



Drivers for student and parent voice in school self-evaluation activities A cross-country analysis of Flanders (Belgium), Ireland and Portugal

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ABSTRACT

School self-evaluation (SSE) has become a key strategy in terms of safeguarding educational quality. In order to reach its full potential, it is argued that parents and students should be given a role in an SSE process, as they can help understand the complex environment in which schools operate. However, little is known about how different education systems include parent and student voice in SSE activities, and what driving factors at the individual, system and organisational level can foster this. This study reports on an international survey among school management team members in Flanders (Belgium), Ireland and Portugal. The results show statistically significant differences between countries in terms of parent and student voice in SSE. In particular, driving factors at the system and organisational level are found to explain differences in parent and student voice inclusion in SSE. The paper discusses the implications for researchers, policymakers, and the field of practice.

1. Introduction

The evaluation of schools is a prominent element in the idea of safeguarding the quality of education (OECD, 2013). Traditionally, in many education systems, there used to be a great deal of emphasis on external evaluation, which is mostly embodied by an Inspectorate (Brown, McNamara, O'Hara, & O'Brien, 2016). However, new ways of evaluation are being sought that correspond to increasing levels of decentralised school governance (Baxter, 2017; OECD, 2019a). In Flanders, for instance, schools are expected to systematically research and safeguard their quality (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2009). In their efforts to give shape to this expectation, Flemish schools are granted autonomy on how to carry out this notion of quality assurance in their school. Ultimately, this comes down to an expectancy regarding schools performing school self-evaluation (SSE). Similarly, in Ireland, schools are required to engage in the process of SSE as defined within a regulatory framework which has an important component in the evaluation of schools (Brown et al., 2018). In Portugal, conducting SSE is compulsory for schools for improvement and

development purposes, and also forms the basis for the external evaluation by the Inspectorate (Figueiredo, Ramalho, & Rocha, 2017). However, although these three countries conduct SSE as an evaluation activity, the levels of implementation vary to a large extent (OECD, 2019b). Nonetheless, despite the differences found across education systems, SSE is widely considered to be a significant strategic leverage for increasing the quality of education provided in many education systems around the world (Eurydice, 2015; OECD, 2013).

SSE is advocated as an approach because it can give a role to a range of stakeholders and encompass the local context in which a school operates, and because it enables the inclusion of different perspectives on the functioning of the school. In order to obtain these different perspectives, stakeholders can be involved throughout an SSE cycle, on the initiative of the school itself (Hannes & Vanhoof, 2017; Vanhoof & Van Petegem, 2010). A school can explicitly decide to carefully select participants to be part of an SSE process based on unique experience and expertise that the school considers as necessary (Brown et al., 2020). The involvement of stakeholders in the processes of evaluation and planning is seen as central to the process and connects to current trends that

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indicate that the distribution of power and agency within an organisation is a key driver for improvement (Hargreaves & Fink, 2012; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

In education, many stakeholders can be thought of as possible partners, but increasingly students and parents are now much more so than in the past, perceived as the primary stakeholders (Hooge, Burns, & Wilkoszewski, 2012; Odhiambo & Hii, 2012). Primary stakeholders should theoretically have a direct interest and influence on schools, whereas secondary stakeholders such as employers, have an interest but only a limited influence on school policies (Hooge, van der Sluis, & de Vijlder, 2004).

The inclusion of stakeholder voice in educational evaluation has increasingly gained attention in the discourse of education, with the significance of parent and student empowerment being particularly promoted (Lincoln, 2003; Sliwka & Istance, 2006; Smith & Benavot, 2019). The involvement of stakeholders in evaluation processes is considered to be a positive shift, as a wider range of perspectives is likely to offer more detailed and complex insights into the depths of the organisation (Chapman & Sammons, 2013). Key stakeholders such as teachers, students and parents, it is suggested, know the local context better than those in central government (Odhiambo & Hii, 2012). They can, therefore, provide detailed knowledge, valuable insights, and constructive feedback on how to improve the school to which they relate (Gordon & Seashore Louis, 2009). Thus, calls for greater participation in decision-making have often been championed in the literature as a progressive way of making schools more democratic and more efficient (Mokoena, 2011).

However, the literature on the involvement of parents in education has already pointed to several challenges that are faced in practice. Challenges exist at an organisational and system-level on the one hand, and at the individual school and teacher level on the other. At an organisational level, for instance, it has been reported by teachers that they lack the appropriate resources to engage thoroughly with parents (Addi-Racciah & Ainhoren, 2009). At the individual level, principals might fear criticism, and they could even have fears over a potential decrease in professional status and wellbeing (Addi-Racciah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008). Furthermore, in cases where teachers are indeed willing and try to increase parents' voice, there may be other barriers. Parents and teachers may have conflicting conceptions of what their involvement should be. Research indicates that teachers are found to have a narrower view concerning parental involvement, limited to home-school contact regarding individual pupils, while parents consider attending and participating in school activities (including teacher evaluations) as part of their involvement (Baker, 1997). 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 climate, the organisational culture or the school itself (Burr, 2015; Dozza & Cavrini, 2012).

While these hindering challenges are found in the field of practice, it must be acknowledged that other organisational members and stakeholders are currently given a more prominent role in influencing school decision-making (Ni, Yan, & Pounder, 2017). SSE is no longer the responsibility of the principal or a small group of senior management members; instead, it is evolving towards a more democratic process where stakeholders as students and parents have a role to play, although to a varying extent.

Thus, there exists somewhat of a tension between the desire to include stakeholder voice in SSE on the one hand, and factors that hinder this inclusion on the other. Across education systems, there are indications of significant variations with regard to how schools engage with stakeholders in their activities in relation to their self-evaluation process. In order to be able to anticipate and overcome challenges, it is necessary to identify aspects that explain this variation. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on the extent to which parents and students as stakeholders are indeed given a role in SSE activities as perceived from the point of view of school management team members. In addition, it

aims to identify what driving factors school management team members consider as contributing to supporting the involvement of parents and students in SSE activities. More specifically, the following research questions are considered:

- To what extent, according to school team management members, are parents and students included in school self-evaluation activities in secondary schools in Flanders, Ireland, and Portugal?
- To what extent, according to school team management members, can the inclusion of parents and students in school self-evaluation be predicted by certain factors across Flanders, Ireland, and Portugal?

