

A self-evaluation process based on the DISO instrument (Diagnostic Instrument for Secondary Education) – Belgium, Flanders

1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of self-evaluation must fit in completely with the internal quality assurance for which every school is responsible. Central to quality assurance are the school's views on what they define as good-quality education. The very first objective is, of course, to achieve the final attainment levels required by law. Nevertheless, the school must also have a view on what is good education. In this, it will set its own targets, highlighting its own points of emphasis regarding good education. Schools will determine what constitutes quality education in their context. In other words, they will have to ask themselves whether they are doing the right things. However, that is not the end of the matter. The question immediately arises as to how to implement that quality; in other words, schools will have to ask themselves in the second instance whether they are also doing the things properly! This requires the skill of reflection as well as self-awareness. A self-evaluation process helps to support such reflection in a systematic way, helps the school to find out whether it is doing the right things and also whether it is doing them properly.

A process of self-evaluation in schools was brought into operation a number of years ago through in-service training by the Catholic Education Schools Advisory Service (Algemene Pedagogische Begeleidingsdienst van het Katholiek Onderwijs) using the 'DISO' instrument (Diagnostic Instrument for Secondary Education). In this paper, I, as a process consultant for a number of schools, want to explain this approach and the conditions required at a school for such an exercise to be brought to a successful conclusion.

'Brought to a successful conclusion' here relates to the process which is gone through as part of DISO. As self-evaluation is a cyclical process, there is no conclusion to it, because working on a good-quality school is of a continuous nature involving a series of evaluation and improvement activities. In this, the team must monitor continuously whether the targets that they have set have been achieved. A cyclical process involves planning (on the basis of a vision), implementation, evaluation and adjustment, in other words determining the quality, measuring the quality and then ensuring and/or improving the quality.

2. AGREEMENTS AND PROCEDURE

2.1. Familiarisation

Ensuring that the process fits in with the school's responsibility for monitoring and improving its own quality is an initial concern in process consulting. Therefore, the first and most important step in the process is the familiarisation interview with the management. This interview examines the school's intentions first of all. Quality assurance concerns the internal dynamics in order to optimise what can be improved. This is in contrast to the pressure to adapt; in that case you adapt your behaviour because you cannot do anything else (regulations), because you are rewarded for that (additional GOK (Integrated Equal Educational Opportunities Policy) hours) or because you want to avoid something unpleasant (and negative audit report). However, you take part in self-evaluation so that the school can develop further. It is unfortunate (but understandable) that in many schools an imminent audit is part of the hidden agenda. When you read through the audit reports on them, you all too often find the sentence: 'the school is still not doing enough work on self-evaluation on a systematic, cyclical and integrated basis'. It is the task of the inspectorate to prompt schools to scrutinise their own quality, but the reverse of this is that a number of schools regard self-evaluation as a routine they have to go through for the sake of the audit. I do not need to say that this is a pernicious point of view, which greatly jeopardises the success of the self-evaluation process. 'People want to change, but do not want to be changed'. Consequently, it is very important to examine the question 'why'. Does the school want to use self-evaluation to define its position or to go in for school development? Or does it simply want to resolve a problem? An important requirement for starting a self-evaluation process is 'calm' in the school. For example, I found that, at a school which had gone through a merger just two years before, self-evaluation was seized on by the teachers in order to vent their frustrations and to settle (old) scores. In retrospect, on the basis of the counselling we should have strongly advised that school against embarking on that process.

Self-evaluation is initiated by the school itself. If the familiarisation interview shows that 'the school' is synonymous with 'the head teacher', this is a major pitfall. If the self-evaluation is merely pushed through by the management 'from the top', the school is lacking the essential basis of its team members. This is the danger referred to in the study in response to the audit of the first cycle of the equal educational opportunities policy. The statutory obligation to carry out self-evaluation of the impact of the equal educational opportunities policy on schools involves the danger that schools get themselves in order, technically speaking. Similarly in our self-evaluation project, it is very important that this is carried out by as large a group of the school team as possible. This concerns communication to the team. Consideration must be given as to how to introduce this. It cannot be a job for the head teacher alone. Therefore, from the outset we advocate setting up a working group on quality care or self-evaluation (which may or may not already exist). They have to be responsible for propagating the true intentions of the self-evaluation process. For example, I have seen this message being conveyed very creatively in schools with pocket mirrors

being laid around everywhere, which naturally led to questions being asked among colleagues. The explanation followed a week later. Another school used large blocks to build a small wall in the school's entrance hall with the message 'Help to build (name of the school)'. At the end of the entire process, the priority improvement measures were put on those blocks.

