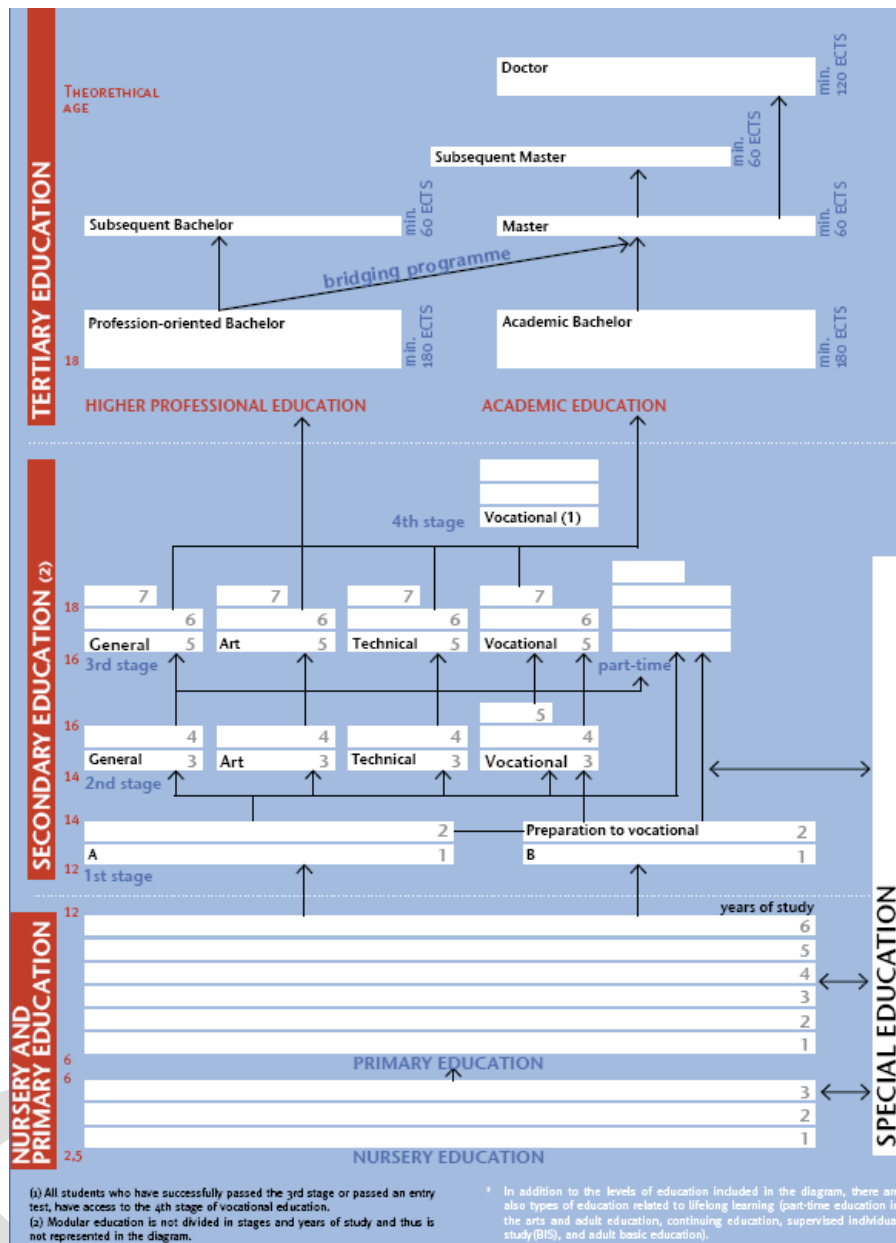
Figure 2 Structure of the Flemish education system

## 2.2 Secondary education

Students are supposed to go through secondary education in six or seven years, in three or four stages. In a first stage, students are oriented in two tracks. One track prepares students for vocational education. The other track provides general education. As from the second stage students can choose between different tracks. First, there is a vocational education track where students are primarily prepared to enter the labour market after their secondary schooling although their diploma allows them to enter higher education. Second, there is a technical track that places an emphasis on general and technical/theoretical subjects. After technical education, students can exercise a profession or pass on to higher education. Third, the arts education track combines a broad general education with active arts practice. After having finished arts education, students can also exercise a profession or enter higher education. Finally, general education places an emphasis on broad education. Students are not prepared for a specific profession. This track provides a firm foundation for passing on to higher education.

