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The Local Institutionalization of Accountability in Education: Network and Bureaucratic Modes of Implementation

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Abstract

Accountability policies have become more important in the educational sector over the last two decades. Arguing that these policies focus increasingly on the technical core, some scholars have recently challenged the enduring finding that classroom activities and teachers' practices are largely decoupled from their institutional environment. In this paper, we argue that this discussion could be enriched by taking into account the processes through which accountability policies are developed and implemented. Two contrasted processes of construction and implementation are compared regarding the extent to which they have an impact on the level of decoupling between the formal structure of evaluation and the teachers' practices. The results show that compared to the bureaucratic approach to educational reform, the network model of organizing is more favourable to the emergence of social and cognitive changes, which contribute to reduce the level of decoupling between the evaluation's mechanism and the teachers' practices.¹

Keywords: Accountability, institutionalization, legitimacy, decoupling, social practices

La Institucionalización Local de la Responsabilidad en la Educación: Modos de Implementación en Red y Burocráticos

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Resumen

Las políticas de responsabilidad se han vuelto más importantes en el sector educativo en las dos últimas décadas. Argumentando que estas políticas se centran cada vez más en la base técnica, algunos teóricos han desafiado recientemente el hallazgo perdurable de que las actividades del aula y las prácticas docentes están en gran medida desconectadas de su entorno institucional. En este trabajo sostenemos que esta discusión podría enriquecerse teniendo en cuenta los procesos a través de los cuales se desarrollaron e implementaron las políticas de responsabilidad. Se realiza una comparación entre dos procesos contrastados de construcción e implementación respecto al nivel de impacto en la disociación entre la estructura formal de evaluación y las prácticas de los profesores. Los resultados muestran que en comparación con el la aproximación burocrática a la reforma educativa, el modelo en red de la organización es más favorable para la aparición de cambios sociales y cognitivos, que contribuyen a reducir el nivel de disociación entre el mecanismo de evaluación y prácticas de los profesores.

Palabras clave: responsabilidad, institucionalización, legitimidad, disociación, prácticas sociales

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In many countries, accountability policies have been developed in the educational sector over the last two decades. External examinations have grown as instruments of control over educational systems, schools and teachers (Eckstein & Noah, 1993; Lee, 2008). Arguing that these policies focus increasingly on the technical core and intensify the pressures from the institutional environment on schools and classrooms in more substantial ways, some scholars (Coburn, 2004; Sauder & Espeland, 2009; Spillane, Mesler, Croegaert & Sherer, 2011) have recently challenged one of the most enduring finding from the institutional studies of public schooling, that is that classroom activities are largely decoupled from their institutional environment.

Extending this emerging literature on the implementation of accountability policies in education, the main objective of this paper is to understand to what extent and through which processes the modes of construction and implementation of the instruments of external evaluation affect their institutionalization at the school level. Two distinct modes of construction and implementation are compared, regarding the extent to which they have an impact on the level of decoupling between the formal structure of evaluation and the teachers' practices. The first is basically bureaucratic. Here, the instruments of external evaluation are designed by a central bureaucracy; then, together with comparatively formal rules for their use, they are sent to each school. In this case, the accountability policy is implemented on a school-by-school basis. The second involves networking by local actors and intermediaries to create policy and provide support for its implementation. Here, in addition to the instruments created at the central level, evaluation instruments are created within networks of principals and inspector, and relayed locally by principals. In this case, authority and accountability are based on the social relationships between network participants. In this paper, we argue that organizational forms (e.g. networks or bureaucracies) mediate institutionalization. We suggest that the network mode of organizing more than the bureaucratic one stimulates the micro-foundations (Colyvas & Powell, 2006; Hallet & Ventresca, 2006; Barley, 2008; Hallet, 2010) of the institutionalization process. We argue that organizational forms (network vs. bureaucracy) influence the ways that

teachers interact with each other and their principal around the external evaluation, and the level of legitimacy attached to the external evaluation, which might lead to influence the level of coupling between the evaluation mechanism and the teachers' practices.

To investigate these analytical dimensions, a qualitative comparative study was conducted within the educational system of French-speaking Belgium. Natural variations in how the instruments of external evaluation were developed and implemented in schools within this educational system were used to compare the network model of implementation to the bureaucratic approach to reform. The institutionalization of the external evaluation was studied within eight schools split in two districts² differentiated from one another by the presence in one of them of a local mechanism for external evaluation developed and supported by a network of inspectors and principals.

The paper extends the literature on the reception of the accountability policies in education in three ways. First it opens a reflection line on the influence of the mode of construction of the accountability policies on their reception, while most previous studies (Spillane, Mesler, Croegaert & Sherer, 2011; Sauder and Espeland, 2009; Hallet, 2010) neglected the impact that the processes through which the accountability policies were developed might have on their implementation at the school level. Second, pursuing the pioneering work of Coburn (2001), it brings a theorization of the mediating mechanisms through which different modes of policy construction enhance or inhibit the re-coupling between the institutional environment and the actors' actual practices. Third it explores how forms of collaboration between organizations and horizontal patterns of exchange play in the institutionalization process of the accountability policies, while the dominant view of institutional change is that it is driven by organizational competition (Ingram & Clay, 2000; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

The paper is structured as follows. First, our study is situated at the interface of two literatures: the literature on the implementation of accountability policies in education and the one on networks and institutional change. Second, the qualitative study is described. Third, implications of the present study are discussed.

Literature review

The implementation of accountability policies

The development of external evaluation and accountability policies has renewed the debate on the coupling between the institutional environment and the teachers' practices. This debate has led to some contrasted positions and arguments. Some scholars (Sauder and Espeland, 2009; Hallet, 2010) suggested that accountability policies forced schools to couple tightly their activities to the institutional environment and pressures, while others (e.g., Ball, 2003) defended on the contrary that schools resist to these new pressures by fabricating identities that protect them. Sauder and Espeland (2009) used Michel Foucault's concept of discipline for understanding why higher education organizations are unable to buffer themselves from the institutional pressure generated by educational rankings and market-based accountability. They suggested that disciplinary practices like the continuous surveillance and the normalization associated with rankings of organizations impel them to reinterpret their practices and internalize new self-conceptions, even in situations where buffering would be desirable for these organizations. Ball (2003) also anchored his analysis of performativity regimes in a foucaldian perspective, but put more emphasis on the resistance made locally by the British schools and teachers to reject the new self-conceptions linked to the performativity regime (promiscuous and enterprising self, with a passion for excellence). He argued that in order to respond to the increasing national targets, indicators and evaluations in England, schools and teachers organize themselves and fabricate inauthentic individual and organizational identities. These fabrications contribute to decouple the core activity of schools and professional identities of teachers from the institutional pressure generated by the high-stake accountability policy in England.

