

The Impact of Formative Evaluation in School Improvement

Assessing the effects of implementing a formative evaluation model on leadership and practice

Denne artikel drejer sig om, hvilken indflydelse formativ evaluering kan have på skoleledelse og på skoleudvikling. I en tidligere artikel i CEPRAsriben har vi beskrevet, hvordan den formative evaluering blev implementeret på syv erhvervsskoler i et samarbejde mellem skoleledelser og en forskergruppe. I denne artikel beskriver vi, hvilken indflydelse implementeringen af den formative evaluering har på ledernes praksis. Vi finder, at den langvarige indførelse af formativ evaluering – ud over at kvalificere skolernes udviklingsarbejde og at give lederne evalueringskompetence – også har en række uplanlagte positive konsekvenser: Den styrker samarbejdet på skoler, styrker læreres kompetenceudvikling og udvikler skolers forandringskapacitet.

Nøgleord: evaluering, skoleudvikling, erhvervsskoler, skoleledelse, kompetenceudvikling.

Introduction

In 2019, a seven-year program was launched to improve the quality of the vocational education and training (VET) systems in the four Visegrad countries: Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. As part of the program, school improvement projects were initiated at seven VET schools.

The aim of these projects was to enhance the quality of vocational education at the schools. As an integral part of the schools' change processes, a formative evaluation program was implemented in collaboration with a research team from Aarhus University (AU), Denmark.

Formative evaluation can contribute to school improvement processes by providing guidance along the way, ensuring that the project is adjusted when needed and that the staff learn from their actions. In so doing, formative evaluation may enhance the quality of school improvement processes (Preskill & Torres 1999; Fullan 2006; Goh et al. 2006; Hopkins et al. 2014; Arney 2017).

During the implementation of the formative evaluation model at the selected schools, we trained the school leaders to conduct formative evaluations while implementing the new activities. The experience from the training process showed that effective use of formative evaluation required competence from the leaders and training in the use of an evaluation strategy. In this journal, we have previously described the process of implementing internal formative evaluation at the schools (Wahlgren & Puge 2022)¹. In the current article we focus on the impact of the implemented formative evaluation on the mindset and actions of the school leaders in relation to school improvement. The argument is that formative evaluation can have a wider effect than simply improving the quality of the change process.

¹ The description of the implementation process in this article is based on the previous article.

The formative evaluation model can influence competence and the practices of the leaders in the school, resulting in strengthened sustainability of the school improvement initiatives. Consequently, the aim of this study is to examine the impact of formative evaluation on school leaders' mindset and actions, and its broader effect on school improvement.

Previous research

Research in school improvement stresses the importance of leadership (Day & Leithwood 2007; Hargreaves & Fink 2006; Gillon 2018; Hitt & Meyers 2018). Leadership is an important factor in creating a change in culture in which schools can continuously adapt to new challenges and changing circumstances (Schein 2010; Fullan 2020).

Studies have analyzed the collaboration between school practitioners and researchers in relation to processes of school improvement. Karagiorgi et al. (2018) showed how school leaders were able to transform the experiences they gained with support from researchers. Solvason et al. (2018) describe methods for strengthening the collaboration between school practitioners and researchers and Barnett et al. (2010) have explored the process of building such partnerships. The conditions for collaboration between researchers and practitioners are analysed in various studies (James & Augustin 2018) and a study by Manley & Titchen (2017) demonstrated that leadership training made educational leaders more efficient.

Thus, studies point to the importance of school leaders for change and how these change processes can be strengthened through school leaders' collaboration with researchers.

In this study, in which we worked with school leaders to enhance the sustainability of school improvement projects through the introduction of formative evaluation, we regard leadership as playing a vital role in the improvement process of the school.

In a previous article in this journal, we have shown how this collaboration can be unfolded and shaped in practice to develop leaders' ability to conduct formative evaluation (Wahlgren & Puge 2022).

In the current study we investigate the impact of formative evaluation on different aspects of the improvement process. The study thus contributes with new knowledge on the impact of professional development of school leaders on school improvement.