The paper begins with a description of the conceptual framework that was used in this study with reference to conceptions of stakeholder voice as it applies to SSE. Next, a description of SSE and student and parent voice in the three case study countries is described. Following on from this, drivers for the initiation of parent and student voice at the individual and system level is described. Leading on from this, the methodology that was used in the study is then described. The penultimate section provides an analysis of the research findings derived from an analysis of survey responses that were administered to secondary school principals in the three partner countries. The paper concludes with a discussion of the research findings and implications for further action for the inclusion of parent and student voice in SSE.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. School self-evaluation and stakeholder voice

Over the past decades, decentralisation of decision making has set in across many education systems (Eurydice, 2015; OECD, 2013). This means that schools are increasingly granted autonomy in the way they organise themselves and how students are taught. This trend has also become established in terms of how schools are evaluated. There is a shift away from centrally controlled evaluation systems towards modes of SSE or internal evaluation as it is known in some jurisdictions. SSE has consequently gained a prominent position in the framework of school evaluation and quality assurance in education (Ehren, 2019; OECD, 2013).

Different terms are used in different educational contexts to designate basic components of SSE. However, the underlying fundamental ideas are found to be rather universal. This does not alter the fact that the interpretation of the 'concept' SSE differs considerably depending on the function it fulfils in the broader quality assurance system and whether it is an independent process or a process that is linked to forms of external evaluation. Having said that SSE can be defined in slightly different ways, the following definition includes all of the common key ideas and is therefore adopted in this study. SSE can be defined as "a systematic process, initiated by the school itself, in which well-chosen participants describe and evaluate (aspects of) the functioning of the school for the purposes of making decisions and undertaking actions in the context of school development" (Vanhoof & Van Petegem, 2010, p. 20). The idea of SSE being a process is, for instance, also reflected in the SSE cycle which is implemented in the Irish education system (Department of Education & Skills, 2012), consisting of six steps that need to be completed (see Fig. 1). A school can engage in different approaches to complete each of the six steps shown in Fig. 1. Consequently, we consider the varied range of activities that can be undertaken by schools in relation to each of the different steps of the SSE process to be SSE activities. The systematic approach, as used in Ireland is exemplary for SSE processes in other education systems, and each of the steps links back to the general notion of SSE agreed upon in the literature.

It is argued that stakeholders can bring in different valuable and fresh perspectives and can create a connection to the complex environment in which schools operate (Ainscow, 2020; Chapman & Sammons, 2013; Mokoena, 2011; Odhiambo & Hii, 2012). From a



Fig. 1. SSE six-step process in Ireland.

theoretical point of view, stakeholders can play a prominent role across different stages of the SSE process (Cousins & Earl, 1995; Fielding, 2001). This means that they may have a critical role to play throughout the whole cycle. In such a case, parents and students also decide on what the focus of an SSE cycle should be, and initiate the whole process, albeit in conjunction with the school management team. Next, parents and students could also take responsibility for planning and for actually gathering evidence about the topic which is under review.

Furthermore, they could even have a role in analysing the data and making judgments about it. Given the idea that such stakeholders can contribute interesting perspectives, this may be considered as a stage in which their judgement can be particularly relevant. In the later stages of an SSE cycle, parents and students can, for instance, be involved in taking part in writing up a report, and/or putting an improvement plan into practice.

The extent to which parents and students are indeed participating or even taking the initiative throughout the different stages of the SSE process is captured in the ladder of stakeholder involvement (Fletcher, 2005). The greater the parents' and students' role is, the higher their involvement is portrayed on the ladder. The uppermost part of the ladder could be described as a situation in which parents and/or students would take the initiative for SSE, decide on its focus, and even take decisions based on the SSE in conjunction with the school. If the involvement of parents and students is limited to being informed or merely consulted during an SSE process, this is considered to be a relatively low level of participation. Next to actual participation, degrees of non-participation are also described in the ladder, such as the manipulation of students and parents. In addition, the tokening of parents and students is considered to be non-participation. This means that it appears that parents and student are given a voice, but in reality, they have no choice with regard to how they participate or what actions they undertake. Fletcher (2005) makes a distinction between degrees of participation or non-participation depending on the role that is awarded to students and parents (see Table 1).

Table 1
The ladder of stakeholder involvement (Fletcher, 2005).

Degrees of Participation	8. Students/parents-initiated, students/parents shared decisions with schools
	7. Students/parents-initiated, students/parents-led decisions
	6. School-initiated, shared decisions with students/parents
	5. Students/parents are informed and consulted
Degrees of	4. Students/parents are informed and assigned
	3. Students/parents are tokenised
	2. Students/parents are decoration
	1. Students/parents manipulated

2.2. SSE in context

The conduct of SSE is mandatory in Ireland and Portugal. Strictly speaking, SSE is not compulsory in Flanders, although it is expected that schools monitor and evaluate their own quality.

In Flanders, schools are granted a significant degree of autonomy in terms of defining and improving the quality of education. Based on this autonomy, schools have a critical role to play regarding school evaluation and quality assurance. In principle, while schools are not obliged to carry out SSE, they are however responsible for improving the quality of education (Faddar & Vanhoof, 2018). This means that an individual school can decide on how it outlines its quality assurance processes. In terms of policymaking structures, the inclusion of representatives of different stakeholder bodies is mandatory by decree (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2004). School councils enable parents, staff, the local community and, in secondary education, students, to participate in policymaking. Schools are also obliged to install a student council. This is an advisory body that aims to enhance the dialogue between students and the school management and teachers. Also, there are some unregulated initiatives in Flanders to encourage different voices to participate in policymaking in schools. A school can decide, for

instance, to organise a platform in which local stakeholders are represented in order to formulate advice to the school's management team (Hannes & Vanhoof, 2017).