In the middle of these two positions, some scholars investigated the extent to which the variations in the level of coupling are linked to intra-organizational explanations. Using the concept of organizational routines as analytical tool, Spillane, Mesler, Croegaert & Sherer (2011) found that within-school administrative practices mediate relations

between the external environment and classroom instruction. They showed that staff designed and redesigned organizational routines in an effort to couple administrative practice with both the external environment and with the technical core, and that the nature of interactions among school staff and the distribution of leadership help understanding the differences in the coupling level. [Hallet \(2010\)](#) made recently quite a similar argument based on a longitudinal ethnographic study anchored in a neo-institutionalist perspective. He studied how the teachers and the principal of one school (re)coupled their practices and identities to the accountability's myth and found that the recoupling process was first associated with an experience of epistemic distress and secondly with an evolution of the meaning attached to the accountability policies that lead most teachers of the school to contest the accountability-based approach and the legitimacy of the actors who initiated the recoupling. This second element shows that social interactions gave teachers the opportunities to think critically about the recoupling process and the transformation of identities and practices generated by the accountability policies.

All in all, the issue of the influence that accountability policies have on the recoupling between the institutional environment and the teachers' practices has been examined either by foucauldian analyses emphasizing tight coupling and resistance or by studies looking at the impact of social interactions and processes of formal and informal leadership within school. But to our knowledge the literature left unexplored the role that the construction and the implementation of the accountability policies might play in the dynamic of recoupling. To begin this reflection, two modes of construction and implementation of students' external evaluation are compared. The first is basically bureaucratic and the second is a network model of construction and implementation.

Bureaucratic vs. network forms of organizing

In the classic literature on schools as organisational forms ([Bidwell, 1965](#)), schools have been described as (professional-) bureaucracies mostly impermeable to systemic reforms. Since the 19th century, education is organized in large bureaucracies managed by political

systems, as many other social activities that came under political and bureaucratic control in modern societies (Meyer & Rowan, 1983). The emergence of large-scale educational organizations has been interpreted through rationalist arguments (Bidwell, 1965), and next, within the neo-institutionalist perspective (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), through cultural ones. This last perspective considers that the source of these organizational features is the surrounding macro-level societal order, which diffuses societal myths, ideologies and norms as to what particular organizations should be (Ingersoll, 1993), but also that the environmental pressures on organizations are largely limited to their structural characteristics and do not affect much their core technology. This means that in schools, instruction tends to be removed from the bureaucratic control, leaving instructional activities and outcomes uncontrolled and uninspected (Meyer & Rowan, 1983).

However, the development of new control designs (Rowan, 1990) and accountability via the external testing of students has reopened the exploration of the decoupling argument. Some studies (e.g. Spillane et al., 2011), most often conducted in educational systems characterized by high-stakes accountability systems, emphasized on the important diversity in the response of schools to the accountability pressures and proposed intra-organizational explanations to this diverse pattern of recoupling. So doing however, they neither have examined per se the role of bureaucratic mechanisms (e.g., rules and hierarchy) in the institutionalization of these new modes of regulation, nor have explained how the school differences in terms of recoupling might be linked to institutionalization processes at the field level. In this paper, our objective is to explore these aspects, by comparing bureaucratic modes of implementation to network forms of organizing.

Recently indeed, some scholars (Wohlstetter, Malloy, Chau & Polhemus, 2003; Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001) raised the issue of the role that alternative organizational forms to bureaucratic mechanisms might play in the implementation of educational policies. Smith & Wohlstetter (2001), for instance, analyzed a public school reform (the Annenberg Challenge) as an example of reform through school networks. The basic objective of the reform was to improve the efficiency of public education in most large urban areas in the US. Schools came together voluntarily to create school families and build collaborative capacities to

innovate, which gave the opportunity to study the functioning of what these authors characterized as affiliation networks. They found that networks have important social correlates that explain the enhanced capacity of schools for reforming their practices. They showed that reforming through school networks implies the transformation of decision-making structures that became largely concentrated in cross-site teams, the emergence of new leadership patterns centred on the network leaders rather than on the principals, and important changes in the type of authorities. They particularly underlined the role of shared beliefs in the formation of authority and in the distribution of leadership, making appear that networks also had cognitive correlates that interacted with the social ones.

Network and institutionalization

In this paper, we argue that micro-foundations of the neo-institutional theory (Colyvas & Powell, 2006; Hallet & Ventresca, 2006; Barley, 2008; Hallet, 2010) permit to theorize the social and cognitive correlates of the network model of policy construction and implementation, and describe the mediating mechanisms through which this organizational form can influence the institutionalization of new social practices in organizations. We suggest that the network mode of organizing (more than the bureaucratic one) stimulates the micro-foundations of the institutionalization process. This conception of institutionalization as a micro-process (Colyvas and Powell, 2006) emphasizes on the active role and the reflexivity of organizational members, and differs from the idea that the institutional change proceeds only through (macro and meso) mimetic, coercitive and normative pressures that impose themselves to organizations. The institutional change is not thought as a passive absorption of environmental influences. The (micro)-institutionalization of new social practices is considered to be mediated by internal work practices through which routines, categories and identities are developed that compress and stabilize the values, the meanings and the kind of use attached to the new organizational practices.

This conception of the institutionalization as internal to the organizations, active and reflexive provides us the theoretical anchoring

for thinking about the cognitive and social correlates of the network model of organizing (Smith and Wohlstetter, 2001). First, we argue that the institutionalization of the external evaluation through networking, more than through bureaucracy, is accomplished by modifying the type of social relationships between the teachers and their principal and facilitating the establishment of roles, practices and local social categories around the external exams. Second, we argue that social and cognitive correlates are interdependent, meaning that the transformation of relations and roles brought about by the network model of organizing leads to increase the legitimacy of the external evaluation and the evaluation process (which included the content of the evaluation instrument), and to favor the development, the internalization and the naturalization of transformed representations of the teaching profession. These representations associated with results-based regulation revolve around the twofold idea that, on the one hand, teachers are responsible for the results of their students and, on the other hand, the results of the external evaluation had to serve as an information base to modify their teaching practices. Our final argument is that as a consequence of these social and cognitive correlates, the network mode of policy construction and implementation increases the recoupling of evaluation structures and teaching practices.