The evaluation perspective

The evaluation model implemented in this project is inspired by a theory-based evaluation approach (Chen 2013). The approach focuses on the mechanisms linking objectives and outcomes (Patton 2011; 2012; Stufflebeam & Coryn 2014). According to this approach, qualified development of practice is based on ongoing evaluation of implemented activities. Such evaluation requires defining specific goals and procedures for collecting data that can be used to assess progress in improvement processes. Consequently, one core element of collaboration with school leaders was supporting them in learning how to conduct formative evaluation of new practices introduced at their schools. The purpose of formative evaluation is to provide insights that can improve activities and initiatives at schools.

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of formative evaluation on school leaders' thinking and action, as well on its broader effects on school improvement processes. The research questions for this paper are as follows:

1. What impact does formative evaluation have on leaders' thinking and actions related to school improvement?
2. What impact does formative evaluation have on the collaboration practices within the school?
3. How does the impact occur over time?
4. Which activities within the formative evaluation initiative contribute to these changes?

Implementing the programme for formative evaluation

The collaboration between school leaders and the research team has been a continuous process over a four-year period. The process could be described as a continuous circle of quality improvement, inspired by Schön (2016) and Kolb (1984). The circle includes four aspects of change: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. In the circle, development is a continuous process of reflection that starts with the identification of goals, implementation of new activities and collecting experiences, resulting in new and improved practices through reflecting on the experiences.

The four steps (the content of which has been described in detail in a previous publication: Wahlgren & Puge 2022) are:

As the first step in our collaboration with school leaders, we asked them to reflect on their school improvement plans by posing the following question: What do you regard as high-quality education? Through this process, the school leaders became aware of the need to clearly articulate the goals of their school projects to enable meaningful and relevant evaluation practices.

In the next step we introduced the concept of formative evaluation. We developed a formative evaluation tool – referred to as reflection papers – which the schools were asked to use to continuously evaluate their activities. Every second month, the school management teams responded to the following questions in these reflection papers: *what has been done; what have we learned; how do we know whether it was successful?*

The third step involved two evaluation meetings with the schools. At these meetings, school leaders presented the progress of their projects. Their presentations were based on an extended reflection paper, which included questions designed to help them elaborate on their previous responses. The first meeting focused on what the projects had already achieved and what still needed improvement, while the second meeting centred on assessing the development of the schools' capacity for change based on the preliminary evaluation results.

The fourth step in the implementation of formative evaluation was a joint seminar for all seven schools. The seminar focused on the principles of advanced formative evaluation and provided an opportunity for the schools to exchange experiences related to their evaluation processes. The seminar was held with physical attendance of the school leaders.

To sum up, the collaboration with school leaders followed a structured, step-by-step process that combined goal clarification, ongoing self-evaluation, reflective dialogue, and shared learning. The approach aimed to build evaluation competencies in school leaders while supporting their evaluation activities in connection to their school improvement initiatives.

Data

To understand the impact of formative evaluation on the mindset of the school leaders and actions in relation to school improvement, we collected the following data (Cohen et al. 2011: 377-444):

We collected survey responses from school and project leaders to assess the perceived impact of the collaboration process. The survey was conducted twice:

midway through the development phase (after approximately 1.5 years) and at the end of the projects (after three years). The design was informed by research on school improvement and empirical findings from our qualitative study.

The first survey measured the perceptions of the leaders of the collaboration impact in eight areas. Respondents rated the impact on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 'A minor impact' to 'A significant impact', with an additional 'No impact option'. The data provided initial insights into the perceived impact of the collaboration implementing formative evaluation.

The second survey followed the same design to enable comparisons over time. Additionally, this survey was expanded to include two new areas of interest:

First, the leaders assessed their own evaluation competencies at three points in time: at the project start, mid-point, and conclusion, on a scale from 'Not at all' to 'To a very large extent'. The data offered insights into the process of competency development of leaders in relation to evaluation.

