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## **An Evaluation of the Impact of the Publication of School Performance Indicators in the Netherlands**

Frans J.G. Janssens\*  
*University of Twente,  
The Netherlands*

### **Abstract**

Since the mid 1990s, schools are on the website of the Netherlands' Education Inspectorate. The information pertains to the overall performance of schools. The most important objective of making school performance public is to enable third parties to inform themselves about the quality of the education a Dutch school provides.

This article gives an overview of research findings on the effects and side effects of public information on school performance on parents, schools and the provider of this information; the Dutch Education Inspectorate. Based on the research literature consulted, it must be concluded that the publication of school performance indicators has little or no influence on the choice of schools by Dutch parents and pupils or on their active involvement with the quality of education. This does not mean that it is incorrect to assume that the publication of school performance indicators stimulates school improvement, since it seems to be the schools themselves that are the primary "users" of this information. At the same time, there is the hidden danger here that schools will act strategically to ensure that they appear in the best light possible "on the card". There are also indications that inspectors too, tend to display strategic behaviour in an attempt to come up with the best possible assessments of education quality.

**Keywords:** School Report Cards, Performance Indicators, School Quality, School Choice

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\* Frans J.G. Janssens is Professor of School Inspections and Public Accountability, Faculty of Behavioural Sciences, Department of Educational Organisation and Management, University of Twente, PO Box 217, NL7500AE Enschede, The Netherlands; E-Mail: F.J.G.Janssens@utwente.nl

## **Introduction**

Since the mid 1990s, the Dutch Education Inspectorate has published reports on its assessments of the quality of individual schools. This began in 1998 via a school report card for secondary education, followed by the publication of inspection reports in 2000. In 2003, in order to make these reports more accessible to non-teachers, the Inspectorate decided to publish a school report card for all schools in the Netherlands. These cards can be seen as a popular summary of the available inspection reports that are primarily aimed at parents and students. The information on these cards pertains to the overall performance of schools expressed in scores attained for teaching quality, curriculum, school climate and learning results. Prior to 1997, school inspection reports and other inspection data were not available to the public; they were, in principle, only meant for the schools concerned and their school boards.

Outside pressure to publish this information came about in 1996, due to a request from the daily newspaper *Trouw* that was based on the *Wet Openbaarheid Bestuur* [Open Government Act]. *Trouw* used the examination and pupil transfer data to compile an overview in which all schools were given a report score. In 1997, on the basis of these scores, the first in an annual series of “league tables” for secondary schools appeared (see Dijkstra, Karsten, Veenstra, & Visscher, 2001; Meijer, 2004; Canton & Webbink, 2004; Meijer, Homburg & Bekkers, 2007). Elsevier also publishes information annually about the quality of secondary schools and all Dutch higher professional education-level and university-level study programmes.

It should be clear that it was the media that took the initiative in the Netherlands to publish data on the quality of schools – not the government, the schools themselves nor the recipients of education. When, for that matter, the *Trouw* newspaper first published Inspectorate data in 1997, it provoked a heated debate in the Netherlands, mainly between the schools whose data had been made public and a scientist who had requested *Trouw* to draw up a league table based on the Inspectorate data. The debate focused on the fairness of the formula used to rank schools, the limited scope of the data used to attain that ranking and the limitations of the Inspectorate data. *Trouw* scores by school track are based on several objective quality indicators, such as the average grades in final centralized exams of the students, the percentage of students who obtain a diploma without delay, the percentage students who end up in a lower or higher school track than initially expected and some other quality indicators that differed from year to year. In order to obtain an indicator for value added by schools, the ‘gross’ quality score that follows from combining the three measures is corrected for the percentage of students with low parental income and from immigrant neighbourhoods. The exact control variables *Trouw* used changed from year to year, just as the weights attached to the quality indicators and the boundary values for the quality categories.

The said data only concerned the exam results of the secondary schools as well as data on transfers and numbers leaving, whereas the discussants would have preferred to include data on, for example, school climate and the quality of lessons. Furthermore, the data to be provided by the Inspectorate contained inaccuracies, as a result of which several schools contested their position in the

ranking. In addition, the discussants claimed that the formula employed and the limitations of the Inspectorate data made insufficient allowances for difficult student populations, while in their opinion schools with a high proportion of ethnic minority students were put at a disadvantage.