In Ireland, school administrators, teachers, students, and parents are regarded as key stakeholders when it comes to the conduct of SSE. However, consulting students or asking for their opinions is not common in the SSE process (Fleming, 2011). The main platform for students to formally engage in school decision-making is through student councils, but not all schools have such a student council as there is no legal obligation for schools to create one (Darmody & Smyth, 2013). While most schools do have student councils, for students, as with other jurisdictions, the reality of the council can be limited to contrived involvements with decision-making (Leren, 2006). Furthermore, there is a significant focus on school event organisation or charity fundraising (Fleming, 2015). In terms of parent involvement, even after the establishment of parent councils, the home-school-community liaison scheme, the improved representation of parents on boards of management, and the emphasis on 'partnership' in policy documents in recent years, there is little evidence to suggest that the real level of parent involvement has improved to any significant extent (Fleming, 2016). The average level of parental participation in Irish schools is lower than the international average (Cosgrove & Gilleece, 2012). While Irish parents do have a high level of informal involvement in their child's education, collaboration is less well-developed on a formal level and typically involves parents acting in a passive or reactive role (Byrne & Smyth, 2011).

In the Portuguese education system, student and parent participation have always been of key importance. Since 1974, parental associations have been officially encouraged as a form of parent participation. A 'general council', a type of management board usually for a cluster of schools, is responsible for defining the guidelines for school activities and ensuring the representation and participation of the school community. The general council consists of instruction and support personnel, families, students, local authorities, and social organisations (scientific, cultural, economic). In addition to the general council, student and family participation is provided through classroom councils. These councils are shaped according to the class level. The classroom councils consist of two parents and one student representative. This council is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the relationship between the school and families. In addition, families have the responsibility of overseeing the progress of their children in school (for example, with regard to behaviour, discipline, education and training). In this context, families are informed about the status of students through parent-teacher meetings (Figueiredo et al., 2017).

2.3. Drivers at the individual level

In exploring why some schools are more proficient in engaging with different school stakeholders in their self-evaluation process, the individual characteristics of school management members can also be at play. The literature on individuals' intentions to engage in certain behaviour, as described in the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), distinguishes three important elements that could also contribute to school management team members' intentions to involve stakeholders in SSE activities. These are attitude, subjective norms, and self-efficacy. The following paragraphs describe each of these elements in further detail.

2.3.1. Cognitive and affective attitudes

The attitude of school management team members regarding the involvement of stakeholders, in the context of distributed evaluation and planning, can influence their intention to do so. The literature shows that an attitude can be broken up into two components: cognitive and affective (Sanbonmatsu & Fazio, 1990). The following paragraphs elaborate on the distinction between these components.

The cognitive component of an attitude refers to aspects that shape

an individual's perception of his/her environment or how he/she thinks (Sanbonmatsu & Fazio, 1990). Specifically, this relates to what principals think about the inclusion of different stakeholders in the SSE process, or what preferences they have regarding distributed evaluation and planning. This component refers to the extent to which principals find it worthwhile and valuable to include different voices in the evaluation and planning process as they affect their school. The literature on the inclusion of parent voice in educational processes confirms that some principals tend to assume that the knowledge of parents with regard to curriculum or pedagogy is narrow, justifying their limited contributions in evaluation processes (Robinson & Timperley, 1996). In contrast, there is also evidence for principals supporting the granting to students and parents, or other stakeholders, an important participatory role in their school (e.g., Van Petegem, De Maeyer, Adriaenssens, & Delvaux, 2010). This fits the rhetoric that describes the involvement of stakeholders as a valuable information source with regard to a school's functioning (Fielding, 2001; MacBeath & McGlynn, 2002). It would appear that these attitudes are as variable as the people who hold them but may be informed by age/length of service with those in the post longest being more resistant to outside interference.

Next to the cognitive component, the literature also discerns an affective component in attitudes. This component in principals' attitude is about their experience of emotions regarding the involvement of stakeholders in evaluation and planning activities (Sanbonmatsu & Fazio, 1990). It also refers to the extent to which they make choices in their approach to the inclusion of different voices based on what they feel. The affective component might contribute to principals' enthusiasm or feelings of being comfortable in working with different voices in their SSE's. Principals might also experience feelings of anxiety or insecurity when it comes down to involving others in their evaluation and planning activities. This can be a consequence of a context in which there is little trust or an unsafe climate between different actors in the school (Griffith, 1998). In the context of the participation of different stakeholders, this is found to be a key element in developing a constructive relationship between actors (Fielding, 2001; Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). School management team members can also have negative feelings about the inclusion of different voices because they might have been confronted with rather negative experiences regarding this issue. This can also be related to a distrust regarding these different actors.

2.3.2. Subjective norms

It can be argued that school management team members' intentions to include different stakeholders in their SSE process can also be influenced by others' opinions (Ajzen, 1991). It could happen that in a school, many colleagues believe that it is not worthwhile investing in such a distributed model of SSE, and therefore have a negative attitude regarding the inclusion of stakeholders. Identifying subjective norms provides an insight into the extent to which principals might feel an external pressure to engage in the inclusion of stakeholders in SSE activities. This also implies that subjective norms relate to the extent to which principals attach much importance to the opinions of others. If they do not attach much importance to others' views on the inclusion of different voices in SSE activities, such views will not have a significant impact on their intentions. However, if they do, and there is a negative attitude towards the inclusion of different voices on the part of their colleagues, their personal intention to engage with stakeholders might also be less.

2.3.3. Self-efficacy

A third element which influences the intention of individuals to engage in certain behaviour is self-efficacy. Ajzen (1991) argues that the extent to which individuals have control over such behaviour predicts their intention to do so. This perceived control over the task, or self-efficacy, refers to the extent to which an individual perceives the task to be within his/her capabilities (Bandura, 1977). It mirrors a

principal's confidence in his or her competencies when it comes to executing the desired behaviour, and indicates what barriers can be expected. Bandura (1997) even argues that people's behaviour can be better predicted by their perception of their capability to perform a task than by their actual competencies. Principals who report a high degree of self-efficacy believe that their current knowledge and skills are sufficient to allow them to include different voices in the SSE process.

2.4. Drivers at the system and organisational level

The extent to which students and parents are involved in SSE activities may depend on several aspects which can be viewed as driving factors. The following paragraphs discuss these factors defined as external regulation, external support, continuous development, professional learning community, resources, and stakeholder training within schools.

