

SURVEY OF THE WELLBEING OF PUPILS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Preliminary Study of the Ways in Which European Inspectorates
Question Pupils during School Inspections¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine which methods European inspectorates use to question pupils of primary schools about their wellbeing. Furthermore, this study examines the kind of tools these inspectorates apply to question pupils. This because the Flemish inspectorate lacks a scientific and statistically supported instrument to ask pupils about their wellbeing. Thus, the inspectors cannot take the pupils voice into account in the judgment about the educational quality of a school. This study is based on a desk research and an internet survey of European inspectorates to find out to which extend they involve pupils during the inspection of a primary school, what they ask these children and which pupils are selected.

The aim of this study is to examine if existing instruments are translatable to the Flemish context of external quality control by the inspectorate. Most of the interviewed inspectorates involve primary learners in some way during school inspections. However, the approach and the used methods of involving pupils appear very different between the European inspectorates. At the other hand the content of those aspects inspectors ask pupils are similar in one way or another between the different inspectorates of the European countries.

Key Words

primary education, questioning pupils, inspectorate, school inspection, SICI, wellbeing, pupils voice.

¹ This report is part of a more extended research, which led into a scientific and statistically supported Flemish questionnaire for pupils of elementary education. Inspectors can use the developed questionnaire to ask the pupils of the 4th, 5th, and 6th grade about their wellbeing in the class and at school.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The reason for the research is the consideration that the Flemish inspectorate – from the perspective of participation – does not involve primary school children in a school inspection. Moreover, depending on the quality indicators used during a school screening, the Flemish inspectorate does not have a tool to ask pupils specific questions about their wellbeing in the classroom and at school. The study of international education and Flemish scientific literature shows that for primary learners hardly any valid and reliable survey instruments exist which governs their wellbeing in a school context.²

This part of the research explores the field in which different European inspectorates question pupils. Knowledge of how educational inspectors abroad act to involve and question children of primary school during school inspections is one of the principles of the research in which we (1) want to develop a survey instrument for the Flemish inspectorate and (2) examine the wellbeing of pupils in primary schools. The questioned European inspectorates give the opportunity to organise an online questionnaire and finds its legitimacy in the growing international cooperation between inspectorates in Europe.

Previously to this study an extensive study of literature took place. The existing comparative studies on European systems of school inspections (MacBeath, Meuret, Schratz & Jakobsen, 1999; Maes, Vereecke & Zaman, 1999; Standaert, 2001; van Bruggen, 2007; Cardon, 2008) provide general information about school inspections and only little concrete information about the instruments used by each inspectorate. Some websites of European inspectorates implicitly refer to the questioning of pupils during school inspections, but the way this occurs and what kind of tools the inspectors use, is almost never clearly stated or explained. This lack of information makes it necessary to examine how European inspectorates query pupils. At the start of the study, we felt the opportunity to collect this information to require potentially valuable research results that we eventually can translate into the Flemish inspection context.

2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study explores the following research questions:

1. With which regularity do European inspectorates involve pupils at an inspection of primary schools? How old are the pupils involved?
2. Do inspectors use specific tools for questioning pupils (orally or written)? What do these tools contain?

² An extensive literature review is included in the second research report of this study: *De Lee, L. & De Volder, I. (2009). Bevraging van het welbevinden bij leerlingen in het basisonderwijs. DEEL II. De ontwikkeling van een bevraginginstrument voor de onderwijsinspectie (Masterproef, Universiteit Antwerpen, 2009).*

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The first part of the research³ is the result of an intensive desk research (see Annex 1) supplemented by the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected via an internet survey. In order to have updated information, we made an appeal to the partnership organization of European inspectorate: The Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI)⁴. This organization, founded in 1995, aims to contribute to the development of education in Europe by means of data and analysis based on direct observation of school practices.

To collect accurate data we asked all 25 members of SICI to take part in an English online survey with closed and open questions. Through the open questions, the respondents could give a qualitative interpretation on the quantitative, closed answers. The first two questions were designed to determine whether inspectors involve pupils during school inspections. Respondents who reported not doing so, were led immediately to the end of the survey. As from question three, the survey focused more specifically to the questioning of pupils during school inspections.