As a result of the discussion about the Trouw publication in 1997, the government decided from then on to publish the data on each school itself in the form of a so-called “school report card” (published for the first time in September 1998). The Dutch government felt that this would provide a better safeguard for the reliability of data on schools. Since then, the Inspectorate has been publishing data on schools in the form of public school report cards. It still provides the basic data Trouw and Elsevier use to publish their annual league tables.

This situation was formalised in the *Wet op het Onderwijstoezicht* [Education Supervision Act], which took effect on 1 September 2002 and is expressly based on the idea that parents, pupils, participants and students have a need for independent information concerning the quality of schools. Via daily newspapers and weeklies and via the web site of the Dutch Education Inspectorate, information on all sectors of Dutch education is now available concerning the quality of schools, sometimes even in the form of league tables.

This article gives a description of the characteristics of the Dutch School Report Card for primary and secondary schools, as published by the Dutch Education Inspectorate, followed by an evaluation of its impact on Dutch parents, schools and the Inspectorate itself. This evaluation is based on available research literature investigating the effects of the publication of school performance indicators in the Netherlands. The article closes with a number of conclusions and recommendations on the impact of school report cards.

### **The Dutch School Report Card**

Outside the Netherlands, considerable research has been conducted into the requirements that should be set for school report cards or overviews with performance indicators. The Inspectorate has made every effort to take these requirements into account in the development of school report cards for primary and secondary schools (see Figure 1 for an example for primary schools). Foreign research literature (Janssens & Visscher, 2004; Cuttance & Stokes, 2000; Hoevenagel, 2007) shows that the following requirements should be set in this regard.