Different governments have different regulations in place regarding the evaluation of schools. A form of internal evaluation or SSE often counterbalances an external mode of evaluation (Blok, Slegers, & Karsten, 2008; Nevo, 2001; Vanhoof & Van Petegem, 2007). The regulatory framework regarding SSE in education systems differ. In Portugal and Ireland, for instance, SSE is mandatory for schools, while in Flemish schools in Belgium, the requirement for schools in terms of monitoring their quality comes without stipulations on how they need to carry out SSE. These subtle differences in regulatory frameworks can have implications on how schools are supposed to engage with stakeholder groups such as parents and students.

While schools have to comply with regulatory guidelines from different levels of government, they can face problems with the implementation of the required policy on parent and student voice in SSE activities. Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, and Reed (2002) found that parental involvement can be a struggle when practical support is lacking. A first negative experience can even lead to undertaking new attempts being stopped. The availability of external support in schools to facilitate the process, or to support schools in their attempts to involve parents and students in SSE activities, can be of value. Such external support can refer to support services, the Inspectorate, consultants, facilitators, or external materials that are available for schools to collaborate or engage with during an SSE cycle.

Whereas SSE represents an important tool to enhance quality assurance, research suggests that school management or school staff do not always have the necessary know-how to run such a process in their school adequately. The literature has raised awareness about the quality of SSE's and capacity building in schools to improve SSE processes (Vanhoof, Van Petegem, Verhoeven, & Buvens, 2009). In order to achieve distributed levels of evaluation, continuous professional development (CPD) initiatives should also cover aspects of stakeholder involvement and strengthen the competencies of teachers and principals in this respect.

As school management team members or school staff members may lack the necessary competencies or know-how to involve parents and students in SSE activities in a meaningful way, they may rely on the expertise of others within the school. Such an exchange of ideas with those who have expertise in the involvement of parents and students in SSE can be referred to as a professional learning community within the school (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006).

Involving stakeholder groups in an in-depth manner also has resource implications. The evaluation of schools is a costly business. For instance, during an inspection, consulting parents and students can lengthen the process and takes up inspectorate time. Likewise, in conducting SSE, schools have to use considerable resources to survey parents, run meetings and focus groups, drum up interest, and disseminate findings. In this regard, resources refer to the extent to which schools need to allocate time, materials, staff or facilities to stimulate and facilitate the involvement of parents and students in SSE (McIntyre, Pedder, & Rudduck, 2005). Research has indeed already pointed out

that, in order to engage with parents and students in a meaningful way, there is a lack of staff and time (Addi-Raccah & Ainhoren, 2009).

Seeing the value of a distributed approach to SSE involving the participation of parents and students in the process does not mean that these stakeholders automatically have the necessary capacity to engage in a meaningful way. Capacity can be understood as knowledge about the topics that are under review, or about the process of SSE itself in which they are required to be involved. Views from parents may be easily put aside because, according to the school staff, they would not know enough about what it constitutes to be a teacher or how the school functions (Dozza & Cavrini, 2012). Therefore, schools can choose to inform and train parents and students in SSE. This stakeholder training may also help to provide all stakeholders with the necessary tools and language to engage in meaningful dialogue, and the various stages of an SSE cycle.

The overall aim of this study is to verify the effect of all these driving factors, both at the individual and system/organisational level, on the extent to which parent and student voice are included in SSE activities.

3. Methods

Since more distributed forms of evaluation in schools are on the agenda in several education systems, an Erasmus + project was set up with different European countries with institutions from Flanders (Flemish community of Belgium), Ireland and Portugal taking part. This paper reports on a study which was conducted as part of this project. This section reports initially on the data collection informed by the research questions outlined above. Secondly, it describes the analyses conducted with regard to the gathered data.

3.1. Data collection

Answering the research questions put forward in this study required a large-scale data collection across the countries involved. Therefore, an online survey was administered among secondary education schools in Portugal, Flanders, and Ireland. The survey was implemented as a national survey, so all eligible administrative school entities were invited to participate in the study. From each participating school, one school management team member was asked to complete the survey. Strict verification of whether the participants in the study are representative for the population is not possible, given the lack of data on potential representativeness criteria. However, given the large number of responses and no evidence for non-random missing responses, there is no serious ground to question the representativeness of the survey results. In Flanders there were 906 eligible administrative school entities, from which 195 respondents answered the survey. In Ireland, 167 respondents from 724 eligible schools and in Portugal, 105 respondents out of 569 administrative school entities answered the survey. The current response rate was obtained after an intensive follow-up of invited schools to improve the response rate as much as possible.

The survey covered several topics. Items regarding SSE activities were included, such as the extent to which parents and students are involved in SSE activities, and the extent to which the driving factors discussed above are in place in the school under consideration. Survey items were developed in a Likert-scale design that aimed to capture the extent to which respondents agreed with a statement. In order to provide their answer, respondents were provided with answering options ranging from one (totally disagree) to five (totally agree).

The instrument was carefully translated and adapted where necessary, so that it fitted the context in which the survey was administered, without losing its comparability across participating countries. The survey was piloted in each participating country by employing cognitive interviewing (Madans, Miller, Maitland, & Willis, 2011; Willis, 2005). Final adjustments were made in terms of finding the most suitable word or description with regard to an item. Table 2 provides an overview of the scales that are included in the study, with an example item. It also

Table 2
Scales, scale statistics and example items.

Construct	Number of items	Cronbach's α	Example item
Involvement			
Parent voice	11	.95	To what extent do you agree with the statement that parents are involved in analysing data and making judgements in SSE.
Student voice	11	.94	To what extent do you agree with the statement that students are involved in deciding on the focus (or foci) of SSE.
Drivers at the individual level			
Affective attitude	6	.73	I am enthusiastic about the involvement of students in SSE activities.
Cognitive attitude	4	.71	I am convinced that including student voice in SSE is valuable in developing our school improvement policy.
Subjective norms	6	.61	I feel obliged to include student voice in SSE activities.
Self-efficacy	6	.84	I feel competent to include parent's voice in the SSE process.
Drivers at the system or organisational level			
External regulation	3	.80	There is a clearly defined legislative framework that stipulates the involvement of students and parents in SSE procedures.
External support	3	.78	This school has the availability of external support (e.g., support service, consultant, facilitator) to help in involving parents and students in SSE.
CPD	4	.88	CPD programs are available to enhance principal and teacher competencies on how best to include parents and students in an SSE process.
Learning community	4	.84	The school participates in a community wherein schools can learn from each other's experiences regarding student and parent voice in SSE.
Resources	3	.82	Our school applies its resources (staff, expertise, funds, facilities, materials) in a targeted manner to involve parents/students in SSE.
Stakeholder training at school	3	.90	The school provides training for students and parents to prepare them for their involvement in SSE activities.

