

This first issue of *Eurydice in Brief* is for those of you interested in the quality of education systems in Europe and thus the way those systems are evaluated. It launches a new series of bulletins setting out in a few paragraphs and illustrations, the main conclusions of enquiries by the Eurydice Network into different issues on the agenda of European cooperation in education. In each case, readers will be able to explore this outline information in greater depth by turning to the original source (see website references on the back page).

Eurydice in Brief will appear around once every two months. As such, we hope it will bring our output to the attention of a wider audience, and offer you helpful support in your daily work. All your comments on this new series would be most welcome by email to the following address (comments@eurydice.org).

We hope you will find it stimulating!

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A CLOSE-UP ON THE EVALUATION OF SCHOOLS

Almost all countries in Europe arrange for evaluation of their schools so as to improve the quality of compulsory education. What are the aims, bodies, procedures and criteria that define the terms of such evaluation? These are the questions addressed by our recent study *The Evaluation of Schools providing Compulsory Education in Europe*.

Improving the quality of education at school is the central concern of educational policies in European countries, for only by doing so can national economic competitiveness and social cohesion be sustained and strengthened. The idea that improving quality entails an evaluation of education systems is now taken for granted. It is therefore vital that policy-makers, no less than those directly involved out in the field, should consider carefully how to go about this evaluation, discuss the criteria underlying it and closely examine the means of achieving their desired ends. The comparative analysis by Eurydice highlights the many procedures or bodies in their variety of forms and with their differing aims, which have been established by European education systems. The study has set out both to provide a 'snapshot' of all evaluation systems and a description of how their procedures are interrelated. It analyses the problems encountered and proposes areas for further consideration in order to understand them better. Drawing on the Recommendation of the Parliament and the Council of 12 February 2001 concerning European cooperation in Quality Evaluation in School Education, the study surveys the situation from several angles, namely the position of internal evaluation and how it is related to external evaluation, all those who are involved in evaluation, and the transparency of its processes.

Schools as the focus

Why should the evaluation of schools be the main focus of attention? First and foremost, because schools are increasingly central to the challenges faced by education as the means at its disposal become more decentralised. Indeed, education systems are increasingly opting for decentralisation in order both to adapt their provision to economic requirements and deal effectively with the growing heterogeneity of school intake, the so-called 'school mix'. On the other hand, decentralisation very often goes hand in hand with a definition of standards - themselves far more centralised - to ensure that educational provision is both fair for all and fully consistent.

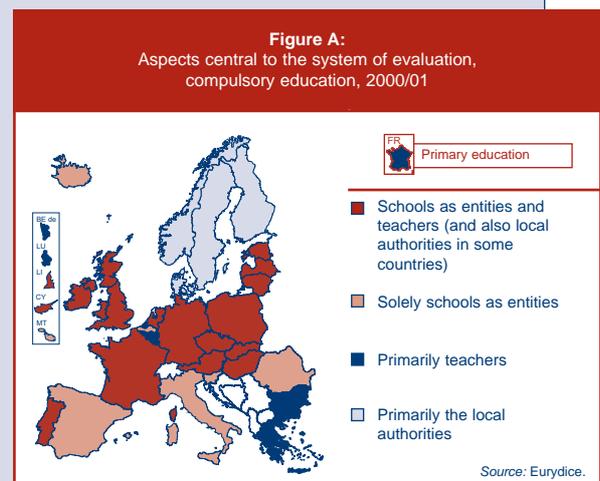
On examining the position of schools in the evaluation systems of European countries, two main models may be identified (Figure A). In the first, in a substantial majority of countries (23 out of 30), evaluation of schools is at the very heart of the system. Here they are evaluated by an external inspectorate, as well as internally by the school community itself. While adopting this procedure, 16 countries also evaluate teachers on an individual basis. In the remaining seven, they are only evaluated under exceptional circumstances as, for example, in the event of possible promotion.