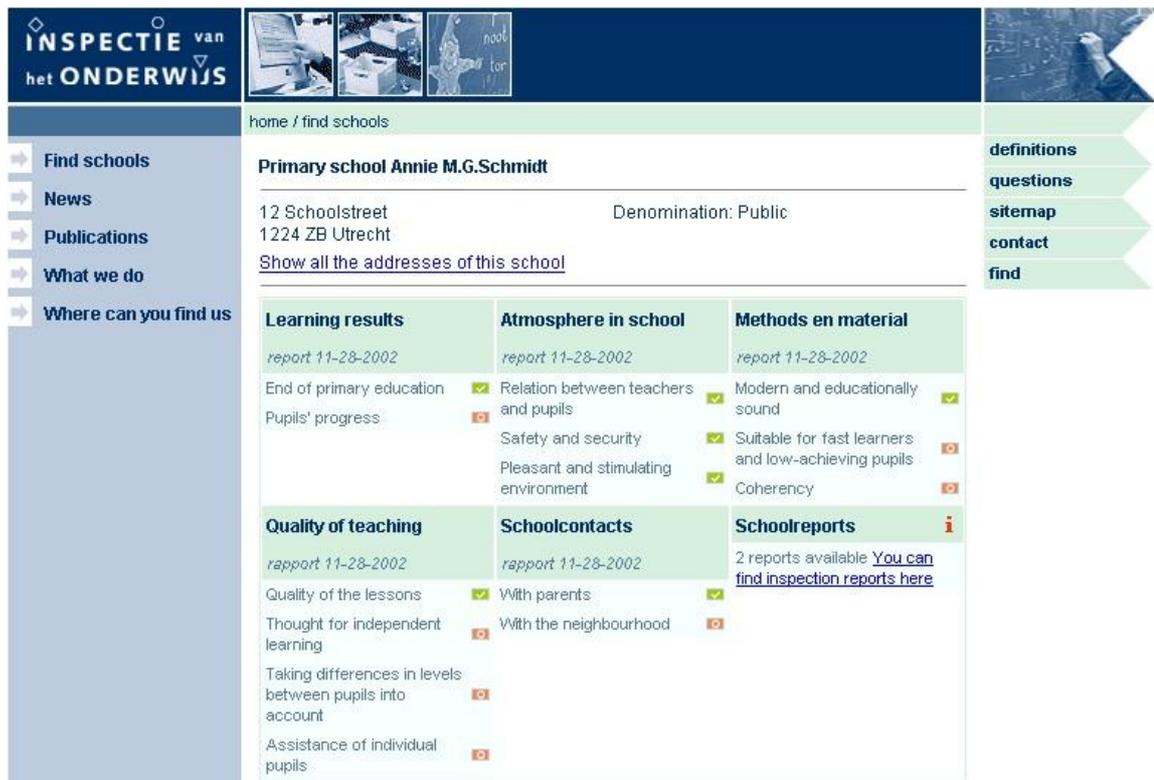


Figure 1: Example of a School Report Card for a Dutch primary school

### Clear definition of the target group

The main question underpinning the publication of data on schools is: for whom is this data intended? Although a school report card can be interesting for several target groups, it is impossible to serve all of these groups in an equal manner. So the best thing to do is to make a clear choice (A-Plus Communications, 1999). This has consequences for the content of the data and its accessibility. If these data are intended for parents and participants, then the contents of a school report card should primarily be adapted to their information needs: ‘You’re better off reporting results on the public’s terms, not your own’ (A-Plus Communications, 1999). The Dutch school report cards are primarily intended for parents and pupils/students.

### Broad accessibility

Not only should the contents be adapted to the target group, the accessibility of the information is also an important factor. The best solution is to make these cards available at different locations and in different ways: in banks, public buildings, even in supermarkets and on the Internet (A-Plus Communications, 1999; Janssens & Visscher, 2004; Van Bijlert & Albeda, 2002).

For a brief pilot period, the Dutch government has made these cards available in hard copy form as well, but for economic reasons from 2002 on the

cards have only been accessible via the Education Inspectorate's web site (<http://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl/>).

### **Selection of indicators**

Firstly, an effective card requires the system with which the data is collected to be integrated, valid and reliable (Ananda & Rabinowitz, 2001; Linn, 2000). Secondly, an effective card requires the information to have significance for the public. Initially, only test and examination results were published on many cards, including in the Dutch league tables in newspapers and on the first school report cards for secondary education. However, this type of information is often difficult for parents to understand and besides, most parents prefer "soft quality data". Research has shown that only 30% of parents think that test and examination results are the most important information to provide when reporting on the quality of education (Linn, 2000; Edwards, 1999). Parents attach greater value to indicators for physical safety, the curriculum, the professional competency of teachers and the class size (Jaeger, Gomey, & Johnson, 1993; Edwards, 1999; Kerna-Schloss; 1999 McMillan, 2000; Dijkstra et al., 2001; Kordes, 2002).

Research has also shown that parents who look for information on schools in systems with school report cards are, to a high degree, influenced by the ethnic make up of the school population (Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Elacqua, 2005). The degree to which this pertains to a so-called predominantly "black school" was often used as a proxy for quality. Cards from "white schools" are studied more closely by parents than are cards from other schools. For this reason, data on the composition of the school population is not given a primary place on Dutch school report cards.

The Education Inspectorate publishes any available soft quality indicators on the school report cards. These cards allow parents to compare an individual school's performance with the national average.

### **Readability**

Research has shown that the readability of school report cards is an important factor in determining how the information is used (A-Plus Communications, 1999; Janssens & Visscher, 2004; Brown, 1999). Cards which are difficult to understand are ignored by the public (Herrington, 1993). The solution to this problem should be sought in a card with a good graphic design. The Education Inspectorate has expressly opted for a concise, graphical representation of the performances by individual schools.

### **Standards for performance indicators**

What is remarkable about the American research is that it is primarily limited to the accessibility of school report cards and to people's opinions about the preferred content of these cards. Little attention is given to the quality of the data used to provide information on these cards (for an exception, see: Linn, 2001), nor is attention given to the requirements that should be set for the indicators to be published. However, in a Dutch publication *Het Oog der Natie* ([Eye of the

Nation] (Dijkstra et al., 2001), Visscher, Dijkstra, Kartsen, and Veenstra (2001) formulate thirteen standards that published school performance indicators should meet in their opinion. The thirteen standards fall into three categories: standards focused on the accuracy, usefulness and precision of the publications.

A study conducted by Janssens and Visscher (2004) into the degree to which the Dutch school report card (see Figure 1) for primary education meets these thirteen standards shows that only three of the thirteen standards are met. This means that the Dutch school report card does not even meet seven of the thirteen standards to any “reasonable” extent. The deficiencies found are related to the standards that pertain to the accuracy and usefulness of the information. The school report card scores well only on the standards set for precision. From this point of view one can say that the Dutch School Report Card is, technically seen, a failure.