The online data collection ran from June to September 2008. All the SICI members were invited to take part in the research (see Annex 2). At that time SICI counted 25 members divided in 27 European regions. The invitation to take part in this study was sent to: Azores, Denmark, Belgium (Flemish, German and French speaking communities), England, Estonia, France, Hessen, Ireland, Lithuania, Macedonia, Madeira, The Netherlands, Northern Ireland, North Rhine-Westphalia, Austria, Portugal, Rhineland Palatinate, Romania, Saxon, Scotland, Slovak Republic, Spain, Czech Republic, Wales en Sweden.

The answers of the closed questions were processed quantitatively to a number of descriptive statistics with Microsoft Excel 2003 and SPSS 16.0. The answers of the open questions were analyzed qualitatively with MindManager X5 Pro and Microsoft Excel 2003. The aim of the qualitative analysis was to describe the diversity on the principle of *giving voice* (Donche, De Maeyer & Kavadias, 2006). For the transcribing of the data it seems that they quite closely matched with the retained dimensions based on a previously performed literature study: (1) *satisfaction*, (2) *academic self-concept*, (3) *educational climate* and (4) *participation*. Although it is a less traditional approach to qualitative research, starting from the similarity we opted for a deductive, a priori benchmarking approach (Mortelmans, 2007) to encrypt the data. "Starting from the conceptual framework that a researcher has compiled in order to collect the data, he can prepare a list of codes that he expects to find [...]. Even in cases of an exploratory research, there is often some background knowledge on the topic and a shortlist of codes can be drawn." (Mortelmans, 2007, p. 401).

³ The complete research has been written down in three separate reports: (1) a study as reconnaissance (i.e. the study you are reading now), (2) the development of a reliable and valid survey instrument and (3) the measuring of the wellbeing of pupils in Flemish primary schools.

⁴ More exact information about SICI and its members can be found at <http://www.sici-inspectorates.org/>

4 RESEARCH RESULTS

The survey had a response rate of 70%: 19 SICI-regions answered the request to fill in the online survey. The origin of two respondents is unknown and the system did not record any data because these participants prematurely terminated the survey. There are data available of 17 respondents, representing a usable response rate of 63%. The regions participating in the survey are Azores, German-speaking Belgium, England, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, North Rhine-Westphalia, Portugal, Rhineland Palatinate, Romania, Saxony, Scotland, Slovakia, Spain, Flanders and Wales.

The data collection includes quantitative and qualitative information about: (1) whether or not pupils are involved in a school inspection, (2) the frequency by which pupils are involved in audits, (3) the age of the youngest children questioned, (4) the use of specific tools to question pupils, (5) how pupils are questioned (orally and / or writing) and (6) the contents of the questioning. In what follows, the data analyzed according to the research briefly discussed. The data analysis covers only the 17 regions mentioned above. Where appropriate, more qualitative information from the open questions supports the figures.

4.1 Whether or not pupils are involved in school inspections

The answers to the question *Does your inspectorate involve pupils during the inspection of primary schools?* Figure 1 shows that all the inspectorates involve pupils in a school inspection in one way or another but this answer does not give a clear view on what they really understand by the concept of involving pupils. Three regions have no experience in this matter. They were unable to answer all of the other questions of the survey. In the analysis, these regions are labelled as not applicable (N/A).

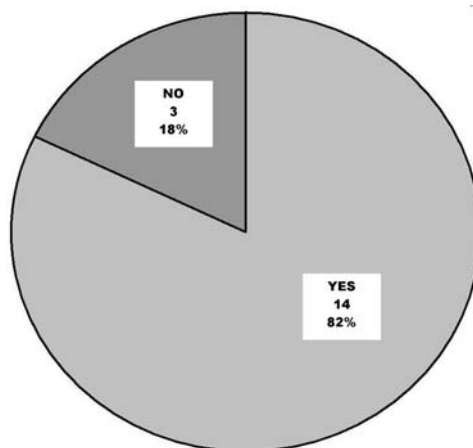


Figure 1. Frequencies of whether to involve pupils in school inspections in primary schools by education inspectors in 17 European regions.