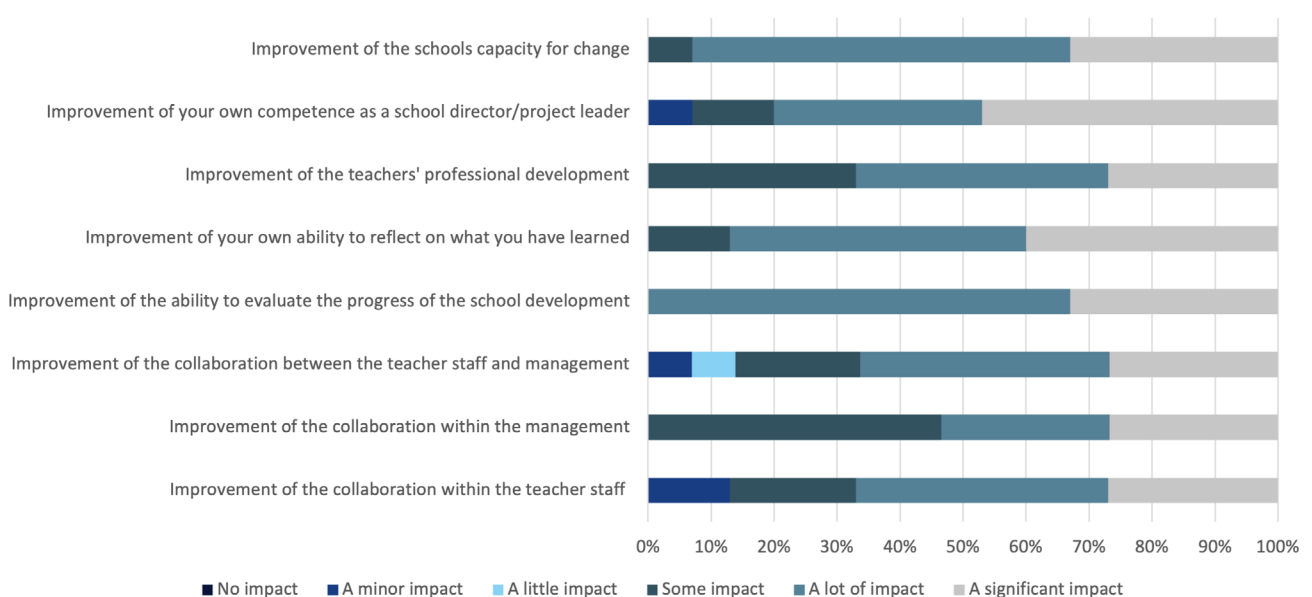
Second, school leaders rated the importance of different activities within the evaluation initiative implemented at their school. They indicated the extent to which each activity supported their school project on a scale from 1 'Not at all' to 10 'To a very large extent'. The data gives insight into the leaders' perceptions of the effectiveness of programme design elements on their school improvement efforts.

To supplement the survey data, we conducted interviews with school leaders concerning their reflections on the process of developing local evaluation plans for improving educational quality and dialogue with researchers. The interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews focusing on a) how the school leaders experienced the collaboration with researchers, b) school leaders' work with the local evaluation plan for quality development, and c) school leaders' reflections on the usefulness of the learning process. Two rounds of interviews were conducted: the first after drafting the final evaluation plan and the second after the two evaluation meetings.

The impact of formative evaluation

To answer research question 1 (the impact on leaders' thinking and actions) and 2 (the impact within the school) we asked the leaders to what extent the collaboration with the research team on implementing the formative evaluation model had influenced various aspects of practice at their schools and their own leadership work. Their answers are presented in figure 1.

The impact of the Aarhus University team on the following issues



Figur 1. Impact of the team – according to school leaders.

As anticipated, formative evaluation exerted a considerable impact on leaders' ability to reflect and evaluate. As stated above, reflection and evaluation were central activities in the implementation of formative evaluation at the schools.

A project leader shared new insights regarding the need to reflect on the relationship between planning and actions:

Management should provide regular information on ongoing and planned steps so that corrections can be made if necessary. We didn't know this before we started the project. We probably didn't even know exactly how important it is to promote a change in attitude in addition to technical developments for sustainability.

And the effect of the reflection papers on the school's awareness of the need to gather experiences as stated by a school leader:

Thanks to the reflection paper, we still do think about how we can use our experiences even though we don't write it down, so we use elements of the reflection paper.

In the same survey, leaders were asked to what extent the collaboration with the research team had contributed to making the management aware "that school improvement is an ongoing task." To this, all but one leader answered, "to a large or very large extent." A leader explains this:

What you have helped me understand is that the process is more important than the goal itself. It was difficult to understand, but now I do.