## **Evaluation of the Impact of the Dutch School Report Card**

### **Method**

The publication of the Dutch report cards is not based on an explicit policy of the Dutch government. Therefore, we reconstructed the theory that underlies the aims and policy of publishing these cards. The aim of reconstructing the theory is therefore to predict the (in)effectiveness of these cards and evaluating the effects the publication of performance indicators should have on the public and the schools, and how these effects should be realized. To this end, we identify the aims and central assumptions of the (implicit) policy and use them to reconstruct its causal scheme. This process is known as the “reconstruction of the programme theory” (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Birkmayer & Weiss, 2000; Weiss, 2000; Leeuw, 2003).

In this evaluation, we apply approaches developed by Pawson and Tilley (1997), Weiss (2000) and Leeuw (2003). These approaches are characterised by the evaluation of programme theory by gaining insight into the acceptability and empirical tenability of the ideas or assumptions and the validity of the argumentation within a programme theory. The more “suitable” and “evidence-based” the assumptions are, the greater the chance that the programme theory will work in practice. This makes it possible to assess whether a policy programme will be able to generate the intended effects (for other examples, see Leeuw, 2003; Ehren, Leeuw & Scheerens, 2005; Janssens & De Wolf, 2009).

### *Formulating assumptions*

The method through which information is translated into assumptions consists of the following steps (Leeuw, 2003, p.7):

Identify the social and behavioral mechanisms that are expected to solve the problem; search formal and informal documents for statements indicating the necessity of solving the social, organizational, or policy problem in question, the goals of the proposed policy or program, and how they are to be achieved. These latter statements refer to mechanisms that drive the policies or programs and are believed to make them effective. Statements having the

following form are especially relevant for detecting these mechanisms:

It is evident that x will work.

In our opinion, the best way to address this problem is to . . .

The only way to solve this problem is to . . .

Our institution's x years of experience tell us that . . .

Compile a survey of these statements and link the mechanisms to the goals of the program under review.

Reformulate the statements into conditional "if-then" propositions or propositions of a similar structure (e.g., "the more x, the less y").

Search for warrants that will identify disconnects in or among different propositions using argumentation analysis. Argumentation analysis refers to a model for analyzing chains of arguments and helps to reconstruct and "fill in" argumentations. A central concept is the warrant, which is the "because" part of an argument. A warrant says that B follows from A because of a (generally) accepted principle. For example, "the organization's performance will not improve next year" follows from "the performance of this organization has not improved during the past 5 years" because of the principle that past performance is the best predictor of future performance. The "because" part of such an argument is often left implicit, with the consequence that warrants must be inferred by the person performing the analysis.

Reformulate these warrants in terms of conditional "if-then" (or similar) propositions and draw a chart of the (mostly causal) links (see figure 2).

### *Aim and Assumptions*

The most important objective of making school performance public is to enable third parties to inform themselves about the quality of the education a school provides (Dijkstra et al., 2001; Meijer, 2004; Janssens, 2005; Ehren, 2006). The assumption is that this enables a kind of public control and will help to achieve the following functions:

Giving an account to interest groups concerning the efficiency and effectiveness of public funds spending.

The interest groups referred to here are the government and those that are directly involved, i.e., parents, other schools and the business sector. Because the Education Supervision Act (ESA) of 2002 stipulates that the Inspectorate shall publish its assessments of schools (ESA, Article 21, paragraph 1), it can be deduced that the Dutch government thereby gives an account of the school performance ascertained by the Education Inspectorate. This is what we call 'accountability' (Canton & Webbink, 2004). By making inspection reports and the school report cards based on them, available to the public an accountability requirement is fulfilled at the government level (Wolthuis, 2006; Janssens, 2005). This enables the public to exercise a type of social control over the schools, thus shoring up their confidence in the education being provided (Meijer, 2004).

Supporting school choice and the involvement of parents and pupils in the quality policy of schools

In 1970, Albert Hirschman published an influential book in which he unites the ideas of economists on the buying behaviour of consumers – when consumers are dissatisfied, they have the option of going to a different company – with the ideas of political scientists concerning protest as a form of influence. Hirschman (1970) states that exit (“voting with the feet”) and voice (“criticizing or complaining”) are different responses from members of the public to an organization that is temporarily functioning at a substandard level. According to Meijer (2004), “exit”, “entrance” and “voice” respectively can be recognised by the management of organizations, such as schools, as signals and in this way can be the impetus for improving the level of performance. It should be said here that “exit/entrance” is a signal without content, while “voice” indicates exactly what people are criticising. The combination of “exit/entrance” and “voice” can lead to divergent effects: well functioning organisations deal with members of the public who, through “voice”, provide an impetus for improvement, while poorly functioning organizations receive little “voice” and therefore continue to decline in their performance.