It is also important during a familiarisation interview to sound out the starting position of the school, as there are different levels of self-evaluation, depending on the school's 'level of development': you can simply draw up an inventory of and describe the school's activities, a school may have a specific acute problem and want to tackle that problem quickly, or people may want to evaluate the entire school situation or aspects of it without any immediate cause. However, the school must bear in mind that a self-evaluation will have a negative effect if large-scale activities are carried out when the school is not yet ready for them. A school where consultation is a matter-of-course has a different starting point from a school which has communication problems.

The promoting and limiting factors must be thoroughly mapped out and cleared up in the initial phase. It may be necessary on the basis of this information to decide to hold off from the process for a while, or to tackle the initiative on a smaller scale, e.g. through a few efficient subgroups.

Factors promoting the self-evaluation process are:

- Stimulating school management exercising a democratic leadership;
- Supported by as many involved parties as possible;
- A healthy school climate: openness, mutual trust, support from colleagues;
- Stability and cooperation within the team;
- Availability of resources;
- Strong conviction concerning the need;
- Willingness to look continually and critically at one's own working;
- Willingness to change at all levels;
- Experience of self-evaluation.

Factors limiting the self-evaluation process are:

- Imposed by the management;
- Lack of willingness to change;
- Not taking time for the process by wanting to show results too quickly;
- Innovation overload;

- Increase in the planning load and workload in education;
- Hidden or open conflicts (demonstrating at the same time the need for self-evaluation and limiting effective self-evaluation);
- An incorrect understanding of what self-evaluation involves (= lack of information and information flow);
- Ambiguity regarding the purpose of self-evaluation.

The full course to be taken is also discussed during the familiarisation interview. We think it is very important that the school should be able to move at its own speed. Experience teaches us that we have to curb schools rather than prompt them. Managements are more inclined to want to go too quickly; ‘get the survey out of the way quickly, and then we will know ...’

2.2. A course to be followed

Across a number of schools, three sessions – spread over the school year – are organised with schools which are entering the project (max. five schools per session), at which we expect someone from the management team, someone from middle management and a teacher. These sessions are learning events at which, in addition to a theoretical framework, people are acquainted with the instrument and the underlying vision. In addition, the final session may include initiatives for further action: determining priorities, working with an action plan... Schools also learn with and from each other how things may (or may not) go.

Two further sessions are held at the individual school itself with the working group, at which the self-evaluation is actually prepared: information for the school team, if necessary making school-specific statements to attach to the survey, organisation of the discussions regarding the findings resulting from the survey...

If it is already clear from the familiarisation interview that the school regards these sessions as superfluous deadweight, then things certainly do not look good. Self-evaluation is not something that you can just take lightly. It is necessary to have or create a climate for it, it is necessary to set aside time for it. A school opting for it must be prepared to put any other things on hold. ‘Grass doesn’t grow any more quickly if you pull on it’.

2.3. All teachers and support staff to complete the survey

The purpose of DISO is to give the school a general picture of its current status, a ‘photograph’ of the school. This is done using a questionnaire with some 100 statements. These statements relate to the main components which together determine a picture of a school in terms of education and organisation. The survey is addressed to all teachers in the school and can be completed together on paper or electronically. 40’ are estimated to complete it. The anonymity of the respondents is ensured. The questions concern only the level at which and/or educational form in which lessons are given. Some schools also opt to have the parameter ‘length of service’ recorded in order to get an idea of any different answers according to the age of the teachers.