Thus, the formative evaluation initiative has influenced the leader's way of thinking about school improvement processes in a way that is more process oriented.

Contrary to what might be assumed, formative evaluation demonstrates a considerable impact on collaboration between teachers, among leaders, and between leaders and teachers. Thus, the implementation of formative evaluation positively influences collaboration within the school. We explain this general impact on the collaboration process at the school as an outcome of the collaboration prompted by the regular completion of the reflection papers, which in various ways involved the teachers.

Formative evaluation has a positive impact on the professional development of teachers and leaders. Our data indicate that leaders perceive formative evaluation intervention as one that has generally improved the professional development of both teachers and leaders, making them better at their work. The requirement for continuous evaluation of one's own practices seems to have a broader impact on the professional competence of the staff. One school leader says:

When we think about the teachers, we assess their needs, and these were taken into account, to have an ongoing dialogue. It is important to mention that you have changed our life completely. I think the teachers really like it, they are not good at saying it, but you feel it. Something about the atmosphere. It takes more time to change the atmosphere within the whole school.

Formative evaluation has a positive impact on the change capacity of the schools. Leaders perceive that formative evaluation has had a positive impact on their school's "capacity for change". Seen from a school improvement perspective, it is interesting that working with formative evaluation has a general effect on the leaders' perception of the school's ability to adapt to change. The school leaders thus experience that a continuous and systematic evaluation of the improvement activities that the school is undertaking increases the school's ability to deal actively with changes. As one of the school leaders expresses it:

Nowadays, we have changed our opinions very much and we have already planned to conduct reflection activities from the project now for a second year.

This has not been planned before, so ... at the end of the day, you have influenced us very positively.

Formative evaluation has less impact on external collaborations. In the survey, we also asked the leaders about other matters on which FE possibly could have an (indirect) influence, namely "collaboration with local authorities" and "collaboration with local employers". The leaders perceive the impact on these factors to be much lower than on those mentioned earlier. We anticipated this lower impact and view the actual low score as an indicator of the leaders' ability to respond differently to the various questions. The leaders do not "automatically" assign high scores to all activities. Thus, the validity of the leaders' responses is reinforced and demonstrates their ability to critically assess and differentiate the impact of various activities.

The impact of formative evaluation, as described by leaders' perception in this article, can be confirmed by an external evaluation of the projects. A summary description of the effect of FE at one of the schools puts it thus:

The school's management assessed that the collaboration with the evaluation group has meant that they now work more systematically with the school's development than before. The regular weekly "monday meetings" are described as an important, lasting track that the collaboration has set.

Overall, the collaboration has also had the effect that the development activities have been carried out in a more systematic way, where different alternatives are drawn up and examined in relation to relevant criteria. In short: leaders act more rationally.

The interviews with the management indicate that the collaboration with the evaluation group has contributed to more systematic work with innovation and more inclusive decision-making processes that represent several parties and perspectives (Wyganski et al. 2023).

This confirmation from the external evaluators, together with the reflections of school leaders supplementing the survey results, underscores the positive influence of formative evaluation in strengthening leadership practices, fostering more structured collaboration, and supporting continuous professional development.

Variation across schools and countries

According to research question 1 (the impact on leaders' thinking and actions) and 2 (the impact within the school) we have analyzed whether differences between schools or differences between the different national contexts affect the impact of formative evaluation. Are there differences between the schools?

Overall, the response profiles are similar across the schools included in this study. However, some differences can be found when comparing the school leaders' response profiles. Their answers differ in how much impact they attribute to the intervention on different issues, and their responses tend to fluctuate around the overall average. These differences may be linked to the specific content and focus of each school's improvement process.

As previously mentioned, the study includes schools from four Visegrad countries. One might expect that national or cultural variations, such as prior experience with school improvement and national policies on education, would lead to noticeable differences in leaders' answers between the countries. However, our data does not support this assumption as there are no systematic differences in the material. In fact, the variation between schools within the same country is as great as the variation between countries.