An important assumption that supports the publishing of school performance is that this information enables parents and pupils to choose a (different) school on a more well-founded basis or to enter into discussion with the school on the education quality provided or preferred (Henry, 1996; Jamentz, 1998; Janssens, 2005; Ehren, 2006).

### *Programme theory*

In Figure 2, we present a causal scheme of the programme theory of the Dutch school accountability policy. The objective of this policy programme, school improvement (z), is presented in the right-hand part of the figure. The traditional means of achieving this objective is through publishing school performance indicators (x) and public control by parents and students (y). This theory is extended with a mechanism in which parents or students involve school performance indicators in their school choice and in their contacts with schools.

The scheme contains two assumptions (A1 and A2) about intended specific mechanisms for school improvement as a result of some kind of parent/student involvement: the publication of school performance indicators will enable parents and pupils to choose schools (A1) and to exercise “voice” (A2) by increasing their involvement with the school, both in order to effectively improve schools.

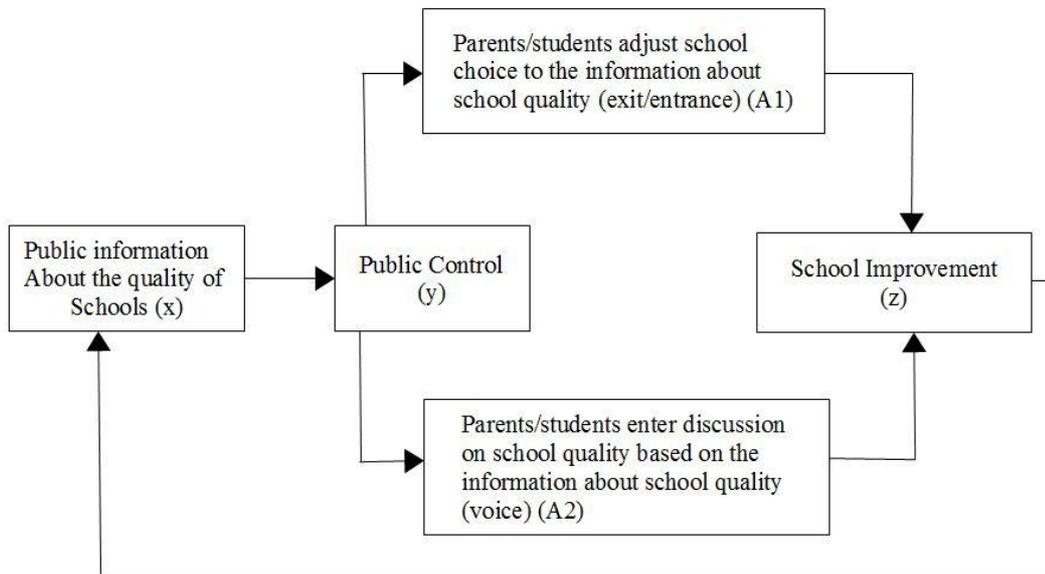


Figure 2: Causal model of public school accountability

### *Evaluation of the programme theory*

A critical evaluation of the programme theory is the last phase of the study. Results of prior research are used to analyze how consistent, complete, and realistic the two assumptions are. By doing so, the potential effects and side effects of the theory can be predicted. If prior research shows that the assumptions have a low potential of actually meeting the desired effects, a number of conclusions may follow. One of them can be to adjust the act or to use other variables in further investigation of effects from educational inspections.

In the next section, we evaluate the plausibility and empirical tenability of the assumption by comparing it with research literature.

## **Results**

### **Intended effects**

The basic assumption is that the publication of school performance indicators will enable parents and pupils to choose schools (entrance/exit) and to exercise “voice” by increasing their involvement with the school. As a result, they are given the instruments to assess the school for any strong and weak points. In this way, parents (and other stakeholders) can contribute more effectively to (improving) the schools (A1 and A2).