In the second model, evaluation is concerned with levels other than the school. In Belgium (the French and German-speaking Communities), Greece, France (primary education), Luxembourg and Bulgaria, teachers themselves are evaluated by external inspectors. However, these countries are moving gradually towards the evaluation of schools as such. The Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway) also exemplify this second model. These countries have decentralised towards the municipalities, which are responsible for school provision and thus the key to evaluation of the system. Hence, the situation is not dissimilar to one involving the evaluation of schools or school heads in their own right, since the aim is to evaluate teaching and administrative arrangements etc. and not individual teachers.

The complementary nature of external and internal evaluation

Given the existence of these two models typifying the evaluation of schools, what approaches have been adopted in those countries in which schools as such are central to evaluation systems?

In most of the countries concerned, evaluation occurs in accordance with two modes, external and internal. Both are distinct from each other in terms of their procedures, players and aims.



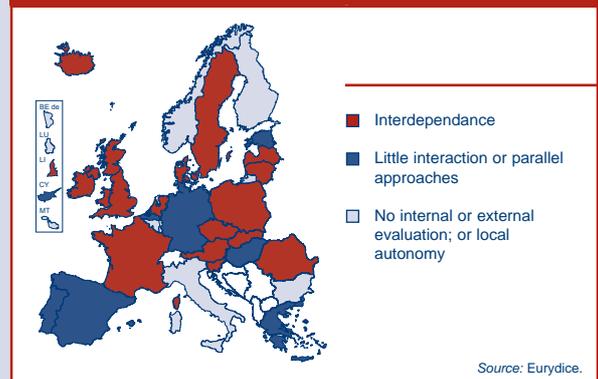
External evaluation – advice and monitoring

Whether local, regional or national, external evaluation is conducted by players who are not directly involved in school activities. In several countries, at least two bodies share the duties with a division very often between the evaluation of teaching activities on the one hand, and management and administration on the other. It is sometimes the case, as in Romania, that two bodies are party to one and the same evaluation exercise but with different aims, namely to advise schools and monitor compliance with standards.

Internal evaluation – many different players

Internal evaluation, on the other hand, is carried out by those who have a direct link with educational activity. It is now compulsory in 22 countries, and recommended in six others. Since the 1990s, it is no longer the exclusive responsibility of school heads. European education systems have sought to promote the involvement of many other players in internal evaluation, including representatives of teachers, parents, the local community and sometimes pupils themselves. The aim is mainly to motivate those with a stake in education to improve its quality and accept or induce change, but also to gain greater insight into the overall complexity of matters by observing schools from several perspectives. Very often, such internal evaluation occurs within formally constituted bodies such as the school board or council, special groups of teachers or teacher assemblies. Yet though it is very widespread, little is known about how it is conducted in practice given the autonomy of schools in this respect. For example, the contribution of the school board may be limited to simply approving a report that describes school activities, or give rise to far more substantive involvement via in-depth discussion of suitable policies. Furthermore, notwithstanding the tendency to favour an increase in the number of parties concerned, strong priority is granted to those closest to the cut and thrust of teaching activity, namely school heads and teachers themselves. Outside these participatory bodies, parents or local representatives who take part in internal evaluation generally do so in an advisory capacity.

Figure B:
Relations between the internal and external evaluation of schools entities, compulsory education, 2000/01



Two interdependent forms of evaluation

Where internal and external evaluation coexist, are they independent or interdependent? Figure B shows that the majority of systems have planned for interdependence: internal evaluation often constitutes the platform for external evaluation, providing a source of insight into the specific circumstances of a school. By contrast, schools are rarely encouraged to take account of external evaluation when engaged in internal evaluation. In some countries, the interdependence of internal and external evaluation is stronger in that the former is supervised and assessed by the agencies responsible for external evaluation.