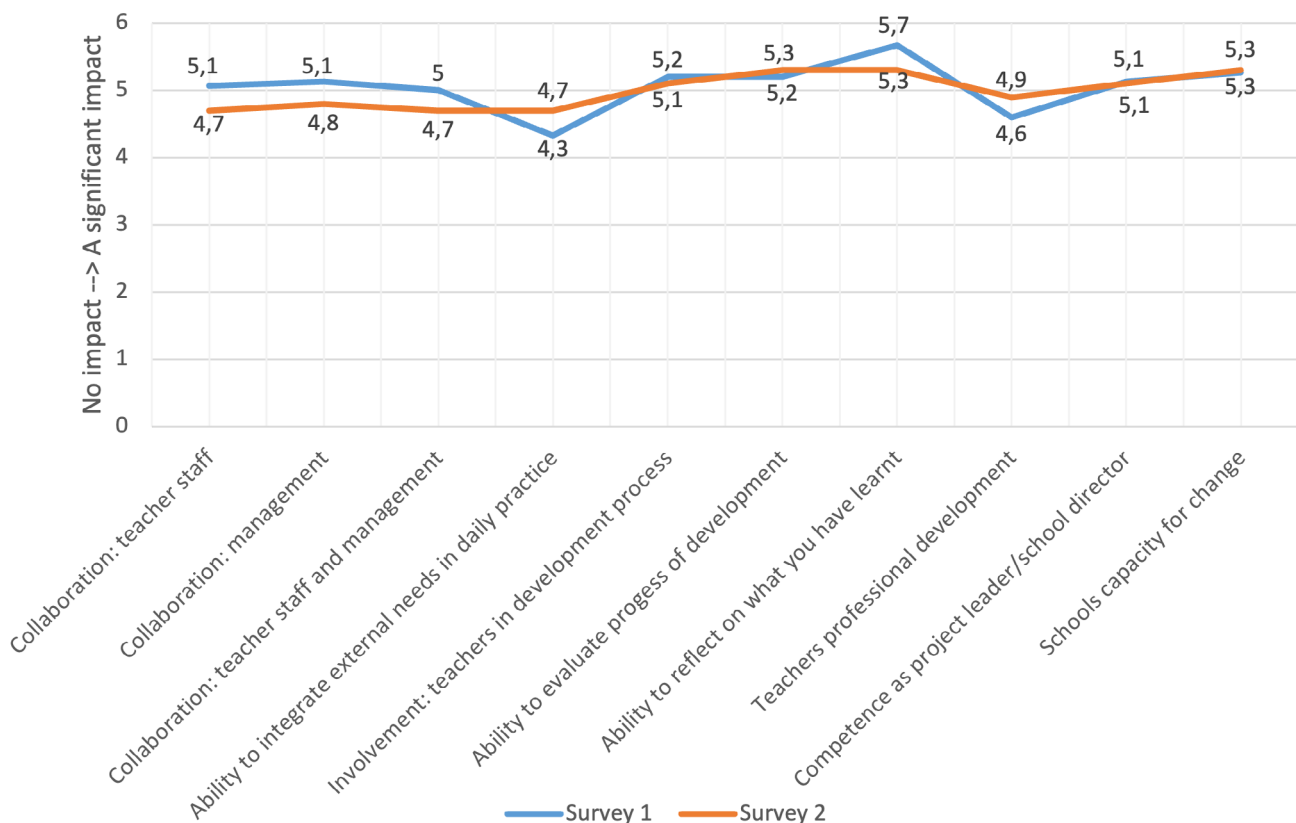
The process of changing

As described above, the implementation of formative evaluation at the schools took place over a three-year period, from the initial meeting at each school to the final joint reflection on the process. Overall, the above analysis shows that the implementation has had an impact on the leadership, collaboration and approach to school improvement at the schools. We now turn our attention to research question 3: How does the impact occur over time?

When comparing the results of the first survey, conducted halfway through the improvement work of the schools, with the results of the second survey, conducted at the end of the process, it is evident that school leaders already reported substantial benefits midway through the initiative.



The impact measured in survey 1 and survey 2



Figur 2. AU impact from survey 1 and 2.

As shown in figure 2, the response profiles of the schools remain largely unchanged over time. The school leaders assessed the impact of formative evaluation on various school-related aspects in a consistent manner at both measurement points.

The overall pattern indicates that the perceived effects of the intervention are stable from midway through the development process and up to its conclusion. This consistency is evident both in the average of answers from all schools and across individual schools.