Yet the available research shows that the publication of school performance indicators has little effect on parents but is having an increasing effect on the schools themselves (Meijer, 2004; 2007; Janssens, 2005). Moreover,

the publication of school performance indicators not only has an effect on schools and the people directly affected, but also on the agency that publishes them (Meijer, 2004). In the Netherlands, this is the Education Inspectorate. The different effects that publication is having are discussed in greater detail below.

*School selection behaviour: entrance and exit*

Research into how parents and their children choose a school shows that the publication of school performance indicators has little impact on that choice. This applies both to parents that are choosing a school for their children for the first time (entrance) and to parents that – for whatever reason – choose a different school (exit) (Hilhorst, 2001; Karsten & Visscher, 2001; Van Bommel, 2004; Meijer, 2004; 2007; Janssens, 2005; De Wolf & Janssens, 2007; Meijer, Homburg & Bekkers, 2007; Koning & Van der Wiel, 2010). School principals are also experiencing the limited impact of publicly available school performance indicators. A large majority (70 to 80%) of the principals questioned (Emmelot, Karsten, Ledoux, and Vermeulen, 2004) think that school report cards play no appreciable role in the enrollment of new pupils, though most of the principals do think that this is useful information for parents to have when choosing a school (see also Meijer, 2007). There is not much empirical evidence to support assumption A1.

*“Voice” behaviour of parents and pupils*

Making school performance indicators available to the public does not have much influence on the “voice” behaviour of parents either. Relatively speaking, parents seldom discuss school performance indicators with schools and therefore they have little or no influence on improving schools (Meijer, 2004; Dudok, 2004; Janssens, 2005; De Wolf & Janssens, 2007; Meijer, Homburg & Bekkers, 2007). This means that there is also little empirical support for assumption A2.

Yet there are indications that the media is displaying “voice” behaviour. Both national and regional newspapers and television stations report on the performance of schools – and this does have a real influence on schools (Meijer, 2004; Janssens, 2005; De Wolf & Janssens, 2007). So there are indications that publicly available school performance indicators have an influence on the improvement of schools, though it is not through the “voice” or “exit” behaviour of parents or pupils.

**Effects of performance indicators on schools**

Referring to a study conducted by Koning and Van der Wiel (2010) into the impact of the publication of school performance indicators in the Dutch newspaper *Trouw*, and also referring to a study of English experiences with granting public access to the performance indicators of schools, Hilhorst (2001: 84) indicates that teachers and school principals are the biggest users of public information on school quality (Meijer, 2007). Research has shown that many primary school principals appreciate the objectivity of the information and are of the opinion that the information enables them to better advise parents in choosing

a secondary school. There are indications that public access to school performance indicators has positive effects on the quality of schools (Dudok, 2004; Janssens, 2005; De Wolf & Janssens, 2007; Meijer, 2007 and Meijer, Homburg & Bekkers, 2007).

Approximately one-quarter of the schools consider the school report card as one of the two leading reasons people cite for the introduction of quality assurance (Doolaard & Karstanje, 2001). Providing public access can also give school principals the needed support to push through changes in the school. The study conducted by Emmelot et al. (2004) shows that school principals consider the “encouragement of schools to improve quality” as the most important effect of publishing information on the quality of schools. Recent research conducted by Meijer (2007) confirms this. He shows that – by way of benchmarking – schools frequently consult the school report cards (of other schools), acknowledging the important role the cards play in the improvement of their schools. This is reinforced when the media gives attention to the quality of schools. Competition between schools also plays a role in this (Meijer, 2004).

Teachers also seem to be well aware of the scores on the school report card, as is shown by Waterreus (2003). He shows that in Dutch secondary education, teacher mobility is somewhat influenced by the assessments made on the school report card. Schools with good assessments on the school report card have a larger net intake of teachers. Their staff turnover is not only less than that of other secondary schools, job openings are also more easily filled by new teachers. Otherwise, the effects found are small.

### **Unintended effects**

Publication of inspection data not only affects the receiver of the message, but also the messenger (Meijer et al. 2007). As a result of active publication, a tendency has been observed among different supervisors towards the standardization of work methods. The reason for this is that publication requires not only that the information be unambiguous, but also the supervisors' method of assessment. Supervisors thus use publication in an attempt to boost the legitimacy of their actions. The publicity generated puts pressure on supervisors to make their activities and policy choices more explicit. According to Meijer et al. (2007), the Education Inspectorate has the impression that the inspectors have become more careful about passing a judgement due to this publicity. The process of forming a judgement has also become more objectified and greater attention is being given to inter-rater reliability.