Next to regular education there are special education schools both for primary and secondary level. Students are allowed in special education when they need special help. This may be due to students' physical or mental health, serious behavioural or emotional problems, or serious learning difficulties. However, a recent decree tends to enable students to attend regular education as much as possible through the provision of adequate guidance (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2014).

Compulsory education ends on the child's eighteenth birthday or on June 30 of the calendar year in which the pupil reaches the age of 18. If a pupil stops going to school on his 18th birthday and does not finish the current school year, he does not have a right to a certificate or diploma which is awarded upon completing the course. For students who obtain a diploma of secondary education before the age of 18, compulsory education stops at that moment. In principle, all schools are mixed sex as a school is not allowed to refuse pupils on grounds of gender.

# 3. Brief overview of School Evaluation in Belgium (Flanders)

In order to understand how schools are evaluated, it is vital to understand the broader perspective on the evaluation and assessment framework installed in Flemish education. Evaluation and assessment operates at different levels and several initiatives are undertaken to establish an information-rich environment. It allows to identify how effectively schools, and the education system in general, contribute in the realisation of the attainment targets and development objectives set by the government.

### 3.1.1 Freedom of education

Traditionally, schools are given a considerable amount of responsibility. They are granted the autonomy in defining and developing quality education, which is in line with the principle of Freedom of education. Consequently, this basic principle has also an impact on how assessment and evaluation is given shape in the education system. After all, the government or the Ministry of Education and Training are supposed not to interfere in the pedagogical and education processes in schools. However, in recent decades external evaluation has been given an increasingly important role. Education was critically questioned for its processes and outputs, leading to an increasing tendency towards more accountability. In this context the implementation of attainment targets and development objectives was set up. These minimal quality conditions were imposed by the Flemish government in exchange for recognition and financing or subsidising. From the perspective of the Flemish authorities this was an attempt to safeguard and steer on the quality of the education system. However, the Flemish government has not the authority to check whether students achieve the minimal requirements. How students are tested on their attainment lies within the pedagogical autonomy of schools. This also means that there is no public data available on how well students are performing, and to what extent schools are contributing in student achievement. This implies that a general framework on quality assurance needed to allow control over the quality delivered by schools and teachers with respect for their own view on quality on the one hand, and a control of the minimal quality conditions put forward by the Flemish government on the other hand.

### 3.1.2 Schools as central actor in quality assurance

Due to the acquired autonomy, schools and teachers have a central role to play in quality assurance and school evaluation. As prescribed by the Decree on the Quality of Education (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2009), schools are the first to be held accountable for the quality they deliver rather than the Ministry for Education and Training (see Figure 2).
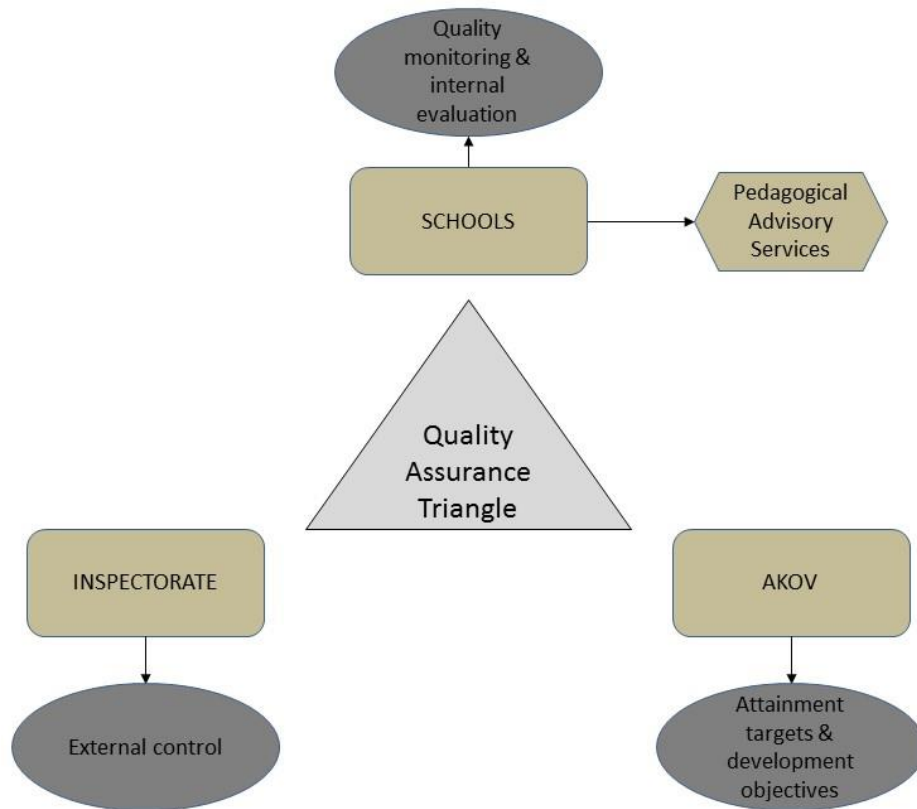
Figure 3 Quality Assurance Triangle in Flemish Education