Method

The Belgian context: centralization, external evaluation and accountability

The educational system of French-speaking Belgium is particularly promising ground for exploring our research questions, both for historical reasons and due to recent changes in educational policies. Historically, the Belgian school system was established as a highly decentralized system. The Belgian Constitution for instance begins not by defining what education should be, but by recognizing the legitimacy, even the prime importance, of private initiatives in education (citation removed). Even in 1914, when education up to a certain grade level became mandatory, the state refrained from interfering with Catholic schools, which would necessarily have

involved investigating what schools actually did. Since the end of the 1990s, however, under the political authority of the French-speaking community, regulatory and legislative activity has tended to standardize instruction, and has made the situation of subsidized schools (Catholic and municipal schools) similar to that of schools under direct state supervision. New rules have been established, principally in two areas: definitions of common requirements for programmes of instruction, and teaching personnel status. Nonetheless, the emergence of the state as a key coordinator has not been achieved by denying the importance of local forms of teachers' work coordination. During the late 90s, the state emerged as an evaluative state (Neave, 1988), meaning that it defined standards and monitored the extent to which they are attained through external evaluation organized at the end of primary school, but that it allowed some autonomy to schools in selecting strategies to achieve these standards.

In such an institutional context, one can easily understand that in Belgium's educational system, the evaluation of students has traditionally been a prerogative of local. The control exercised by the State over educational institutions being weak, the competent authorities for schools³ have been free to define curricula, pedagogical approaches and, a fortiori, evaluation practices for a long time. In the XX century, certain competent authorities introduced common exams for the sixth year of primary school. These exams took varying trajectories, but have now been abolished and replaced in 2009 by an exam that is common to all competent authorities and leads to certification. Also, for about the last ten years, external evaluations for diagnostic purposes of what students have learned have increasingly been used in basic education (citation removed).

By "external evaluation", we mean all evaluations of student learning not devised by a teacher or a local educational team but, rather, created and implemented by actors external to the classroom setting. In Belgium, these types of instruments are not created or organized exclusively by the State (French-speaking Community) but also by some competent authorities or more rarely at the district level. Some external examinations have official status and are constrained by legal text, while others are informal (typically those organized at the district level), having taken a completely different approach in order to be

accepted by the various actors involved. We now turn to the description of the external evaluation separately for each district.

Mechanisms of evaluation in districts A and B

External evaluation in district A

Primary schools from the “district A” are confronted to two types of external evaluation. They have exams leading to certification in the 6th year of primary school. These exams are relatively new, though they rely in part on previous exams (later eliminated) set up by some competent authorities like the Catholic network of schools. An exam is constructed every year and awards successful candidates the Certificat d’Etude de Base (Basic Education Certificate; hereafter referred to as the CEB). Exam results are not allowed to circulate. They must not be used to determine the position of students in a class or to rank educational institutions. These exams are sent to schools by the central administration. The correction is organized locally by the inspectors via a “production line” by bringing together several schools and results are sent back to the central administration. Finally schools get the results of their students individually.

But since 1994, schools also have external evaluations not leading to certification. They have been devised for the entire French-speaking Community. Every school year all students in 2nd and 5th year of primary education (7 and 11 years of age) take part in an external evaluation dealing in turn with the reading/production of written work, mathematics and sciences/geography (tri-annual rotation). The tests are held at the beginning of the school year. Again the results are not allowed to circulate or be used to rank educational institutions. They serve a “diagnostic” role (a) for teachers individually and (b) for managing the “educational system” as a whole. The teachers receive comparisons dealing with their classes together with the results of the system, as well as “pedagogical advices⁴” derived from problems identified at the system level. This feedback is intended to help the teachers to know in which discipline they must improve their results and which kind of teaching practices are appropriate for that.

External evaluation in district B

In district B, primary schools have the same external exams as schools from district A. But importantly for the purposes of this study, they also have external evaluations developed at the district level through networking between inspectors and principals. The network was built over the last 15 years on the initiative of two inspectors who proposed principals from the district to participate voluntarily to the conception of external exams. At that moment, no external exams were organized by the state. The inspectors claimed that in this period they “worked in secret”, did not inform their hierarchy of their initiative and did not receive the support of their other colleagues in the district. They lived with the fear of being criticized and having their project stopped, since they knew they were modifying existing standards and the roles assigned to the various actors, especially through the links they were creating among actors of different education competent authorities (catholic vs. official). They also terminated their limited roles as inspectors in order to produce instruments of knowledge that would provide advice and decision-making support for the principals and teachers. In the beginning, some principals who were not under the responsibility of these two inspectors participated to the network; they told of how they discretely obtained the exams through their colleagues -- principals already participating in the mechanism.

Today, “*it has become a large and complex bazaar*”. All of the inspectors in the district have now joined forces to support the evaluation mechanism involving just over 200 schools (98% of schools in the district)⁵. About a hundred principals from different networks are involved in the creation of two exams (2nd and 4th years of primary school) every school year. Ten working groups⁶, each consisting of 10 principals, are formed. The exams are held at the end of the school year. Compliance with test instructions, and the exact time and place of the test are the responsibility of the principal and the teaching staff. They are very similar in terms of the type of questions asked and the form of the exam to the exams created at the French-speaking Community level (CEB and diagnostic exams). In most of the schools, the tests serve as certification exams for teachers who, consequently, no longer make up their own final exams. The teachers encode the results on an Excel

spreadsheet directly connected to the inspectors' computers. The inspectors analyze the exam results and create graphs; they include in their analysis the results of the non-certification exams held in the Francophone Community and the CEB. The analyses are distributed to both teachers and principals. Very often, the results are commented on and discussed at meetings, but also during individual interviews with principals and teachers.