Our findings suggest that school leaders have a steady and coherent view of how formative evaluation influences the leadership and practices of their schools.

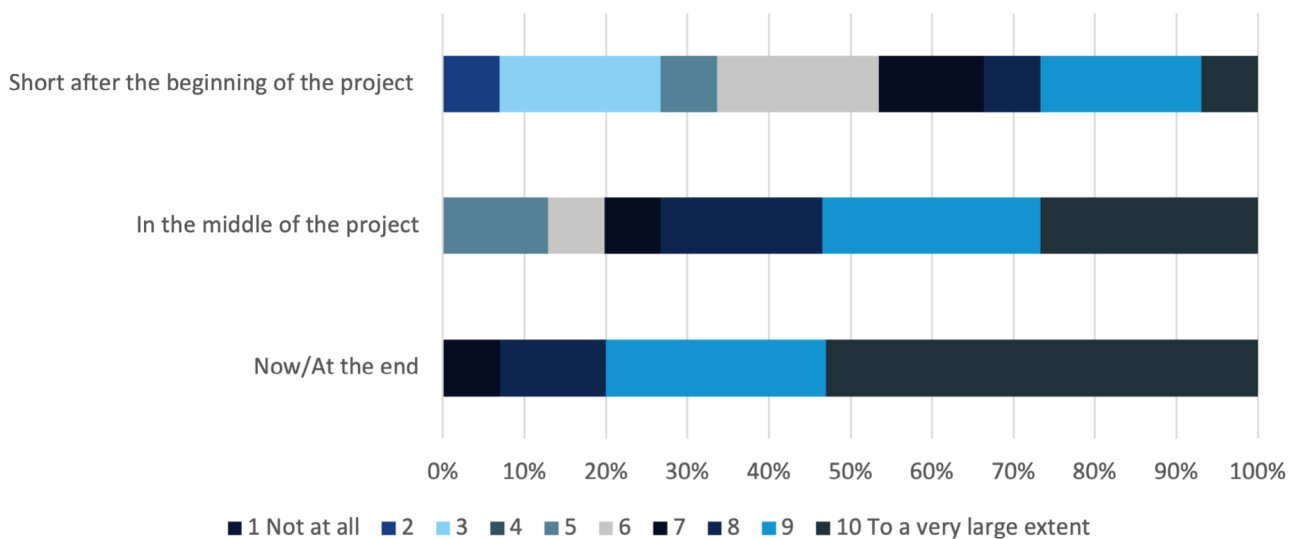
Furthermore, when comparing the responses at the two points in time – midway through and at the end of the process – it appears that the leaders’ assessment of the impact remains relatively stable at both points.

Based on this, one might conclude that the effects of formative evaluation were largely achieved during the first half of the implementation process. From this perspective, it could be argued that the second half of the process would not have been necessary.

However, this conclusion is contradicted by another set of data. We asked the leaders to retrospectively assess their competence in evaluating the development process at three different points: shortly after the project began, midway through, and at the end.

As shown in figure 3, there is a clear progression in ratings over the course of the project and the data reveal continuous growth in evaluation competence. Leaders reported that they initially had moderate competencies to evaluate development. According to their answers, there was an increase in their competence by the middle of the project. By the end of the project, more than two-thirds of the leaders indicated that they felt competent to evaluate development processes.

The projects impact on the development of leaders competencies to evaluate over time



Figur 3. The leaders' competence to evaluate development processes.

We interpret figure 3 as follows: The leaders already perceive their interaction with the researchers regarding formative evaluation as beneficial for their schools midway through the process. At the same time, they retrospectively report a continuous increase in their competence to carry out and sustain formative evaluation throughout the school improvement period. Based on this, we conclude that the implementation of formative evaluation has a significant impact

during the initiation of the improvement work, and that the effects on leader competence grow as formative evaluation become more integrated into the mindset and practice of the leaders.