At this stage it is extremely important that the team members are fully aware that they only have to answer to themselves (unlike in a school audit). DISO does not express an opinion on 'good' or 'bad'. It is a question of giving the school an accurate picture of the way in which it is working at that moment and not of the desirable way in which people think a school should work in order to be a 'good' school. On the other hand, the respondents can of course point out any items where action is desirable. In this way, the school can also take into account the willingness to take action concerning a number of areas of school working. This is then assigned more specifically to a later stage of the self-evaluation process.

2.4. Clarification discussions

The findings are given to the teachers. Then, clarification discussions are held a week later with the various subgroups which the school established prior to completion of the survey (e.g. 1st level or the teachers of carpentry and construction). The purpose of these discussions is simple: to examine with the teachers whether they actually said what they intended. Thus, there is no discussion, simply clarification. In scientific circles this is sometimes called communicative validation. Sometimes the findings are contradictory. The teachers are inclined to respond positively to the statement that they teach the pupils to work independently. When it also turns out that they also respond positively to the statement that they themselves are speaking for most of the lesson, something is not right. The clarification discussions should explain and differentiate this. This stage is a necessary and essential supplement to the survey. It happens quite often that the scores on certain items raise a few eyebrows ('do we think like that at school?'). We have to take into account that people sometimes react differently in a group from how they act as an individual. It is quite possible that in the staff room or in the occupational group people get the impression that a particular opinion prevails, because it is expressed by a few speakers. People who are less assertive or are less comfortable expressing their opinion in the group express their (possibly different) opinion in this survey. And the sum of those opinions leads to the findings formulated.

In these discussions, therefore, it comes down to all teachers being given a chance and not only the articulate ones. At the same time, it must be emphasised once again that it is not a question 'good' or 'bad' answers, but 'clear' answers; what is the status now at this school? Since DISO fits in with the self-evaluation by the school, there is no need to be answerable to external parties (the educational consultant leading the discussion). In this respect, I wish to point out the importance of the educational consultant (for the teachers, an external party) as process consultant. The school might also opt to have these discussions led each time by someone from the school. In fact, this must be possible in a school with extensive policy-making capacity. Nevertheless, I am of the opinion that at that moment most schools need a 'critical friend' who does not suffer from organisational blindness, because they can look at the school from a distance and can (should) ask much more pointed and critical questions. These critical questions are necessary because we learn from experience that teachers are often much more lenient in answers to those statements dealing with their own educational and teaching activities (the core processes) but a great deal more

critical about components relating to management and administration, communication, school rules... because they regard these more as 'another person's' task. A clarification discussion lasts one and a half hours.

2.5. The summary report

This report groups the most important findings around 12 components corresponding to the significant components of the school as an educational entity and as an organisation. It is important here that the school is both educationally and organisationally able to develop into a unit and that the two elements are in keeping with each other.

The image of a football match fits in well here. Usually you play football with eleven players against eleven, on a grass pitch of a specific size, with a leather ball of a specific weight... So isn't it possible also to play football on a paved playground with a plastic ball and with five against six? Of course! You can certainly get as much pleasure from the game, but it is not a football match as prescribed. On the other hand, playing football with a ping-pong ball would present a great many difficulties, and playing football on a ping-pong table, absolutely not. Likewise at a school. There are various possibilities for providing a good education and training, but some things really do not go together or will lead to difficulties. DISO examines the educational and organisational model of the school and takes as its basis for this the school models of Petri. The educational model concerns the way in which pedagogical and didactic ideas are tackled. For example, what is the procedure for testing, pupil support, reporting? How do teachers present their subject? The organisational model covers the means for cooperation in the school, as expressed in regular contacts between subject teachers, the lines along which decisions are implemented, the tasks of the school management or the position of the middle management. There is a clear link between education and organisation; certain organisational forms are better suited for certain developments of educational ideas. For example, if the educational model devotes a great deal of attention to curriculum planning, common teaching methods and pupil support, then structured forms for cooperation between subject teachers, mentors and management are required. If these do not exist, you may have a school model in which certain components do not fit in with each other or counteract each other, thus standing in the way of good-quality working.