Beyond their modes of construction, the distinctiveness of these exams resides in the statistical treatment carried out afterwards by the inspectors, and in the way results and analyses are communicated to teaching staff. Each teacher receives the results of this statistical treatment in two different forms (synchronic and diachronic). A comparative synchronic analysis of the relative value (to the district average) of the performance of their class and their school was provided. A comparative diachronic analysis was also developed based on the results of external evaluations for several school years, including as well the results of external evaluations organized by the French-speaking Community. This involved comparing the results of the same class at different times.

Data collection

The present research paper forms part of a European-funded research project, which has set itself the objective of examining the role of "knowledge" in the development and socio-genesis of public policy and public action. The research material was collected in two stages.

In the exploratory phase of the research, teachers, inspectors and the individuals in charge of creating and distributing external evaluation instruments were met in order to improve our knowledge of the context, and of external evaluations carried out in the French-speaking Community. The exploratory interviews allowed us to identify, within one district (which we call "District B"), a particular external evaluation mechanism that seemed to structure a significant part of the social relations and practices within the district. Most of the local actors (inspectors, principals and teachers) signed on to this mechanism, though their support (at least in the case of the inspectors and principals) was voluntary.

Following the exploratory interviews, the research was pursued in two distinct districts: (1) “District A”, where no external evaluation was added locally; (2) “District B”, where external evaluations were additionally set up for the district. Natural variations in the way the policy of external evaluation is developed and implemented were thus used to explore our research questions. To maximize the validity of the comparison, 1) district A was selected for its similarities with district B using information-oriented sampling and 2) schools from district B were matched as much as possible with schools from district A regarding their social composition (advantaged, disadvantaged or mixed), their membership in the different competent authorities (Catholic network vs. the network of local public authorities), their geographic setting (rural or urban environment) and their size (from 1 to 4 classes per educational level). Nonetheless, one must note that district B differentiated from district A on some dimensions different from the local mechanism for external evaluation, which calls for caution in the interpretation of the links between the modes of external evaluation mechanisms’ construction (bureaucratic vs. network) and their institutionalization at the school level. District B was now experiencing greater social difficulties, which explain why schools from District B have on average a lower social composition. It was a region where industrial activity had been extensive, and industrial redevelopment was in full swing on several levels. District A was a more rural region, where economic activity was more stable and based to a greater extent on the tertiary sector and agriculture.

Beyond the fact that parts of the differences between the two districts are probably not due to differences in the modes of policy construction and implementation, one must also note that the comparison between the two districts is a comparison between two mixed forms of policy construction and implementation. The network and the bureaucratic modes represent ideal-types (Weber, 1971). It is particularly important to nuance that the network mode of construction and implementation is limited in its characterization by 1) the limited amount of exchange between the organizations (the exchanges are essentially organized around the external evaluation, even if over time, exchanges between the principals largely extended to new aspects, different from the external evaluation) and 2) the limited participation of categories of

actors to the network (the participation is limited to the school principals). The bureaucratic mode of policy construction and implementation is also limited in its characterization by 1) the fact that the Belgian educational system is traditionally highly decentralized and 2) the spreading of authority between different constituents. However, it can be argued that the organization of the external evaluation in French-speaking Belgium is a typical example of the emergent centralization of the educational competencies in French-speaking Belgium, even if that does not fully restrict the local initiatives as it is the case in District B.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers affected by external evaluation within each school and with the principals (see Table 2). In total 32 interviews were conducted, 16 in each District (3 in school A1, 4 in school A2, 6 in school A3, 3 in school A4; and 4 in each school from District B). In District A, the interviews focused on the teachers in second (confronted to the non-certificate evaluation) or sixth (confronted to the certificate evaluation) grade, while they were equally spread over teachers from the three “cycles”⁷ in District B. The interviews with the teachers were centred on the following categories: perceptions and uses of the external evaluation, and perceived effects of the external evaluation on the teaching practices and the social relationship in the workplace. In order to capture as best as possible the level of coupling/decoupling (as perceived by the teachers), teachers were systematically asked to describe the extent to which, according to them, the external evaluation had effects on lesson planning, teaching methods, teaching materials, student (internal) evaluation, learning pace and classroom management. Interviews lasted between half an hour and one hour and half and were systematically transcribed. The interviews conducted with the school principals focused on the same categories (except for the systematic questions on the impact of the external evaluation on the classroom practices) but also on general context of the school and its history. Aside from the interviews with the teachers and school principals, document analyses were also performed to fully understand the diversity and uses of the instruments used in the French Community. The type of feedback given to schools within the district B by the inspectors as well as the kind of pedagogical advices derived from the central diagnostic evaluation were analyzed.

Table 1
School matching in the two districts

	Social composition	Membership	Geographical setting	School size
A1	Advantaged	Catholic	Rural	Medium
A2	Mixed	State	Urban	Big
A3	Mixed	Catholic	Rural	Big
A4	Mixed	State	Rural	Medium
B1	Advantaged	State	Rural	Medium
B2	Mixed	State	Rural	Big
B3	Disadvantaged	Catholic	Urban	Big
B4	Disadvantaged	Catholic	Rural	Medium

Table 2
Interviews conducted in the two districts

Actors	District A	District B
Principals	4	4
Teachers, cycle 1	5	4
Teachers, cycle 2	0	4
Teachers, cycle 3	7	4

Data analysis

The main categories of our theoretical setting were systematically coded in the interviews conducted with the teachers and principals in the two districts using NVivo Version 8.0. The level of coupling/de-coupling between the teaching practices and the external evaluation mechanism was coded by referring to the categories of analysis suggested by [Coburn \(2004\)](#). Four categories were kept in our own analyses: de-coupling, the symbolic response, accommodation and assimilation. In

Coburn's words (2004): decoupling happens when “schools respond to pressures from the institutional environment by decoupling changes in structures from classroom instruction”, symbolic responses when “teachers responded to pressures symbolically, rather than in ways that influenced classroom routines, organization, use of materials, or approaches to instruction” (p. 224), assimilation when “the teachers drew on their tacit worldviews and assumptions to construct their understanding of the content and implications of messages” (p.224) and accommodation when “the teachers engaged with pressures from the environment in ways that caused them to restructure their fundamental assumptions about the nature of their teaching practices or students’ learning” (p. 226).