In principle, the performance of an internal evaluation or school self-evaluation is not mandatory, schools are required to safeguard and monitor their educational quality themselves. Given the increased autonomy this means that schools need to strengthen their policy-making capacities to benefit from the freedom they have to develop their school into a more effective, efficient and innovative organisation (Vanhoof, Deneire, & Van Petegem, 2011). How schools need to perform such internal evaluations is, however, not stipulated by the government.

An important partner for schools to support them in quality assurance efforts are the Pedagogical Advisory Services, which are linked to each of the Umbrella Organisations in Flanders. They deliver professional support to schools on in-service training of teachers, the conduct of self-evaluations and quality assurance (including student assessment and teacher appraisal). They also foster the policy-making capacities of schools in order to let them make optimal use of their autonomy. They also have a role to play in external evaluation. When an external evaluation turns out negatively, the school receives mandatory support from the pedagogical advisory service of their umbrella organisation.

External evaluation is conducted by the Inspectorate, which is an autonomous body under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Education. An external inspection has the task to monitor and promote the quality of education and, therefore, aims for both improvement and accountability through the continuous cycles of evaluation. The government has made the choice to adopt the CIPO (Context, Input, Process and Output) framework into legislation on school evaluation. It is responsive for the local context and autonomy of schools, while it provides a framework that enables to verify variables at different stages in the educational process in order to review schools. The Decree on Quality of Education stipulates that the inspection controls to what extent schools have made informed choices

that ensure that students achieve the attainment targets and development goals. The inspection also assesses whether or not schools systematically monitor their own quality. Finally, inspection controls whether or not the 'habitability, safety and hygiene' of the school infrastructure meets the legal requirements.

As mentioned earlier, the Flemish Ministry for Education and Training does not impose a definition of (high) quality education. However, the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training (AKOV), which operates under the authority of the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, has a pivotal role in overseeing and improving the quality of Flemish education. It sets out the minimal standards that should be met by schools in order to provide quality education. More precisely the agency maps out the attainment targets and development objectives. These provide a framework for both internal and external evaluation.

# 4. Overview of DEAPS strategies in Belgium (Flanders)

## 4.1 Regulated participation of stakeholders

In terms of Distributed Evaluation And Planning in Schools, there has been given attention to different stakeholders' voice within schools. The Flemish government has made some statutory provision for parents, teachers and representatives of the local community to participate in the policymaking of primary and secondary schools. The Decree for Participation in Schools and the Flemish Education Council (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2004) regulates the bodies where consultation and participation is expected. The most important bodies are discussed below.

### 4.1.1 School council

The school council enables parents, staff, the local community and, in secondary education, students to participate in the policymaking of schools with an equal amount of representatives. Mainly, the school council discusses with and informs parents, staff and students (i.e. the representatives) about the school's functioning. Members of each section are elected by respectively the parent council, pedagogical council and student council. Representatives for the local community are co-opted by the other members of the school council. Basically, the school council is a body that provides the school governing body with advice on the profile of the school leader, the staff professional development plan or collaboration with other schools or external partners. Furthermore, the governing body of the school discusses issues like the school rules or construction works with the school council.