4.2 Regularity in the involvement of children

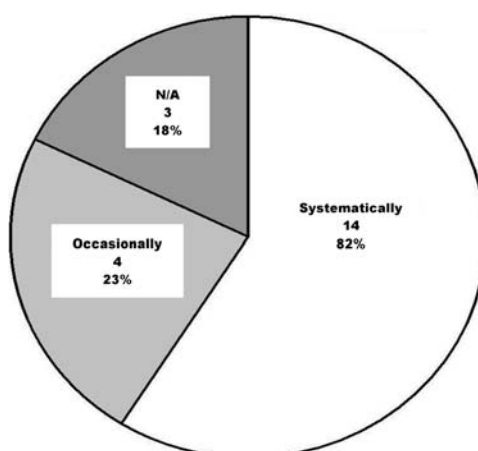


Figure 2. Frequencies of the regularity of involving pupils in school inspections in primary schools in 17 European regions.

Respondents who involve children in a school inspection could express the frequency in which they did so, through the possible answers (figure 2). In four regions (23%) there is no strict system. During the inspection itself, the inspectors decide whether it is appropriate to consult pupils. Thus, one respondent illustrated his answer as follows: "(...) if there are signals of risks in the domain of (social or physical) safety." In other regions (59%), pupils are systematically involved in each school inspection.

4.3 The age of the youngest pupils questioned

The starting age of the children being questioned by the inspectors during a school screening, ranges from five to eight years (figure 3). In three regions (18%), the youngest children being questioned are five years old. In an equal amount of regions the youngest children questioned are eight years. The most common starting age is six years (four regions, 24%), which broadly corresponds with the starting age of primary education in most European countries. Two regions (12%) stated to question pupils, but they did not report a starting age (N/A).

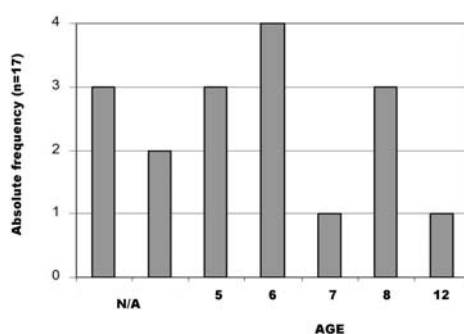


Figure 3. Frequencies of the initial ages of the pupils questioned by inspectors of education at primary school inspections in 17 European regions.

4.4 The use of specific tools for pupils to question

Asked *Does your inspectorate use tools or specifically developed instruments to question pupils?* ten regions (59%) gave a positive answer. The information on the open question *Please give a short description of the used tools or instruments.* shows that the respondents interpreted the term “instruments” in a very broad way, describing the various instruments they were used during the inspection of a school. One respondent wrote: “All evidence is recorded on an inspection evaluation form which forms the source of evidence at the end of an inspection (...). The form does not have specific questions for pupils.” The high number of positive answers should be relative, since the respondents’ demand for specific tools are not limited to specially designed questionnaires to pupils. The qualitative analysis of the respondents given explanations, suggests that only five regions (29%) actually own a list of questions to be asked by pupils, whether orally (in the form of an interview guide) or written (in the form of a list item multiple choice).

4.5 The method of querying pupils

All the regions that involve pupils in a school inspection, use oral questioning. In half of these regions this method is the only method of questioning, while in other regions the inspectorate uses a combination of written and oral questioning.

The responses to this question given by the respondents shows that the choice of oral or written surveys is closely related to the age of the children. Even so, the qualitative data show that some regions interpreted oral questioning of pupils rather as a spontaneous talk during the visit of the inspector in the class: “Inspectors talk to pupils in their classrooms about the work they are doing. (...) They talk to them during lessons about their understanding of teaching and their learning.” In some regions inspectors use a more structural working method in oral questioning by speaking with a selected group of children of different ages in a panel discussions. The age of the children who take part in such a discussion panel varies. In some regions, the inspectors choose to form a group of children from almost every age group of primary school. In other regions, the inspectorate composes a panel of children of the highest learning groups. Thus, one respondent reported: “With older children [we] enter into structured discussions on a range of topics drawn from the inspection framework.”