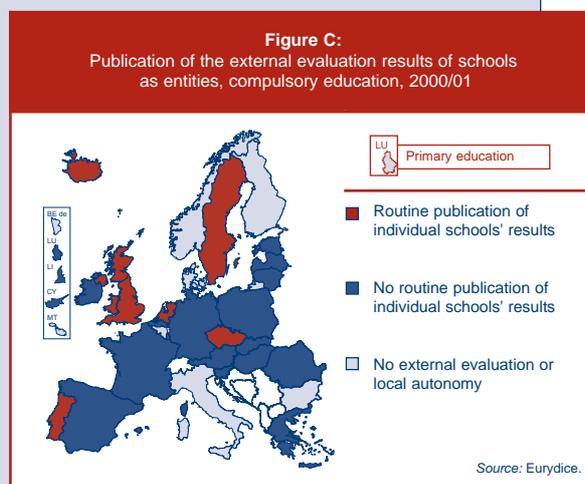
Greater standardisation of procedures

Evaluation means establishing criteria. The first question is who determines them, and whether they are exactly the same for everyone or take account of each school's particular circumstances. In the case of external evaluation, the fixing of criteria depends on the level of authority to which the evaluators are responsible. The closer this level is to the centre (or top level for education), the greater the uniformity of criteria with respect to a standard list. This is the situation in around ten countries. In the case of internal evaluation, there are two possible scenarios. Where the aim is to improve quality, school staff are very often involved in determining the criteria, so that they may satisfy them more easily. But where the findings of internal evaluation are used as a source of information for an external authority, that authority generally fixes them.

Inevitably, fixing criteria also means considering the content of evaluation. In other words, precisely what is evaluated? The answer in most countries is two things. First processes, or all those means and resources mobilised in the course of school activity and, secondly – since the 1980s or 1990s – outcomes, referring essentially to pupil attainment. Evaluation of processes has many sides to it. First, clearly, come teaching and learning which naturally raise the question of evaluating teaching practice in the classroom (not all countries arrange classroom visits for this purpose). Next, evaluation may pay special attention to criteria for guiding and supporting pupils, relations with outside persons, and sometimes the general 'atmosphere' of a school, thereby clearly demonstrating the importance attached to its various dimensions. As regards the extent to which schools have to comply with fixed requirements, certain countries specify it very clearly, while others grant the evaluators themselves considerable leeway in this respect. As far as the knowledge and competence of pupils is concerned, there are two approaches. The first is to fix exactly the same level of attainment for everyone - a national mean - while the second is to establish a level conditioned by specific features of the pupil intake at a particular school. With this latter option, it is possible to take account of the specific circumstances of schools enrolling large groups of disadvantaged pupils.

What should be made of the findings of evaluation?

When the entire evaluation process – both internal and external – is complete, a decision still has to be taken on what should be done with the findings. This means considering their possible consequences for schools, and whether or not they should be published. In the great majority of countries concerned, schools receive recommendations which may or may not also oblige them to draw up a written plan for improvement, and subsequently involve penalties if the plan does not yield results. Certain countries have decided to publish findings for each individual school (Figure C). While this certainly enables parents and pupils to compare schools in detail, it may also give rise to perverse effects and, in particular, forms of segregation resulting from parental strategies to avoid certain schools or, on the contrary, target those perceived as more attractive. Nevertheless published findings are an important information source for all those involved in education and keen to improve its quality.



And so ...?

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It is clear that any consideration of quality in education entails a penetrating description of the forms of evaluation that are implemented. The question that remains to be answered is how do these different approaches to evaluation contribute to improving quality and affect the performance of school systems. Further exchange of experience and expertise in this area undoubtedly provides interesting prospects for cooperation at European level.

References

Title of the publication:	Evaluation of Schools providing Compulsory Education in Europe		
Language versions:	English, French and German – See the Eurydice website for further information on the availability of electronic versions in other languages		
Online location:	http://www.eurydice.org/Documents/EvalS/en/FrameSet.htm		
Publication date:	March 2004	Reference year:	2000/01
See also:	National monographs (http://www.eurydice.org/documents/evaluation/en/frameset_eval.html)		