The advice of the school council is not binding. The final decision lies with the governing body. However, when an advice of the school council is not followed, the school governing body needs to substantiate its decision.

### 4.1.2 Student and parent councils

According to the Decree on Participation schools need to facilitate the installation of a student council and a parent council in schools.

A student council is an advisory body elected by and consisting of students. Its purpose is to enhance the dialogue between students and the school management, students and teachers, and among students. It can give and be asked for advice on all topics that are of interest to students. Furthermore, the school management is obliged to inform the student council on all student-related topics. Primary schools need to install a student council when 10% of all students between the age of 11 and 13 ask for it. A parent council needs to be installed when at least 10% of all parents ask for such a council.

## 4.2    Unregulated initiatives on DEAPS in Belgium (Flanders)

While the Decree on Participation in schools assures the participation of different voices in the policymaking in schools, there is no legal representation in the evaluation of schools. Moreover, the principle of Freedom of education and the Decree on Quality of Education makes schools particularly autonomous in their internal evaluation efforts. How a school's stakeholders are involved in evaluation mechanisms and strategies is entirely up to the individual school.

Under the impetus that schools are expected to execute some form of internal evaluation, many schools have started initiatives in that direction in the past years (Vanhoof & Van Petegem, 2010). In connection to this increased use of internal evaluation, an awareness has risen in schools to involve different voices in their evaluation strategies. Different stakeholders could be thought off to be given a role in schools' evaluation process. Mostly it concerns stakeholders that are closely linked to the educational process such as teachers, students or, to a lesser extent, parents.

In the sections below, some initiatives in the framework of DEAP strategies are described without having the ambition to be exhaustive.

### 4.2.1    School self-evaluations

One initiative of internal evaluation where schools can involve different stakeholders is an organisational self-evaluation. School self-evaluation as it is often called can be defined as a systematic process, wherein well-chosen participants describe and judge their own functioning. Ultimately, such a school self-evaluation has the aim to take decisions and undertake actions in the framework of school development (Vanhoof & Van Petegem, 2010).

Such a school self-evaluation can be undertaken by means of different techniques. Often, schools make use of a survey instrument that focusses on a certain topic or series of topics of a school's functioning. Participants are then asked to give their perception of the actual performance of the school and to make a judgement of that. Next to administering a survey among the participants, another possibility is conducting a focus group, possibly led by an external facilitator. This technique starts from the same basic principle that relies on the perception of participants on a series of topics. Often the subject of a school self-evaluation is inspired by school effectiveness research that identifies aspects that enhances the effectiveness of organisational processes in the school such as distributed leadership or the innovative capacity of the school.

A central element in the conduct of school self-evaluation is who is asked to participate. This responsibility lies within the school or whoever initiates the school self-evaluation. In many instances it is acknowledged that teachers have a clear insight in the operations of their school because of their day-to-day experiences. To a lesser extent students and especially parents are involved in this method of internal evaluation. However, the method of school self-evaluation is usable in different contexts and is not restricted to one group of participants. Apparently, the involvement of other groups of respondents, apart from teachers, generates (practical) challenges that are difficult to overcome. A school needs to consider thoroughly what information it wants to collect and from whom.

### 4.2.2    Collegial visits

In the framework of quality assurance, a rather unique initiative is the strategy of 'collegial' visits. This strategy bridges in a way strategies for internal evaluation with aspects of external evaluation. The basic principle here is that a team of teachers from other schools visit a school to provide them advice for further school development based on their professional judgement (Cautreels & Van Petegem, 2006).

A collegial visit starts with a well-considered team of teachers or school leaders from two or more schools. On a voluntary basis the team alternately visits each of the schools and asks questions and gathers information on the quality of the visited school and the initiatives they undertake to improve their delivered quality. Based on this information the team makes a professional judgement provides the visited school with advice and recommendations on what steps can be taken to further develop and improve the delivered educational quality. Note that the collegial advice and recommendations are not binding and that the individual school decides autonomously on which conclusions it adopts.