Publication has also led to a further hardening and formalization of the supervision. An example of this is a school that calls in lawyers to review the draft inspection report to ascertain its legal consequences. Research has also shown that inspectors make a distinction between the inspection report itself and the oral explanation of the report. In the explanation they are sometimes more critical and clear than they are in the written report, in which they tend to “soften” or “equivocate” their judgements because they know that a highly critical public assessment could harm the school (Meijer et al. 2007, p.58).

## **Discussion**

Various authors indicate causes for the limited influence that the publication of school performance indicators has on parents and pupils (see, for instance Janssens & Visscher, 2004; Janssens, 2005; Wolthuis, 2006). The most important causes are: the accessibility of these indicators, the mismatch between the need for information and its supply and the psychological limitations of school choice.

### **Accessibility and significance of school performance indicators**

Despite the tradition in the US of publishing school performance indicators, it has been reported many times that parents and pupils there are unaware or insufficiently aware that this information exists (Janssens & Visscher, 2004). This is also true in the Netherlands. Although the website of this Inspectorate is consulted by many people, a substantial number of parents, for different reasons, have no access to this information or are not aware of its existence.

The usefulness of performance indicators to parents is also limited because “laypeople” are not always able to interpret their performance indicators in the correct manner (Veenstra, Bleker & Knuver, 2004; Janssens & Visscher, 2004; Robinson et al., 2003; Meijer, 2004). In New Zealand, parents have sat on supervisory boards for over 15 years. Research conducted there (Robinson, Ward & Timperley, 2003) has shown that the ability of parents to function as supervisors is seriously limited due to their lack of the knowledge and skills that are necessary to assess school performance indicators. These parents do not seem to be able, for example, to properly interpret the reports written by school principals about the quality of their schools (Janssens, 2005).

There is also professional criticism of the content of published performance indicators (for an extensive overview, see: McMillan, 2000) because they provide a limited and narrow picture of the quality of schools (the indicators “distort” reality). The schools also act in a strategic manner in order to score as well as possible on the performance indicators (De Wolf & Janssens, 2007). In the US, Jacob (2002) studied whether the publication of school performance indicators led to better school results and how schools react to this. He did find strong improvements in the educational achievements. He also found that schools that perform relatively poorly showed bigger improvements than other schools. Jacob discovered too that schools are acting strategically to produce a picture of school performance indicators that is rosier than they actually are. They do this, for instance, by not testing their weak pupils, by referring these pupils to special programmes and by having them repeat a year more often (Ladd & Walsh, 2002; Figlio & Getzler, 2002). In the Netherlands, such phenomena can also be observed in the administration of the Primary School Leavers Attainment Test of the National Institute for Educational Measurement [Cito] (Janssens, 2005).

### **Conflict between the need for information and its supply**

In the research literature, it is pointed out time and again that there is a mismatch between the respective preferences and norms of parents, the school, the

Education Inspectorate and the government when it comes to information about the quality of schools (Dijkstra et al, 2001; Vanhoof, 2004; Janssens & Visscher, 2004; Visscher, 2004; Meijer, 2004; Vogels, 2002). This mismatch is caused by the different views these groups have with respect to educational quality. The information that schools or the government provide on the quality of education does not correspond with the information that parents need. Parents, after all, have a greater need for indicators on “soft” rather than “hard” quality characteristics. It is these latter characteristics in particular that are often published in league tables, inspection reports or on school report cards.

With the publication of school report cards, insufficient consideration is given to the type of information process used by those consulting this information (Hurenkamp & Kremer, 2005). From research conducted among parents with respect to their involvement in the school, it seems that their role with regard to the school depends on the school career phase of their children and on the situations in which contact with the school is necessary. The preference for one role or another also depends on the background of the parents and at primary schools, preferences are different from those at secondary schools (Vogels, 2002).

A distinction can also be made between parents who are choosing a school for their child for the first time, parents that have moved house and therefore must choose a school in their new city of residence, or parents that want their child to change schools in their current city of residence. A parent that is choosing a school for his child for the first time is perhaps better served by specific information about how the lower years function, rather than general information about the school as a whole. A parent that is choosing a different primary school already knows quite a bit about schools, but could perhaps be specifically interested in the points on which the new school performs better or differently than the previous school.