describes the Cronbach's alpha for each of the scales, which is an indication of the internal consistency. Considering the somewhat debated thresholds for interpreting Cronbach's alpha, the alpha for the scale 'Subjective norms' was .61 and consequently, just between the range of .60 and .70 of being acceptable (e.g. Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Spector, 1992; van Griethuijsen et al., 2015; Vaske, Beaman, & Spornarski, 2017). Alphas for all other scales were considered to be at least of sufficient and good quality and should not refrain us from proceeding with analyses.

3.2. Analyses

In the first stage, and as a response to the first research question, descriptive statistics were run on the data to give insight into how parent

and student voice are integrated into the different stages of SSE. These descriptive results are considered in terms of each of the participating countries. In order to verify whether differences in parent and student voice inclusion are significant, an ANOVA analysis was run. Consequently, a Bonferroni post hoc test was conducted, enabling us to identify differences between the individual countries.

In the second stage, explanatory analyses were run on the data. Since the data were gathered in three different education systems, the responses from schools are nested in a respective country. The nature of such data had to be taken into account in order to reduce possible error in the analyses. Therefore, hierarchical multi-level modelling was applied in the analyses. Linear mixed-effect models were run using the R-package 'lme4' (Bates, Mächler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015).

4. Results

The first section of the results focuses on answering the first research question as to the extent to which parents and students are involved in SSE activities according to the school management teams in Flanders, Ireland, and Portugal. The second section reports on explanatory analyses that address the second research question that aims to identify what drivers explain any variance in parent and student involvement across Flanders, Ireland, and Portugal.

4.1. Level of parent and student involvement in SSE and its drivers

Across all the participating countries, the respondents are not very positive about the involvement of parents in SSE activities (see Table 3). The Flemish respondents are fairly unanimous (SD = .78) and score on average 2.48 on a five-point Likert-scale. The average score for Ireland was even lower at 2.14, and the respondents were also largely unanimous in their reporting. This is statistically significantly lower than the Flemish and Portuguese averages. Portugal has the highest average score for parental involvement (M = 3.08), but the respondents were less unanimous than in other countries (SD = 1.14). The differences found between the Portuguese average and these of Flanders and Ireland are also statistically significant.

Regarding the involvement of students, both Flanders and Ireland reported higher average scores compared to the scores for parental involvement, with a respective average of 2.81 and 2.49. Here again, respondents were fairly unanimous in their responses. Remarkably, Portugal has a lower score for student involvement compared to parental involvement (M = 2.82). The Irish average for student involvement is significantly lower compared to the Flemish and Portuguese averages. The Flemish and Portuguese averages are not statistically significantly different from each other.

The descriptive results for drivers at an individual level can be found in Table 4. The results show that the affective attitude of school management team members regarding the inclusion of student voice in SSE

Table 3
Descriptive statistics for parental and student involvement in SSE.

	Mean	Standard deviation	Significant differences with countries ($p < .05$)
Parental involvement	2.53	.97	
Flanders	2.48	.78	IRL-PT
Ireland	2.14	.75	BFL-PT
Portugal	3.08	1.14	BFL-IRL
Student involvement	2.69	.94	
Flanders	2.81	.84	IRL
Ireland	2.49	.78	BFL-PT
Portugal	2.82	1.15	IRL

Note: BFL = Flanders (Belgium); IRL = Ireland; PT = Portugal.

Table 4
Descriptive statistics for drivers at an individual level.

	Mean	Standard deviation	Significant differences with countries ($p < .05$)
Affective attitude towards student voice	4.27	.57	
Flanders	4.19	.55	
Ireland	4.36	.54	
Portugal	4.26	.62	
Affective attitude towards parent voice	3.96	.62	
Flanders	3.85	.53	
Ireland	3.97	.67	
Portugal	4.06	.63	
Cognitive attitude towards student voice	4.35	.59	
Flanders	4.27	.53	
Ireland	4.35	.55	
Portugal	4.43	.68	
Cognitive attitude towards parent voice	4.08	.61	
Flanders	4.00	.53	PT
Ireland	4.00	.62	PT
Portugal	4.25	.64	BFL-IRL
Subjective norms towards student voice	3.67	.58	
Flanders	3.45	.54	IRL-PT
Ireland	3.74	.58	BFL
Portugal	3.78	.55	BFL
Subjective norms towards parent voice	3.59	.54	
Flanders	3.38	.51	IRL-PT
Ireland	3.67	.50	BFL
Portugal	3.68	.55	BFL
Self-efficacy towards student voice	3.65	.74	
Flanders	3.34	.67	IRL-PT
Ireland	3.78	.68	BFL
Portugal	3.78	.80	BFL
Self-efficacy towards parent voice	3.14	.41	
Flanders	3.13	.38	
Ireland	3.08	.29	PT
Portugal	3.23	.51	IRL

Note: BFL = Flanders (Belgium); IRL = Ireland; PT = Portugal.

activities is relatively positive across all the participating countries ($M = 4.27$). This means that respondents are enthusiastic or experience positive feelings about involving students in SSE processes. This average score for the affective attitude of school management team members is slightly lower when it comes to the inclusion of the parental voice in SSE activities ($M = 3.96$) across all the participating countries. Between the participating countries, no statistically significant differences are found regarding the scores for the affective attitude regarding parent and student voice.

In addition to the affective dimension, the cognitive dimension of attitudes towards the inclusion of parents and students in SSE is also surveyed. Findings show that, for the inclusion of students as well as the inclusion of parents, the average scores across the participating countries are rather high (resp. 4.35 and 4.08). This demonstrates that respondents indeed see added value in involving students and parents in SSE activities. The cognitive attitude of respondents towards the inclusion of parent voice is statistically significantly higher in the case of Portugal compared to Flanders and Ireland.