Impactful activities

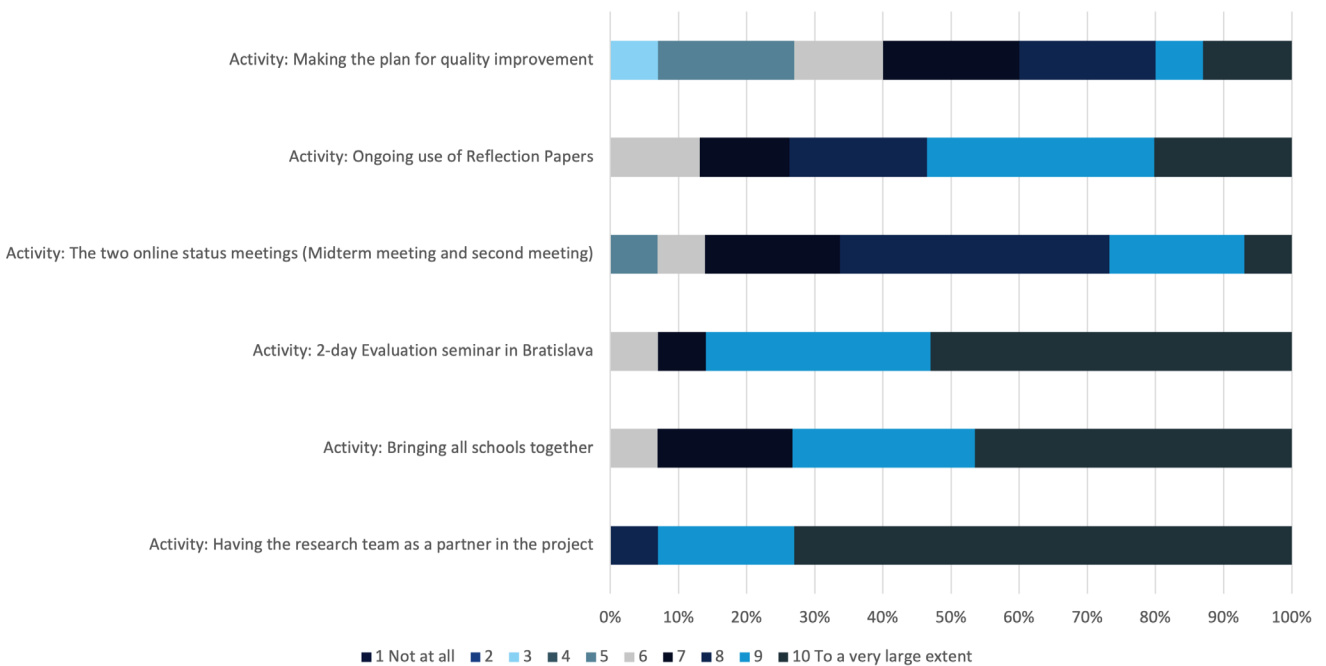
We now turn to the research question 4: Which activities within the formative evaluation initiatives contribute to the changes?

In the survey, we asked the school leaders to retrospectively assess the importance of the various elements of their collaboration with the research group. Specifically, they were asked to evaluate the activities that were part of the implementation of formative evaluation, as described earlier in the section “Implementing the evaluation program”. Additionally, we included a question about the overall impact of the collaboration with the evaluation group.

As shown in figure 4, the school leaders perceive the different activities as having varying levels of impact on the implementation of local projects at their schools. Planning for quality improvement, a prerequisite for conducting evaluation of the said improvement, is rated as having the least impact.

The two status meetings, in which experiences were presented and discussed with the research group, are assessed slightly higher, but still amongst the less influential activities. Ongoing use of reflection papers is rated moderately high. Bringing the schools together around a shared evaluation theme appears to be one of the most valuable activities from the perspective of the leaders. However, the activity rated as having the greatest impact is the ongoing collaboration with the research team, which is seen as the most important form of support in the school improvement work.

The extent to which the activities have supported the school projects



Figur 4. Supporting activities – according to school leaders.

The perception of the leaders as to which activities within the formative evaluation intervention had the greatest impact does not fully align with what would traditionally be considered important from an evaluation logic perspective. For instance, the intervention related to planning the school improvement projects served as an important starting point for the subsequent activities in the initiative and is described in a separate research article from the project (Puge et al. 2025). However, it is noteworthy that the collective components, such as the joint seminar on evaluation methodology for all participating schools and the ongoing collaboration with the research group, are consistently rated as highly impactful by the school leaders. These findings suggest that the leader's perception of the impact of the formative evaluation initiative on the leader's mindsets and actions, as well as on school practices, are reinforced when they are embedded in a collective process of shared experience and mutual learning.