4.6 The contents of the student survey

Based on a prior literature study we define wellbeing as a multidimensional concept containing following four dimensions: (1) *satisfaction*, (2) *academic self-concept*, (3) *educational climate* and (4) *participation*. These dimensions are the starting point of the construction of the Flemish questionnaire and the qualitative research.

Out of the recorded data of 12 regions, we were able to make a short inventory of what the inspectors asked the pupils. The inventory is based on the qualitative responses which were categorized by the four dimensions. Almost all recorded contents in the survey fit into this categorization. Within the *educational climate* we made a distinction between aspects related to the educational process and issues dealing with relationships.

Table 1 shows the four dimensions and the content of the questions within each concept. Only in one region the inspectorate asks about the *involvement* of parents in what happens at school and how birthdays are celebrated at school. These contents are not included in table 1.

In most regions, inspectors mainly question pupils on aspects related to *satisfaction* and the *educational climate*. Within the latter dimension, aspects of the educational process and interpersonal relationships are discussed. Few regions question pupils about their *academic self-concept* and if the organization of education is sufficiently adapted to the needs of the children.

Table 1. Frequencies of the content of the questions inspectors of education ask to pupils during school inspections in 12 European regions (absolute frequencies).			
Concept	Contents of the questions	yes	no
Satisfaction	Enjoying to come to school	7	5
	Feeling safe	7	5
	Feeling good	8	4
Academic self concept	Understanding about learning	4	8
	View of own learning	4	8
	Feeling of making progress	5	7
Educational climate			
Education process	Teaching	6	6
	Organization of adapted education	3	9
	Asking questions and getting help	9	3
	Meeting the needs of children	9	3
Relationships	Dealing with teachers	8	4
	Way and reasons for punishment	4	8
	Way and reasons for reward	4	8
	Dealing with other pupils	7	5
	Responding to other pupils' behaviour	5	7
	Dealing with bullying	3	9
Participation	Using principles of participation	4	8

4.7 Analysis of the questionnaires pupils of different regions

Although most regions mentioned that the tools they use to question pupils were available, we only received the questionnaires of two regions. Although we had the intention to make a comparison of the different tools inspectorates use, it is hard to make a comparative study based on only two questionnaires. Furthermore, both inspectorates mentioned they are engaged in innovating and reforming their inspection framework.

5 CONCLUSION

Most of the inspectorates of the group of respondents state they involve pupils in primary education during school inspections in one way or another. In regions where this actually happens, the inspectorate usually does this systematically during every school inspection. In the actual practice of school inspection *the involvement of pupils* means that inspectors question pupils sometimes formally, often and usually informal. The Flemish inspectorate, for whom the questioning of pupils in primary education has not yet been achieved, cannot remain at this level if it wants to give a voice to the key stakeholders of their educational system.

The method of questioning pupils varies greatly between the different inspectorates. The data gathered by the online survey show that oral questioning happens less systematically than written questioning. Furthermore, oral questioning mainly takes place based on spontaneous conversations with pupils during classroom visits by the inspector. A written questioning of pupils seems to happen more systematically, but implies a focus on the oldest children of primary education. Finally, the results of the survey show that an inspectorate that question pupils in a formal way, tends to organize this with a selected group of pupils in conversation.

The study gives us no indications on the most appropriate age for pupils to question them about the school and education. This is not part of this study and asks for further research. Inspectors tend to question pupils about the school and classroom life, from the age of six. This query happens mainly orally. The method of questioning (oral or written) is naturally linked to the age of the children. The study provides less equal information about the various tools inspectorates use in questioning pupils. Respondents mention they use tools, but when more closely investigated, these instruments are not specifically designed to question pupils. Especially with the informal, oral questioning, inspectors mainly rely on aspects of the supervisory framework they use, rather than on a list of specific questions. Such lists appear to be rare in most inspectorates. The expected comparative study of different tools can hardly be conducted using only the two instruments received. The analysis of the received survey instruments only states that these two instruments are quite very different.

6 DISCUSSION

The finding that respondents gave different answers to the same questions requires critical self-reflection and some thoughts about the study design. In fact this diversity enables us to make a clear analysis of the generated data.