Asking respondents about feelings with regard to social pressure to include students and parents in SSE activities, responses are rather moderate. Respondents across Flanders, Ireland and Portugal report an average score of 3.67 when it comes to including student voice. Regarding the inclusion of parent voice, the respondents indicate a slightly lower feeling when it comes to external pressure ($M = 3.59$). Here, Flemish respondents score significantly lower than Irish and Portuguese respondents, in terms of including both parent and student

voice.

Finally, the respondents indicated the extent to which they feel able to succeed, referred to as self-efficacy, in including student and parent voice in the SSE process. Regarding the involvement of students, school management team members are only moderately positive. Across the participating countries, an average score of 3.65 was reported. Of all drivers at an individual level, the self-efficacy of respondents towards the inclusion of student voice in SSE has the highest standard deviation ($SD = .74$), which means that respondents, irrespective of country, are slightly more divided on this issue. The Flemish respondents score statistically significantly lower than their Irish and Portuguese counterparts. However, the respondents' self-efficacy is lower when it comes to the involvement of parents. Across the participating countries, the average score is 3.14, and respondents are unanimous about this ($SD = .41$). However, the scores for Ireland and Portugal are statistically significantly different, but no significant differences are found with regard to Flanders.

Next to drivers at an individual level, this study also focused on factors at a system and organisational level that can contribute to the involvement of stakeholders in SSE activities (see Table 5).

Table 5 shows how respondents across and within countries answered with regard to system and organisational drivers for stakeholder involvement. The first aspect relates to external regulation, which indicates whether there are policies in place that encourage the inclusion of parents and students in SSE. Flanders has the lowest average score ($M = 3.03$) of the countries included in the study, with Irish respondents agreeing to a higher extent that there are regulations in place which stipulate the involvement of stakeholders in SSE ($M = 3.77$). The Irish respondents are also quite unanimous in their responses ($SD = .58$). The mean scores for all the participating countries are statistically significantly different. Across all the participating countries, the average score for external regulation ($M = 3.48$) is the highest of all drivers at the system and organisational level.

Respondents across all countries are rather neutral with regard to the availability of external support for the involvement of stakeholders in SSE activities ($M = 2.99$). This refers to both the availability of external instruments and tools and the support of critical friends or facilitators during the process of SSE. The Flemish and Portuguese respondents

Table 5
Descriptive statistics for drivers at the organisational or system level.

	Mean	Standard deviation	Significant differences with countries ($p < .05$)
External regulation	3.48	.80	
Flanders	3.03	.73	IRL-PT
Ireland	3.77	.58	BFL-PT
Portugal	3.49	.91	BFL-IRL
External support	2.99	.97	
Flanders	2.81	.86	IRL
Ireland	3.23	.90	BFL-PT
Portugal	2.89	1.07	IRL
CPD	2.90	.93	
Flanders	3.12	.71	IRL
Ireland	2.78	.88	BFL
Portugal	2.86	1.10	
Learning community	2.94	.98	
Flanders	2.99	1.10	
Ireland	3.05	.78	
Portugal	2.76	1.06	
Resources	3.43	.85	
Flanders	3.22	.77	PT
Ireland	3.27	.78	PT
Portugal	3.81	.88	BFL-IRL
Stakeholder training at school	2.10	.85	
Flanders	1.99	.76	
Ireland	2.07	.72	
Portugal	2.25	1.05	

Note: BFL = Flanders (Belgium); IRL = Ireland; PT = Portugal.

score lowest (with respective averages of 2.81 and 2.89). Ireland has a slightly higher, but statistically significantly higher, average score of 3.23.

When it comes to CPD programmes and stakeholder involvement, the respondents are rather neutral. This includes the extent to which CPD programmes are available and the extent to which special attention is paid to enhancing principals' and teachers' competencies in the involvement of stakeholders in SSE activities. Across the three participating jurisdictions, there is an average score of 2.90. In Flanders, the respondents are most positive about this aspect (M = 3.12), with respondents being mostly unanimous (SD = .71) compared to those in Ireland and Portugal. Only the difference between the Flemish average score is statistically significant compared to the Irish average.

Also, regarding the existence of professional learning communities, the respondents score rather neutrally. Across all countries, an average score of 2.94 is awarded by respondents with regard to the extent to which ideas are exchanged on the involvement of stakeholders in SSE. The respondents were asked to consider both the exchange of ideas within the school, as well as if the school were taking part in a community outside the school where such an exchange could take place. Flanders and Portugal have the lowest average scores (resp. 2.99 and 2.76), although there is no statistically significant difference with the Irish score. The Flemish and Portuguese respondents were somewhat divided, with a respective standard deviation of 1.10 and 1.06, while the Irish respondents score more unanimously (M = 3.02; SD = .76).

Regarding resources, which entail staff, facilities or materials being available in order to stimulate the involvement of stakeholders, respondents are slightly positive across all three participating countries (M = 3.43; SD = .85). This also refers to the allocation of time in order to involve parents and students in SSE processes. Portugal has the highest average score (M = 3.81), which is statistically significantly higher than the average for Flanders and Ireland.

The training of parents and students within schools regarding SSE is not common practice according to the respondents from each country (M = 2.10). This seems to indicate that if schools are granting a role to parents and students in terms of SSE, they are not preparing these stakeholders to carry out this role. Regarding this driver, Flanders has the lowest average score (M = 1.99), while the highest average score is found among the Portuguese respondents (M = 2.25) although these differences are not statistically significant.

Table 6
Random and fixed effects for the inclusion of student and parent voice in SSE.

Variables	Student voice				Parent voice			
	Variance	Estimate	Std. Err.	p-value	Variance	Estimate	Std. Err.	p-value
<i>Random effects</i>								
Country	.075				.203			
Residual	.671				.571			
	ICC = 10.05 %				ICC = 26.23 %			
<i>Fixed effects</i>								
Intercept		.037	.166			.017	.264	
<i>Individual level</i>								
Affective attitude		.046	.090			.049	.083	
Cognitive attitude		-.004	.089			-.048	.084	
Subjective norms		.119	.060	*		.042	.056	
Self-efficacy		.011	.065			-.025	.048	
<i>System/organisation level</i>								
External regulation		.118	.066			.177	.063	**
External support		.043	.067			.131	.061	*
CPD		.032	.065			.005	.061	
Learning community		.054	.070			.019	.065	
Resources		.266	.071	***		.305	.064	***
Stakeholder training		.236	.068	***		.192	.062	**

Note: *** = p < .001; ** = p < .01; * = p < .05.