Comments and thoughts on this are given for the first time during the self-evaluation process. The purpose of the comments is simply to confront the school with its own opinions. This is done from the perspective of development, in other words without the label 'good' or 'bad' but in such a way as to enable the school to outline a policy for the future.

This summary report is explained by the process consultant at a staff meeting. The school must set aside at least one hour for this.

2.6. Determining the priorities

A self-evaluation process does not end with the summary report. Even though a good distance has been covered by this point, the work is just beginning. Using this summary report as a basis, the school (working group, educational steering committee, management board, all teachers together...) will determine its priorities and decide what steps it will take in the short and medium term to improve quality. This is the essence of self-evaluation: not so much self-reflection on one's own 'working', but mainly determining for oneself how things should proceed in the future. The role of counselling is to support the school in this by passing on methods for determining priorities, not taking over from it. We know from experience that schools often find this difficult. To what extent is the school able to develop such priorities itself on the basis of a sustained vision, translated into a school work plan and put in concrete terms in action plans? This is connected with the capacity to formulate a policy for itself. Priorities can best be determined according to the basis provided by the school. A school which is still finishing off a number of things would do better to wait to take up something new. It is advisable in the first instance to plan actions for improvement which are easy to implement. This creates energy; the teachers see that their efforts lead to something concrete. More difficult and complex problems are best separated out into sub-problems, which can then be tackled part by part, because some problems have a domino effect. If schools want to handle reporting to parents differently, this is directly relevant to the evaluation method, which is in turn relevant to methods of teaching, remedying, learning to learn...

Nor should the human factor be overlooked. The school is counting on the experience and expertise of its staff for the solution to its problems and implementation of the action plans. The school expects them to be involved and to be well motivated. However, this involves intervening in the way in which they carry out their duties, use their time and in their availability. Consequently, here too you should think before you start, but do not fail to start and to continue thinking...

This completes the process around DISO. However, self-evaluation (the cyclical process of self-enquiry, taking actions to improve the quality of the education) is continued.

3. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

3.1. Weaknesses

- In most cases the decision to go through the self-evaluation process is taken from the top. A joint decision by the whole school team seems to be utopian, but the decision should at least be supported by an educational council.
- The instrument obtains information only from the teachers and the support staff. If the atmosphere is not good, this may undermine the validity of the information. Therefore, we advise schools to examine how the pupils/parents experience certain things if this is necessary for certain components.
- It is still difficult to motivate as large a part of the school team as possible so that they understand the (self-) interest of such a self-evaluation process.
- Very many teachers really do not have the reflective skills yet. ‘Perhaps we aren’t doing it properly?’
- Teachers still find it difficult to think along the lines of ‘school policy’ and thus to think beyond their own class/lesson/discipline.
- Teachers are not always familiar with the jargon of the instrument used and find that some statements are not clearly formulated.
- The comments given in the summary report are based on pedagogical literature which comes across as too theoretical to very many teachers.

3.2. Strengths

- The structure of the instrument is based on a number of concepts which have been verified empirically (scientific base).
- All those involved in education are surveyed in a relatively short time.
- The process requires relatively little time from take-up to the summary report of the school team.
- There is an essential theoretical structure for the core team (working group) so that they can also continue to grow in quality assurance and school development.
- Schools come into contact with other schools through the in-service training sessions, and experiences (dos and don’ts) can be exchanged.
- The instrument is based on an approach relating to educational content and organisation.
- Reflective skills – essential for policy-making – are developed and/or honed via the process.

- The school gets control of activities for improvement and/or change.
- Involvement and motivation (and well-being) are increased, although very many teachers do not see this at first sight. Rather they see an increase in the planning and work loads.
- The process has an important communication component (the clarification discussions), which can stir up a great deal.
- The report offers a great many opportunities for proceeding in a planned way instead of dealing with one minor incident after another.
- The process support from the educational consultant as a ‘critical friend’ is clearly an added value.
- The self-evaluation process is an important event based on the philosophy of ‘the learning organisation’, the school which learns from and with each other, where regularly asking questions of oneself is an inherent feature.
- The desire to change comes from within (extrinsic motivation is the strongest motivation).

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