The legitimacy associated with the external evaluation by the teachers and the school principals were coded in two steps. Firstly types of legitimacy were coded by distinguishing between the cognitive, pragmatic and moral types of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). The cognitive legitimacy refers to the most commonly used “taken-for-granted” (or socially-accepted) status. In our analyses, the cognitive legitimacy mainly referred to the taken-for-grantedness associated with the idea of external evaluation itself and the cognitive principles associated with results-based regulation. The moral legitimacy refers to the social values associated with the external evaluation by the teachers, while the pragmatic legitimacy involves, in the definition given by Suchman (1995), the self-interested calculations and concerns of the most immediate actors. In this paper the pragmatic legitimacy is simply redefined as the evaluation by the teachers and the school principals of the appropriateness and the validity of the external evaluation’s procedure (test construction, data collection, data analysis, results communication). Secondly each quote related to a category of legitimacy was coded according to their level, by distinguishing between low, medium or high level of legitimacy.

The practices, roles and social categories were firstly coded with reference to the theory of local institutionalization as discussed by Colyvas and Powell (2006). In this paper, quotes were coded as social practices, roles or categories when the teachers and the school principals described the 1) social practices developed to organize locally the external evaluation and make sense of the results, 2) the shift and the

differentiation of professional roles attached to the external evaluation and 3) the use of common language and semantics to discuss issues related to the external evaluation. As it has been done to the coding of the legitimacy, the different categories (social practices, roles and categories) were secondly coded according to their level, by distinguishing between low, medium or high level of social practices, roles and categories. More details on the coding process and categories can be found in appendix.

Results are now presented, district by district. First social and cognitive correlates of the policy modes of construction and implementation are described. Second their relationships with the forms of coupling/de-coupling are examined.

Results

The social side of institutionalization: social practices and roles

The type of leadership exercised by the principal varied according to the policy's construction and implementation modes. More principals in District B schools than in District A schools (with the likely exception of school A2) strongly supported and legitimized their actions based on the external evaluations and results obtained by their schools.

"We meet with our principal in order to analyze our results (at the external evaluation) ... He explains us our strengths and weaknesses. He shows us some graphs indicating which competences we need to improve. And next we meet with our colleagues to explore solutions ... It's true that we are more and more scrutinized" (School B2 – C1)

The four principals of this District created a set of practices designed to ensure that the teachers took the external evaluation seriously, that the teachers were familiar with, and had analyzed and understood their students' results, and that a variety of measures would be taken to remedy deficiencies brought out by the evaluation.

"Mr. X (the principal) organizes meetings during the school time in order to discuss the results and conceive new pedagogical activities, adapted to the kids' difficulties ... In the beginning it

was hard to think differently about my practices, but now the things are improving and that motivates us" (School B3 – C1)

These practices were diverse: finalizing the presentation of the results to bring out any changing trends; collective and/or individual communication of the results to the teachers; participation in teacher meetings designed to analyze the results of the external evaluation (B2 and B3); and collecting information from teachers on the changes implemented to improve the weakest results obtained in the evaluation (B2 and B3).

In the district B, the participation of the principals in the construction of the external evaluation enabled them to improve their knowledge of pedagogical approaches per se.

"It (the external evaluation) has really changed the relationships I have with my teachers! You know, it gives much credit to my role ...When they become aware that my knowledge of the pedagogical contents is up to date, and even sometimes better than theirs, it reinforces much my interventions on their classroom practices" (Principal B2)

It also allowed them to improve their knowledge and understanding of (a) the results-based regulation model, (b) the concrete mechanism for its implementation, and (c) the public action referents on which this mechanism was based (in particular, the core competences delineated by the French-speaking Community). In sharing this knowledge with the teachers, the principals were able to play a central role in the new local social structures implemented around the external evaluation; improve their credibility in the eyes of the teachers (in one school, they were even viewed as the local expert whose skills were required to provide a valid interpretation of the results and comprehend their implications); and narrow the gap between the management structure and what was happening at the classroom level.

A contrario, in the schools of the district A, the principals intervene much less in classroom or other pedagogical matters. In three out of the four schools, the action of principal was largely decoupled from teaching practices. This was particularly clear when it came to the external evaluation.

"We have many discussions with our principal and with our colleagues – particularly with my colleagues teaching in the same grade as I - about the difficulties we face daily, but we nearly never talk about the external evaluation. It is true that we are preparing ourselves to the evaluation, but I am not sure it really influences what we do during the whole school year" (School A1 – C1)

One principal only in district A paid attention to the teachers' use of the external evaluation results. The three other principals contented themselves with circulating them and were mostly unconcerned by the fact that the teachers had taken the necessary steps to improve the least developed competences of the students in the school. Nonetheless, in one school in this district (school A2), the leadership provided by the principal was closer to the type of leadership observed in the schools of the other district. Referring to the results obtained in the external evaluation, the principal of this school invited the inspectors to a professional development day on the difficulties revealed by the evaluation; its purpose was to initiate a discussion on measures to be taken to remedy these difficulties. She also requested and made sure that this discussion continued in the grade meetings. However, the structures designed by the principal vis-à-vis the evaluation results were not only comparatively specific and responsive (whereas in the other district, regardless of the content of the results, the external evaluation was accompanied by local mechanisms), but also not as fully accepted by the teachers, who felt, to an even greater degree than in certain District B schools, under pressure and controlled by the external evaluation mechanism.

The analysis of the differences between the two districts in terms of the leadership of the principals has already revealed that in District B the implementation of the external evaluation was accompanied by a transformation of the most important roles. What about the roles, structures and social practices in a broader sense? Also, it seems that in District B (the "network" district) to a greater extent than in District A (the "bureaucratic" district); relations among teachers were modified due to the introduction of the external evaluation. Directly related to the social practices initiated by District B principals, the local coordination and division of work in this district revolved more than in District A schools around the external evaluation. By way of the consultations

among teachers, analyses of the results were established and certain practices designed to remedy possible difficulties noted in the external evaluation were initiated.