### **Psychological limitations**

The limited use of public information on school performance indicators can also be traced to psychological factors, such as the manner in which the human brain works (Hoevenagel, 2007; Kenniscentrum voor Ordeningsvraagstukken [Knowledge Centre for Organisational Issues], 2007). Scientific research has shown that people do not choose rationally; that they do not need to have all the relevant information in order to come to a choice (Simon, 1979; Stigler, 1971). Furthermore, research shows that our memory is simply too limited to place all the possible choices, with their pros and cons, on a mental list inside our brain for the sake of comparison (it is even doubtful whether the brain can involve more than seven variables in any comparison). Schwartz (2004) assumes that people have a certain style when they arrive at the point of making a choice; one person appreciates having all information available so that he can make the best decision, while another person is satisfied with a limited set of basic quality characteristics.

The effect of information used for making choices is limited for two other reasons. In the first place, due to the fact that an over-abundance of options tends to paralyze consumers (Simon, 1979; Stigler, 1971; Schwartz, 2004; Hoevenagel, 2007). Laypeople should be able to compare services and products easily with respect to relevant variables. The choices that the government pushes in front of

citizens are often too complex. They require expertise that a layperson simply does not have. With respect to childcare, education and health care, laypeople do not possess the necessary expertise to properly assess the quality of the services provided.

In the second place, the effect of information used for making choices is limited by the connection that a parent has with particular institutions that were chosen at some point in the past. In childcare and in education, for example, the freedom of choice for parents is impeded by the relationships that their children have with the staff and the other children at the day care centre or school they attend. As a result, it is difficult for parents to change institutions – the psychological price of changing is simply too high (Hurenkamp & Kremer, 2005; Hoevenagel, 2007). Besides, not all parents want to be involved as a partner or participant in childcare or education. Parents do not want to jeopardize the interests of their children by getting involved in the quality of the education a school provides (Laemers, 2002; Vogels, 2002).

Despite the fact that the public only makes limited use of the publication of school performance indicators, most researchers agree that the possibilities for ensuring this information plays a larger role among parents and pupils have not yet been fully utilized. Most parents are inexperienced in the area of education and performance indicators. Perhaps the use of cards in the process of choosing a school can be supported in additional ways. The information section of the web site of the Contra Costa County of Education in Pleasant Hill, CA provides a good example of this (<http://www.cccoe.k12.ca.us/about/chose.html>). Also worth consulting in this context is the publication of The Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards & Student Testing What makes a good school? A guide for parents seeking excellence in education (Baker, Herman & Bain, s.d).

## **Conclusions**

The basic assumption underlying the impact of school report cards is that with the publication of school performance indicators, parents and pupils are given the instruments to assess schools for any strong and weak points. In this way, parents (and other stakeholders) are able to exercise influence on school improvement. However, based on the research literature consulted, it must be concluded that the publication of school performance indicators has little or no influence on the school choice of parents and pupils or on their active involvement with the quality of education. So both assumptions A1 en A2 seems to be theoretical failures.

This does not mean that it is incorrect to assume that the publication of school performance indicators stimulates school improvement, since it seems to be schools themselves that are the primary “users” of this information. At the same time, there is the hidden danger here that schools will act strategically to ensure that they appear in the best light possible “on the card”. Well-documented side effects in this respect include influencing the average school score on tests by, for instance, “not counting” the scores of weak pupils, having weak pupils repeat a year, removing these pupils from school or – as was discovered in the US – even doctoring the test scores (De Wolf & Janssens, 2007; Koretz, 2008). It also seems that the improvement activities suggested by the publication of school

performance indicators are not always aimed at the long-term improvement of education quality. Moreover, there are indications that inspectors too, tend to display strategic behaviour in an attempt to come up with the best possible assessments of education quality.

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#### **About the Author**

Prof. Dr. Frans J.G. Janssens is with the University of Twente and Co-ordinating Inspector of Schools at the Netherlands' Education Inspectorate. His research programme concentrates on 'Inspections and accountability of schools' and 'Growth and Value-added Measurement'. During the last decade, he has developed and implemented highly standardized methods and instruments for school inspections. He has published various articles on these methods and is now working on a book about Formative Evaluation.