Underlying this strategy of a 'critical friend', it is essential that there is a sense of confidentiality and respect towards each other. Also, the professional judgement is key and requires therefore a team which consists of members that are experienced with the daily processes in schools. Teachers and school leaders are privileged partners in this context. However, it is also considered valuable to co-opt other stakeholders such as parents, administrative staff or an educational expert in the team. Of course, there needs to be a consensus within the 'collegial visit'-team about who is involved.

### 4.2.3   Teachers Learning from Students

In contrast to the two preceding initiatives this last evaluation strategy in the framework of quality improvement is situated at classroom level. The instrument *Teachers Learning from Students* (TLS) starts from two perspectives (Van Petegem, Deneire, & Cautreels, 2008). Firstly, teachers are performing a self-evaluation and, secondly, students provide teachers with feedback. Research has already demonstrated that student have very valuable and critical insight on the functioning of teachers in the classroom.

The TLS-instrument is based on school effectiveness research, where process variables at classroom level are identified have an effect on student achievement. The TLS-instrument focusses on, among others, classroom climate aspects and to what extent teachers provide students with feedback and encourage them by reinforcement.

The TLS initiative is a response to an increased interest for students to participate in quality assurance and quality improvement strategies. Simultaneously it meets the renewed attention for primary educational processes.

### 4.2.4   Local initiatives

Next to common known instruments and strategies, there are also local initiatives. We found an example where a school is explicitly involving different stakeholders in their strategic planning. In the development of a (revised) vision statement they actively consult representatives of different stakeholder groups (Hannes & Vanhoof, 2017). In a first stage the school invited regional and local politicians, local entrepreneurs, persons in charge of trainee posts, former teachers and former students. In a second stage also the school's neighbours, a former inspector and representatives of local anti-poverty organisations.

Another example is a school that actively engage with the field of action of former students in order to evaluate the delivered curriculum (Silkens, 2017). The school created a working group which is responsible to maintain contact with employers of their former students. By doing so they aim to identify topics that were not addressed or competencies that were not developed during students' education which are seen as necessary.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Flemish schools are granted a high amount of autonomy in how they organise education. This is also reflected in school evaluation regulations and processes. There is a minimal steering of the central authorities from the Flemish government on the education system. However, the government has imposed minimal requirement about what students should achieve, but there are no central exams to identify whether students indeed attain the minimal requirements. It is the school that is responsible to keep track of students' performances and grant students' diploma's.

Within the quality assurance system schools are given the most prominent role. They are a central actor within a system that aims to combine both external and internal evaluation. External evaluation is executed by the Inspectorate and aims to verify whether schools makes informed choices to ensure that students achieve the minimal requirements set by the government and whether schools systematically monitor their own quality.

This imposed monitoring of the own quality is the impetus for schools to perform internal evaluations. How schools should perform such internal evaluations is not stipulated by the government, and lies within the power of the school. This means that there is a high extent of variation among schools in the execution of internal evaluations.

The concept of Distributed Evaluation And Planning in Schools starts from the perspective that the involvement of different stakeholders in schools' evaluation and planning is crucial. It must be concluded that despite the assurance of participation of different stakeholders by decree, no clear evidence is available on what role these stakeholder groups currently play in the evaluation of schools and their policy-making.

It must be acknowledged that there are several initiatives taken that enhance the capacity of schools to involve different stakeholder voices in a prominent role. This is, at least, an indication that the awareness has risen in schools about the importance of adopting different stakeholders' views in their evaluation and quality assurance practices.

Some questions about the involvement of stakeholders are still unanswered, and more research should address these issues. Up till now it is not known to what extent schools in Flanders indeed make use of their autonomy to involve different stakeholders in their evaluation strategies. It is also unsure whether schools have the necessary capacity and tools to involve different stakeholders in their internal evaluation practices. Further research could also look into the conditions that are necessary to foster a distributed evaluation and planning strategy in schools, or what schools are experiencing as obstacles with such a distributed strategy.

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