4.2. Effect of drivers for parental and student involvement in SSE

Our second research question studies the extent to which drivers can explain the inclusion of parent and student voice in SSE at an individual, system, and organisational level across countries. Table 6 reports on this question, where the left-hand side displays the explanatory results on the inclusion of students, and the right-hand side of the table the inclusion of parents.

The results of the multilevel regression model (see the left part of Table 6) indicate that differences in the extent to which students are involved in SSE are explained by country ($\sigma = .075$). 10.05 % of the variance between countries with regard to the involvement of students in SSE activities is explained by the country in which the respondents are situated. The table also shows the drivers at an individual, system, and organisational level to be fixed effects.

At an individual level, the results show that only the extent to which respondents feel an external pressure to include student voice in SSE, referred to as subjective norms, is statistically significant (Est. = .119). The more respondents feel external pressure, the more they indicate that students are indeed given a role throughout the SSE process. No statistically significant relationship is found between the respondents' affective and cognitive attitudes. Nor is a relation was found between the respondents self-reported self-efficacy to engage with students in SSE, and the actual reported involvement of students in SSE activities.

At the system and organisational level, depending on the extent to which external regulation is in place, external support is available, CPD focusses on the inclusion of stakeholders, or the extent to which there is a professional learning community regarding the inclusion of student voice are not statistically significant explanatory variables for the involvement of students in SSE in the model. However, the extent to which resources such as staff, instruments, time, or facilities are allocated in a school is found to be statistically significant (Est. = .266). This indicates that, in line with the literature on SSE, the more resources that are provided, the more schools are involving students in their SSE process. The more respondents indicate that their school is indeed providing some form of training in terms of supporting a role for stakeholders in SSE, the more they report that students are involved in SSE processes. Stakeholder training is a statistically significant explanatory variable (Est. = .236).

The right-hand side of Table 6 reports on the findings regarding the explanatory model on the inclusion of parent voice in SSE. The variance estimation for each country points to the fact that there are indeed

differences between countries in the extent to which they include parent voice in SSE activities ($\sigma = .203$). Compared to student voice, a higher proportion of the variance in parent voice inclusion is explained by differences between countries (ICC = 26.23 %).

Fixed effects are the explanatory variables that are included in the model. None of the explanatory variables at an individual level is found to be statistically significantly related to the extent to which parents are involved in SSE processes.

At the system and organisational level, the results show that external regulation is found to have a positive and statistically significant relationship with regard to the inclusion of parent voice in SSE (Est. = .177). The more that external regulation stipulates that stakeholders need to be included, the more it is reported by our respondents that parents indeed have a prominent place in the SSE process. Furthermore, the availability of external support is found to have a statistically significant relationship with the actual involvement of parents in SSE activities (Est. = .131). The extent to which CPD is focusing on the inclusion of parents in SSE does not statistically explain any significant differences among respondents on the inclusion of parent voice in SSE processes. Results also show that there is no statistically significant relationship between the existence of a learning community regarding the inclusion of stakeholders in SSE and the actual participation of parents in the schools' SSE processes. The extent to which resources are allocated to involve parents by the school has a statistically significant relationship with the actual reported involvement of parents in SSE (Est. = .305). According to the respondents, the more a school allocates time, staff, materials, or facilities in order to enable the involvement of parents, the more parent involvement happens. Regarding stakeholder training in a school, there is a positive statistically significant relationship with the extent to which parents are included in SSE (Est. = .192). According to the respondents, the more training for stakeholders is provided at school; the more parents are involved throughout an SSE process.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Schools are increasingly expected to conduct processes of self-evaluation (OECD, 2013), and the involvement of stakeholders in such processes is advocated from a number of different perspectives. However, the literature has pointed out that many challenges may jeopardise the involvement of parents and students, although they are considered to be primary stakeholders in education. The objective of this study is twofold. First, this study aims to quantify to what extent stakeholders are involved in school self-evaluation processes across Flanders (Belgium), Portugal and Ireland. Next, the study aims to explain differences in the involvement of parents and students by drivers at the organisational or system-level and at the individual level. To discover answers to these questions, a survey was administered to over 300 school management team members in the countries involved in the project. The research was perceptual in that what was asked, and what is reported are the perceptions of school leaders in these countries regarding the extent to which parents and students are involved in SSE and how these leaders feel about involving them. Secondly, the research set out to discover the more important drivers or factors in achieving student and parental involvement in SSE, even in systems where such involvement is either required by law or strongly urged upon by schools. The results indicate that among the school leaders surveyed, positivity around the involvement of parents and students is lukewarm at best. In Portugal, the average support for the inclusion of parent voice is highest, but this perception is still rather neutral. The score for Flanders and Ireland is statistically significantly lower.

In particular, the inclusion of parents seems to be less well received in the SSE process compared to the inclusion of student voice. This finding tends to confirm research on parent participation which indicates that there are many challenges that threaten intensive and meaningful participation of parents in a range of school activities. Parents are alleged to lack sufficient time, for example, to engage with

school activities, even to the extent of helping their children with homework, or it is presumed that they lack the necessary resources to make their voice heard (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Tveit, 2009). The fact that Portugal scores significantly higher than Flanders and Ireland might be partly explained by the fact that the inclusion of parents in management decisions is already deeply rooted in the system, as this regulation was in place as early as 1974 (Figueiredo et al., 2017). In consequence, parental inclusion could also have been more easily transferred to the SSE processes.

Regarding student voice in SSE, the averages for Flanders and Ireland are slightly higher, but these perceptions still tend toward the neutral. The student councils that are commonly a feature in schools in these countries may foster school management team members' feelings of students being given a voice, while, in reality, the role of these councils tend to be limited to discussing practical or organisational issues (Fleming, 2015). Although the installation of a student council is not mandatory in Ireland, schools are instructed to involve stakeholders, including students, throughout the SSE process. Since this requirement regarding SSE in the Irish system was only introduced in 2012, schools have been struggling with the full implementation because of a lack of resources and expertise (O'Brien, McNamara, O'Hara, & Brown, 2017). This might also be the case for the meaningful inclusion of parent and student voice in SSE activities across the participating countries.