Discussion

Existing research has highlighted the importance of evaluation as part of school improvement and has shown that leaders have a significant influence on the improvement process. Likewise, it has been shown that collaboration between researchers and school leaders can strengthen the development process. We have confirmed these findings in the present study. In the study, we have shown that formative evaluation additionally has several effects in promoting school improvement which has been less highlighted in existing research.

Based on our findings there are good reasons to establish collaboration between researchers and practitioners to ensure a qualified evaluation process. At the same time, the overall process is resource intensive and requires the existence of funding to be feasible. We have investigated which of the different evaluation interventions has had the greatest effect on school improvement as a way to decide which interventions are needed and necessary to secure efficient formative evaluation of school improvement efforts. Further research may clarify which types of interventions provide the optimal effects in relation to the initiation and continuation of local school improvement processes.

The data collected has two key limitations. First, they are based solely on self-reported perceptions of school leaders. Do the leaders think and act in the ways they describe in the survey? It can be argued that the leaders may present themselves as having benefitted more from the collaboration than was in fact the case. Second, the data was collected by the research group itself. This may have introduced bias because the leaders might have been inclined either to please the researchers or, conversely, to distance themselves from the process.

Regarding the first validity concern, we argue that school leaders' self-perceptions are important in their own right. How leaders perceive their own practice is likely to influence what actually takes place at the school. As for the second concern, we would emphasize that the same general development is observed across all schools – regardless of whether the leaders viewed collaboration with the research team positively or negatively. Furthermore, in addressing both validity issues, we can point to two independent external evaluations of the projects, both of which confirm the overall development reported in our study.

Conclusion

The implementation of an internal formative evaluation model in schools in connection with school improvement projects is expected to improve the quality of the improvement process. In this study, we focus on the impact that the formative evaluation initiative has on school leaders' mindsets and practices, as well as on collaborative processes within vocational schools.

The evaluation programme was extensive and long-term. It included planning, continuous experience gathering and reflection, and training in formative evaluation, some of which was carried out in a collective setting. The total duration was approximately three years.

In this article we have documented the impact of a formative evaluation programme on the thinking and action of school leaders, namely, improving competence, professional development, and the ability of school leaders to reflect and evaluate.

We have documented that formative evaluation has considerable impact on collaboration between teachers, among leaders, and between leaders and teachers. Thus, the implementation of formative evaluation positively influences collaboration within the school. We conclude that the implementation of formative evaluation has a significant impact during the initiation of the improvement work, with the effects on competencies of leaders growing as formative evaluation becomes more integrated into the mindset and practice of leaders. The findings suggest that the perception of leaders of the impact of the formative evaluation initiative on leader mindsets and actions, as well as on school practices, are reinforced when they are embedded in a collective process of shared experience and mutual learning.

According to the school leaders, the formative evaluation initiative had a considerable impact on collaboration within the schools and on their own ability to reflect on and evaluate school improvement initiatives. The leaders report that the initiative had the greatest influence on their leadership competence and on the overall capacity of their schools for change. Thus, the formative evaluation initiative appears to have contributed to general improvement – an impact that goes beyond the specific activities initiated through the improvement projects.

The perceived impact is consistent across the participating schools and across the four countries involved in the study. Importantly, the effect of the formative evaluation initiative was already visible halfway through the process. Furthermore, the leaders reported that their development in terms of evaluative competence continued throughout the entire project period.

Our research has implications for both practice and research. It demonstrates that formative evaluation can serve as a powerful driver of school improvement when implemented as a structured and long-term process, supported by collaboration and external guidance. The findings indicate that such an approach not only enhances the evaluation competencies of leaders but also contributes to enhancing collaboration within schools.

Our study thus supports existing research that emphasizes the value of formative evaluation in school improvement efforts. While formative evaluation is recommended in some studies as a meaningful tool for supporting improvement processes in schools, our findings show that its impact extends beyond evaluation practice alone. Our study demonstrates how formative evaluation can influence the professional development of school leaders, strengthen collaboration across school staff, and enhance the overall capacity for change within schools. This broader impact underlines the relevance of integrating formative evaluation systematically into school improvement strategies to foster more sustainable improvements.



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