First, there is the method of collecting information (i.e. via an online survey) which has a number of restrictions. In accordance with the working language of SICI we opted for an English spoken survey. Most of the respondents are not *native* speakers, which makes it difficult to achieve an unambiguous interpretation of the more difficult questions. Some respondents stated they do not control the English language sufficiently to give clear and unequivocally answers. Furthermore, some questions of the survey were not sufficiently defined. This can lead to confusion and ambiguity. Moreover, the specific vocabulary of each inspectorate differs. An international glossary of specific terminology specific to educational inspectorates does not exist yet. Even within SICI, the national educational vocabulary of each inspectorate has not yet been translated into a common lexicon.

During data analysis, these limitations were taken into account. Despite these limitations, the applied research methodology delivers interesting and useful data. In particular, the survey provides valuable information about the substantive interpretation of the concepts of class and school climate. These concepts are important for further research purposes: the development of an instrument for the Flemish inspectorate to question children of elementary schools. The major substantive topics will be used as guidance for the choice of the dimensions from where the questionnaire will be compiled and for the formulation and selection of appropriate questions. The results and conclusions of the survey via members of SICI offer several angles to develop the desired tool. In addition, it is essential to consider the specific context in which the instrument will be used (i.e. school inspections in the Flemish primary education). This survey merely focused on the involvement of pupils as active participant in the quality control of schools, but did not mention the differences in educational and quality systems between the questioned areas. Moreover, the survey primarily wanted to study the written questionnaire surveys of pupils, although the questions used, allowed different interpretations. A revised questionnaire with a more clear definition of the questions could avoid several interpretations.

In addition to this survey, qualitative comparative research of the different inspection systems in Europe is needed to reach greater clarity. It is essential to take the differences between the education and the vision of quality into account. Holding back certain development criteria for the questioning of pupils in Flanders is linked with making specific choices.

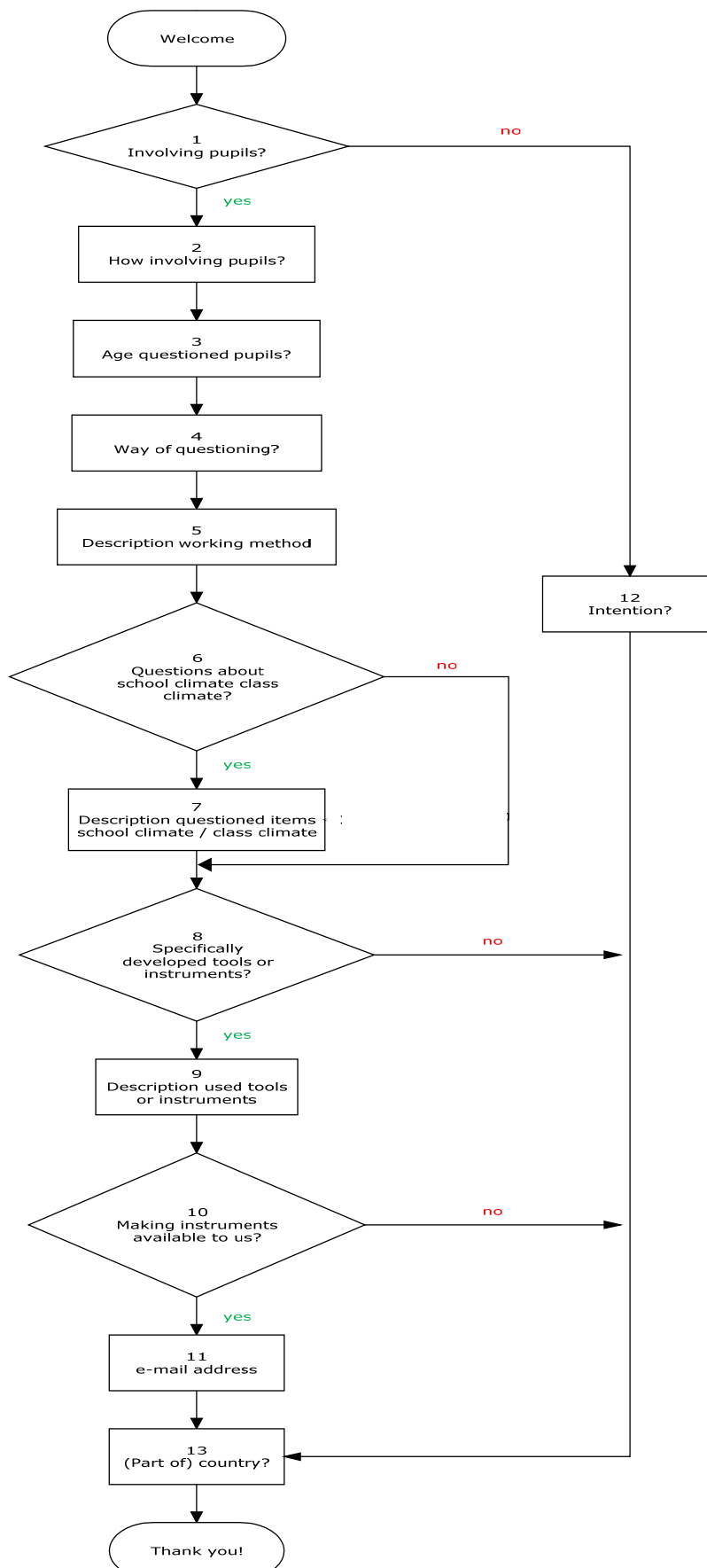
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During the study, the following websites were consulted in the period between June 2008 and November 2008:

<http://www.enquetemaken.be>
<http://www.estyn.gov.uk/home.asp>
<http://www.hmie.gov.uk>
<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk>
<http://www.onderwijsinspectie.be>
<http://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl>
<http://www.sici-inspectorates.org>

8 ANNEX 1: STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE ONLINE SURVEY



Does your inspectorate involve pupils during inspection in primary schools?
Yes / No

How does your inspectorate involve pupils during inspection in primary schools?
Systematically (e.g. every school inspection)
Occasionally (e.g. some school inspections)

From which age on does your inspectorate question the pupils during inspection in primary schools?

How does the questioning of pupils take place during inspection in primary schools?
Orally / In writing / Both

Please give a short description of the working method in questioning pupils.

Does the questioning involve questions related to the pupils' perception about the school climate and/or class climate?
Yes / No

Please give a short description of the questioned items about school climate and/or class climate by pupils'

Does your inspectorate use specifically developed tools or instruments to question pupils?
Yes / No

Please give a short description of the used tools or instruments.

Would your inspectorate be so kind to make the instruments being used available to us, so we can make a comparative study of them?
Yes / No

Please fill in your e-mail address so we can contact you to make further arrangements.

Has your organisation the intention to involve pupils voice during inspection of primary schools?
Yes / No

Which country or part of a country do you represent?

9 ANNEX 2: INVITATION SICI-MEMBERS TO TAKE PART IN THE ONLINE SURVEY

E-MAILTEXT

Dear colleague

As members of the inspectorate of Education in the Flemish part of Belgium, we follow a master study *Training and Educational Science* at the University of Antwerp, more specifically at the Institute of Education and Information Sciences. At this time we are preparing a survey about **involving pupils' voices during inspections of primary schools**.

A part of our research explores how inspectorates of the different European countries use the pupils' voice during school inspection in primary education. We are interested in the way how different inspectorates gather these data. And also, we would like to know the different types of instruments that are used for that purpose. If possible we ask you to forward the original electronic version of the instrument, even in your own language of origin (see e-mail addresses below).

We developed an electronic questionnaire to gather the required information. This short questionnaire, counting less than 15 questions, is available up to and including by the 15th of July 2008 via the link below. We sincerely hope we can count on your cooperation to fulfil this part of our investigation successfully. We will send those inspectorates who shared this useful information a summary of our results.

Yours sincerely,

Ilse De Volder (ilse.devolder@skynet.be) & Ludo De Lee (ludo.delee@telenet.be)

Flemish inspectors of education

Please fill in our questionnaire, simply by double clicking this link:

<http://www.enquetemaken.be/toonenquete.php?id=4472>

If double clicking doesn't work, please be so kind to type this link in your browser manually.