The explanatory results indicate that the drivers at an individual level for including parents and students, posited in the conceptual framework, hardly have a significant impact on the inclusion of a parent and student voice in SSEs. The challenges that come with the aspiration to include the parent and student voice might be of such a nature that they exceed the capacity of an individual school leader to overcome them. For instance, school management team members may see the added value of including parents and students in SSEs, but if the problem is that these stakeholders are not perceived to have the necessary expertise or know-how to participate, this is not easily resolved by the action of one individual such as the principal. These results seem to indicate that this needs to be dealt with at a more organisational or system level.

This finding is also confirmed by the explanatory model in which drivers for the inclusion of stakeholder voices in SSEs at an organisational or system level, were included. In particular, drivers at an organisational level explain differences in the extent to which parents and students are included in SSE activities. The extent to which resources are allocated to involve stakeholders, and the extent to which training for stakeholders is provided at school, are found to predict the inclusion of parents and students in SSE processes. In explaining differences in the inclusion of parents in particular, the power of external regulation and external support is found to be statistically significant, in addition to the allocation of resources and the provision of training at the school level for stakeholders.

The results from the study are thought-provoking and feed into the discussion about the role stakeholders can and/or should play in SSE processes. While this study's first aim was to understand what factors contribute to the implementation of stakeholder voice in SSE, the found differences between countries also point to the existence of reluctance towards the inclusion of different stakeholders in SSE. For several reasons, the idea of stakeholder involvement can be thought of as a desirable good to pursue, but the question to what extent schools in different educational contexts currently support this idea emerges. It coincides with the question as to what extent these two stakeholder groups can and should both play an evenly prominent role, and whether they should take a (leading) role in each of the stages of an SSE process (Department of Education & Skills, 2012).

It can be argued that, given the chosen focus of an SSE process, one stakeholder group can have a more prominent role over another. This implies that the ladder of stakeholder involvement (Fletcher, 2005) is not a static feature. Different stakeholder groups can climb or descend the ladder to different levels for different topics. The involvement of

stakeholders in SSE is therefore not viewed upon as an either-or issue, but rather as a continuum. According to the situation of a specific school, an assured degree of involvement of well-chosen stakeholders in SSEs can be considered as valuable (Gordon & Seashore Louis, 2009). Their involvement creates opportunities for enhancing teachers' openness towards other perspectives for the purpose of school improvement (Harvey, 2015). Stakeholders' involvement could also be a strength when it comes to the use of SSE results when a broader support is created by the inclusion of different stakeholders (Taut, 2008). Next to strengths and opportunities, stakeholder involvement however also yields weaknesses or threats. Including stakeholders such as parents and students could be perceived as an extra layer of accountability (Brown et al., 2020). This can generate feelings of resistance among staff members which can jeopardise other potentially valuable intentions. A potential weakness is that despite all efforts, actual response to calls for involvement of parents and students turns out to be very limited. Research demonstrated that a lower level of involvement of parents and students can also be the result of a lack of time or capacity to take up a role in SSEs, and consequently leave it 'to the experts' (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Tveit, 2009).

Future research has to explore this issue in a more refined way by not only examining the actual level of participation of stakeholder groups, but also by identifying to what extent participation is desirable, what barriers are blocking a more profound involvement in SSE and how differences within the student or parent body of a school could be explained.

The significance of this study for policymakers and practitioners in education, lies in the finding that, given effective policy, regulation, resources and supports an impact can be realised with regard to the inclusion of parents and students in SSE. Specifically, regarding the inclusion of parents, an external impetus seems to be essential when it comes to fostering significant roles and levels of involvement in SSE activities. Maybe, this external impetus is needed to overcome a restraint regarding stakeholder involvement in SSE as this could be perceived by school staff as an extra layer of accountability (Brown et al., 2020). External regulation, but also the provision of sufficient external support, is critical. This strongly confirms recent research on SSE which trenchantly argues that a model in which an external facilitator or 'critical friend' is utilised, is key to the effective implementation of SSE (Eurydice, 2015; O'Brien et al., 2017). In addition, this research strongly suggests that, for both the inclusion of parent and student voice, providing resources and training at the school level for stakeholders should be considered as absolutely necessary measures to foster their participation in SSE processes. In the past decades there was a strong emphasis on building capacity among school leaders and teachers to anticipate the challenges to implement SSE processes in schools (McNamara, O'Hara, Lisi, & Davidsdottir, 2011; O'Brien et al., 2017; O'Brien, McNamara, & O'Hara, 2015). Meeting the needs of school staff and the stakeholder groups themselves, requires a further focus on tools that can be used by the field. The development of hands-on materials that can be used by schools during stakeholder training sessions would be beneficial for the more effective and valuable participation of parents and students in SSE.

In addition, for the academic community, this study generates significant findings that might guide future research. This is the first large-scale study into the inclusion of parent and student voice in SSE activities across education systems. Although the study makes use of advanced statistics to model the nested data structure in an appropriate way, future research could focus further on aspects that might explain differences between the different education systems. For instance, cultural differences that disentangle parent-school or student-school relationships, and the role of trust therein, might be considered (Adams & Christenson, 2000). It must be acknowledged that cross-national or cross-cultural studies face the challenge of grasping such complex concepts in different contexts. A well underpinned and transparent conceptualisation and operationalisation of concepts under scrutiny is

crucial to ensure valid conclusions drawn from the data (e.g., Van de Vijver & Leung, 2021).

At the same time it should be emphasized that a qualitative approach, with more in-depth and richer information, could also enhance the understanding of complex SSE-phenomena in different contexts (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). A qualitative approach, for example, by means of case studies in different jurisdictions could shed light on how stakeholder voice is embedded in the implementation of SSE. This can contribute to our understanding of the found differences between jurisdictions. Next, while this study identified the perspective of school management team members regarding parent and student voice in SSE, examining how parents and students view their role in these SSE activities would be the next promising step in disentangling the processes of distributed evaluation and planning in schools.

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