"We analyze for each item the results of our school, and where our pupils are situated (compared to the pupils of the District) ... and next we organize long meetings during which we are not disturbed in order to find solutions, to work on specific problems of learning and to construct new set of exercises and learning activities" (School B3 – C3)

Teachers in two schools (B2 and B3) also mentioned the impact of the external evaluation on the division of work. In school B3, this was manifested as a new division of competences, to be developed, in the various teaching "cycles", in mathematics and science. In school B2, it was through the adoption of a new mathematics textbook using the competency-based approach that a new division of competences, to be taught in the various teaching cycles and years, was introduced. In certain schools the external evaluation also seemed to have an impact on how teachers were compared. This impact seemed more meaningful in District B schools, where district policy on the communication of the external evaluation results focused on the performance of each class. However, it seems that in this regard the guidelines set down by the principal when presenting the results played a more decisive role than the policy of communicating the results of the inspection. In the schools where the emphasis was placed on collective performance (more often at the school level, for example in A3), the feeling that the teachers had been placed in a situation of competition was less evident than in the schools placing greater emphasis on individual performance on the external tests (for example in B4).

The same is true regarding the existence of social categories and techniques shared by staff at the local level. Indeed, it seems that in District B schools, common semantic and linguistic levels were created to make sense out of the external evaluation results. The level to emerge the most clearly was that of effectiveness in teaching. Several teachers and principals interviewed (here, one could also include certain inspectors in the district) used categories developed within this research trend (School Effectiveness Research). Thus, on the one hand, some

differentiated between school composition effects and practice-related effects, and, on the other hand, between class effects and teacher effects.

"With the evaluation, we are able to know whether the results are due to a class-effect or to a school-effect. So when the results (of a given teacher) are due to a class-effect, he is directly questioned in his practice" (Principal B3)

It is also interesting to note that the use of these categories, which were designed to balance different factors (the part of student performance attributable to teachers and that attributable to exogenous factors) played a subtle role in getting teachers to assume greater responsibility. This was because the latter tended to employ these categories to refer to the part of student performance attributable to their practices, than to cast their students' performance in a relativistic light, especially in schools with a more underprivileged population.

"We were disappointed by the results (of the external evaluation) and suffered because of them ... there had been more failures than in other schools and we took it hard. I know that the population of my school is underprivileged, yet we need to obtain normal results since the name of the game is to have zero failures" (Principal B4)

Obviously, the use of this category to get teachers to assume greater responsibility was not unconnected to the use to which this was put by inspectors in the district, who created their indicators with a view to immediately excluding school-population effects and thus avoiding the possibility that teachers would shun their responsibilities.

What can be said about the relations with the inspectors? Did the mode of construction and implementation of the external evaluation affect the way they performed in the schools and the relations they established with local staff? Once again, there was a difference between the two districts; it involved the teachers' perception of the importance attributed by the inspectors to the external evaluation and the results. Indeed, in District B the vast majority of teachers and principals made a very strong connection between the inspectors and the external evaluation. In certain schools (B1 et B3), this seemed to emerge through joint local meetings organized by inspectors, either to explain the external evaluation at the district level or to analyze the results obtained by the school. This connection was clearly less common in District A

schools, where several teachers (especially in A4 and A3) claimed to be unaware of what the inspectors did with the results of the external evaluation.

"It's really rare for us to have opportunities to talk with our inspector about the evaluation. And when we have, we do not discuss the core of it. The debate is rather technical" (School A3-13); "I don't know exactly what they do with the results (of the external evaluation). I guess that they are interested in developing a global point of view, but I am not sure" (School A4 – C1)

However, school A2 constituted an exception, since, at the request of the school principal, some of its teachers had recently been inspected following poor results obtained by the school in the external evaluation. Consequently, in this school not only did the teachers make a stronger connection between the external evaluation and the inspectors, but some also brought up the existence of a difficult relationship with the inspectors, since they felt they were under great pressure.

For this reason, did this stronger association, perceived by local staff to exist between the inspectors and the external evaluation, modify the teachers' relations with their inspectors? In the two districts, the relation with the inspectors continued to be marked by a fear of being inspected (i.e., that the latter was based exclusively, as was most often the case in District A, on standard compliance monitoring, or on monitoring extended to the use teachers made of evaluation results, as was most often the case in District B, and especially in school B3). It also seems that the intensity of the teachers' fear of inspection depended, on the one hand, on the quality of the personal relationship the inspector formed with the staff and, on the other hand, past experience with inspection. Nevertheless, a special characteristic arose in district B where the inspectors worked with the principals to develop external evaluation tests. To a greater extent than in district A, the external evaluation instruments led to conciliation between the inspectors and the teachers, and that it tended to increase teachers' trust for their inspector. This relationship of trust was indicated not only by the instrument but also by the inspectors' mechanism accompanying the external evaluation results (for example, by presenting the evaluation mechanism to local staff, or even by helping staff interpret the results and look for ways to improve).

Thus, more often than not, the teachers in this district had an ambivalent relationship with the inspectors, one affected by a fear of monitoring and a trust inspired by the social and technical mediation of the tool. In addition, in specific cases the teachers found it difficult to deal with this ambivalence. Thus, there were cases where an inspector might make an individual visit to a class, and the teacher had to deal with a relationship with the inspector that was based strictly on monitoring. In such cases, the teacher might not be able to deal with the situation very well and end up questioning the relationship of trust established via the instrument.

Table 3

Social practices, roles and categories by district

	District A	District B
Social practices	Continuity in the social practices No clear link between the external evaluation and the social practices	Intensification of the collaboration between the teachers and the principal, and of the collaboration between the teachers Teacher collaboration, and collaboration between teachers and the principal strongly centered on the external evaluation
Social categories	No common semantic levels created	Strong reference to the school effectiveness research categories
Roles and identities	Continuity in principal leadership	Principal leadership shift

Up to this point, the social correlates of the construction and implementation modes of external evaluation were examined. We will now focus on another major characteristic of the institutionalization of these tools at the local level, namely, the creation of a legitimate relationship with these tools - the cognitive correlates. It is accomplished by dissociating cognitive, pragmatic and moral forms of legitimacy.

The cognitive side of institutionalization: construction of local forms of legitimacy

It seems that the construction and implementation modes play a significant role in the process that links the local acceptance of evaluation instruments to the cognitive principles giving them meaning. Indeed, the analyses suggest that the dual concept of the increased assumption of responsibility by teachers and the inclusion of the external evaluation in a perspective of continuous improvement of teaching practices was much more evident among teachers in District B than it was among teachers in District A. Most teachers from district B seemed to experience their profession as a performance, one for which they are in large measure responsible.

"It's up to the teacher to determine why something went wrong; we're obliged to challenge our own positions (School B4 - C1)"; "It's up to us to do the re-evaluation (School B4 - C3)"; "We are in a constant state of self-questioning, it's very demanding, we never know if we're on the right path, it's hard" (School B2 - C2); "That's the judgment made: you either succeed or you don't; classes are compared and the results are attributed to different methodologies" (School B4 - C1)

This finding confirms the theoretical proposition advanced by [Colyvas and Powell \(2006\)](#) on the very nature of the institutionalization process, as well as propositions advanced by [Weick \(1995\)](#) on the role of exchange and communication processes in the stabilization of organizational routines and interpretations. It does this by revealing the extent to which the institutionalization of an organizational practice is based on the one hand on reducing the ambiguous character of this practice and on the other hand on a legitimization of the collective cognitive model chosen by the organization's members to make sense of the latter.

The analyses also show that in schools from the District A, characterized by fewer social practices centered on the external evaluation, teachers have less internalized the cognitive principles of the accountability policies. Most teachers from this district have felt less responsible for their students' performance and have less perceived that

results of the external evaluation are relevant information to improve their practices.

"I do not think that the results (of the external evaluation) reflect what I do in the classroom with the kids during all school year ... I think that teachers are the best placed to evaluate the true competencies of the kids (School A3 – 31)"; "I prefer to organize regular evaluation myself to diagnose their difficulties and not to simply say: they have that or that level. My evaluations are more helpful (School A1 – C1)"; "I doubt on its relevance (of the external evaluation). I feel that we could do almost anything, as long as the results are good it's ok. And I think it's bad because it's very easy to give good grades to the kids" (School A1 – C3)

Only some 5th and 6th grade teachers described feelings of guilt about the results as well as significant feelings of responsibility.

"It's a two-edged sword: they're not harmless, since individuals are being evaluated, compared, judged; we feel judged even if they insist this is not the case; our work is being called into question" (School A2 – 32)

But importantly, they have never made the link between these feelings and the perspective of being in a state of continuous improvement. This shows that even teachers from this District who are confronted to an external evaluation leading to certification have not really internalized the "regulation schema" underlying the accountability policies. This interpretation will be next confirmed when analyzing the level of coupling between the evaluation mechanism and the practices of these teachers.

Table 4

Social practices, roles and categories by district

	District A	District B
Cognitive legitimacy	Lower internalization of the cognitive principles associated with the accountability policies	Higher internalization of the cognitive principles associated with the accountability policies
Pragmatic legitimacy	Administration procedure more often contested	Higher credibility of the evaluation mechanism
Moral legitimacy	Very few reference	Very few reference

The level of pragmatic legitimacy appeared also contrasted according to the modes of construction and implementation of the policy, but less than the cognitive one. In the district where the construction and implementation of the external evaluation were carried out by a network (District B), very few actors interviewed challenged the evaluation mechanism and even less the validity of the statistical treatment, even though technically speaking some of the indicators were questionable as to the relevancy and reliability of what they were seeking to understand.

"The evaluations are very well conceived. The documents on which the evaluations are based are appropriate. And the fact that the evaluation is the same for each teacher helps us to question our practices" (School B1 – C1).

A contrario, more teachers and school principals from District A have contested the administration procedure of the test and the test itself.

"I feel that people who conceived the tests are not teachers ... The way items are formulated makes them difficult while they are not! And that causes them (the students) problems ... Moreover the test administration is very different from one school to another. In some schools, the test is administered in the students' class. It is very different for us. Our students are grouped with students they don't know and are given very unusual conditions for evaluation. So how can you compare the results? They obviously cannot be equal!" (School A2 – 32)

They have shed doubt on the equality of treatment during the administration and challenged in consequence the comparative value of the test performance and its role for regulating the teaching practices. We also noted that this contestation was more significant in mixed or disadvantaged schools, whatever their district.

Finally teachers from both districts have made little reference to social values to judge and make sense of the developing external evaluation. Some teachers from both districts underlined that their support for the external evaluation mechanism was related to the objectives of "equality of treatment" for students, even if some teachers from District A (mainly teachers from school A2) contested that these objectives were reached.

Till now, mediating pathways associated with the construction and implementation modes of external evaluation were described. Results relating to the decoupling will now be analyzed by replying to the following question: was there a difference between the external exam's mode of construction and implementation in terms of the decoupling between the evaluation mechanism and the teaching practices?

External evaluation and coupling/decoupling

The modes of policy implementation (see Table 5) also appeared to be linked to the reported level of coupling of the external evaluation mechanism and the teachers' practices. In the district where the construction and implementation of the external evaluation proceeded mainly bureaucratically (District A), the form of coupling that largely dominated was the symbolic response (8 teachers out of 12, see Table 6). For the teachers, the latter consisted in keeping the pressures of the institutional environment at a distance by adapting their practices at the margins and making the implemented transformations visible. Essentially, this was expressed through (a) a modification of the internal evaluation practices, with a view to making them adhere as much as possible to the test-taking conditions of the external evaluation, and (b) even, and especially in the cycle 3, through coaching given by the teacher in how to take external exams.

“What I changed is not so much in my way of working, but much the way I prepare the students to this type of evaluation” (School A3 – 31)”; “I make them pass the tests of last years. It is important to make the kids familiar to this type of questions and to show them the kind of performance that is expected from them (School A3 – 31)”; “After Easter we will resume the tests of last year to do a mock exam with the kids. First to get them used to the type of items, and next to the functioning of the evaluation itself” (School A2 - 33)

Other transformations displayed on a more regular basis by the teachers in this district were also close to the symbolic response category; these included reprogramming learning objectives according to the results of the external evaluations, or intensifying the pace of

learning during the months preceding the external evaluation, so as to maximize student performance in this evaluation. In this district, there were more symbolic responses among teachers in cycle 3, which was completed by a certificate evaluation. Three more obvious cases of decoupling were revealed among teachers in other cycles. In rarer cases (2 of the 9 teachers coded), symbolic responses seemed to bear the mark of accommodation. It was particularly evident in a sixth year teacher who essentially coached her students for the external evaluation, prepared them using old exams or used the exams of the previous year to situate her students in relation to the requirements of the CEB. However, in one subject (science studies) she also used pedagogical advices to carry out her own evaluations and substantially modified her teaching sequences, by focusing them more on experience and a process of discovery and competency construction by students.

On the other hand, accommodation was the most frequent response of teachers (9 teachers out of 12, see Table 7) in the district where the construction and implementation of the external evaluation occurred in a local network (District B). The transformations reported by the teachers in terms of their practices all revolved around an increased application of a competency-based pedagogy: organizing lessons around a competency rather than a subject; conducting experiments serving as the basis for learning, particularly in sciences; and language-learning activities anchored firmly in the reading of documents.

“Initially my teaching practices were very systematic, but evaluation after evaluation, I changed them importantly. The adaptation is necessary, not only to be accountable to the inspection, but mostly for the students (School B3 – C3)”; “I cannot say anymore that I teach now the same as I did ten years ago. The students’ evaluation has changed, and the methods also. It is particularly clear when I teach science. I do not ask them anymore to study definitions; I prefer to make them read documents, do experiments, interpret graphs, etc. (School B2 – C2)”; “The external evaluation modified some of our practices. The greatest changes were in the teaching of measurement competencies. Some years ago we taught separately the measurement of weight, distance and volume for instance. And now, we try to integrate much more these different competencies

by integrating them in real situations and by teaching them all along the school year" (School B4 – C2)

The scope of the changes varied considerably. Some teachers said they designed a lesson using a competency-centered approach, and based it on students' failures in specific areas of the evaluation; others seemed to have brought this approach into general use, either in particular disciplines (in the present case, early-learning studies and mathematics were the disciplines most frequently cited) or in all of their teaching practices. One response was coded as "assimilation", thereby indicating that the changes introduced by the teacher were in line with their personal practices. There was another interesting aspect to this district: the transformations to the teaching practices did not specifically target teachers in the final cycle but were, rather, extended to the various stages of the organization.

Table 5

Dominant types of coupling/decoupling at the district level

	District A	District B
Cycle 1 teachers	Decoupling	Accommodation
Cycle 2 teachers	-	Accommodation
Cycle 3 teachers	Symbolic response	Accommodation

Table 6
Type of coupling at the teacher level (District A)

	Level of coupling		Level of coupling
School A1		School A2	
Cycle 1 teacher	Symbolic response	Cycle 3 teachers:	
Cycle 3 teacher	Decoupling	- Teacher 31	Symbolic response
		- Teacher 32	Symbolic response
		- Teacher 33	Symbolic response
School A3		School A4	
Cycle 1 teachers		Cycle 1 teacher	Symbolic response
- Teacher 11	Decoupling	Cycle 3 teacher	Symbolic response
- Teacher 12	Decoupling		
- Teacher 13	Decoupling		
Cycle 3 teachers			
- Teacher 31	Symbolic response		
- Teacher 32	Symbolic response		

Table 7
Type of coupling at the teacher level (District B)

	Level of coupling		Level of coupling
School B1		School B2	
Cycle 1 teacher	Accommodation	Cycle 1 teacher	Symbolic response
Cycle 2 teacher	Assimilation	Cycle 2 teacher	Accommodation
Cycle 3 teacher	Accommodation	Cycle 3 teacher	Accommodation
School B3		School B4	
Cycle 1 teacher	Accommodation	Cycle 1 teacher	Accommodation
Cycle 2 teacher	Accommodation	Cycle 2 teacher	Accommodation
Cycle 3 teacher	Accommodation	Cycle 3 teacher	Symbolic response

Note: The category of coupling/decoupling was assigned to each teacher as a function of the dominant category coded in their interview.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to understand to what extent and through which processes the modes of construction and implementation of the instruments of external evaluation affected their institutionalization at the school level. Natural variations in the modes of construction and implementation of the instruments of external evaluation in the educational system of French-speaking Belgium were used to compare the network model of implementation to the bureaucratic approach to reform. Results from this comparative study show that more than the bureaucratic approach to educational reform, the network model of organizing stimulates the micro-foundations of the institutionalization, which contribute to reduce the level of decoupling between the evaluation's mechanism and the teachers' practices.

This study participates to the elucidation of the factors that explain the local variations in the level of coupling between the accountability policy and instruction. Authors like [Sauder and Espeland \(2009\)](#) argued that accountability policies, more than other strand of policy in education, forced schools to couple tightly their activities to the institutional environment and pressures. Our analyses showed that in an institutional environment into which accountability policies are being developed, the reception of the external evaluation instruments and the institutionalization of an output-based regulation are highly variable and depend, at least partially, on the processes by which the external evaluation have been developed and implemented in schools. In the district characterized by a network model for reform, the significance and the weight of the external evaluation mechanisms were found largely different than in the district characterized by bureaucratic approach. The "district" external evaluation was used by the teachers from District B for certification; it supported internal pedagogical discussions that tended to involve all teachers whatever the grade they teach in (and not only the teachers in the particular grade evaluated); and it justified, called for and even "forced" teachers to re-evaluate their own beliefs and actions for the purpose of change in terms of work organization or teaching practices.

This study also points out that the network effect on the institutionalization of the external evaluation at the school level is

largely mediated by the development of social practices, categories and roles on one hand, and by the construction of local forms of legitimacy on the other hand. It appeared that the changes in the social practices in schools from District B were mostly linked to a shift in the principal leadership. The participation of school principals to the construction of the external evaluation instruments improved their knowledge of the evaluation mechanism and its pedagogical content, and increased their legitimacy in the eyes of the teachers. Their authority thus became reinforced by its coupling with a new expertise (evaluation tools and analysis) which fuels in turn their pedagogical leadership. The principals in District B influenced the re-coupling in two inter-related ways. They initiated a direct control of the teaching activities by attending lessons or by following-up of the pedagogical projects developed in link with the external evaluation, and they stimulated the development of social structures largely centered on the external evaluation. The social interactions developing locally in district B helped the teachers more than in district A to make sense retrospectively of their individual and collective performance and participated to the internalization of the cognitive principles underlying the external evaluation organized by the inspectors. As a result, in district B, organizational and pedagogical routines have changed more deeply, evaluation tools became more legitimate and represented also higher stakes for teachers and principals.

The present study makes a contribution to the theorization of institutional change in three ways. First, it gives substance to a conceptualization of the institutional change that contrasts with the idea that the institutionalization, as a deterministic process, would operate essentially through isomorphic pressures (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), but also with the one that the institutional change would be largely driven by institutional entrepreneurs who have the resources and the skills to realize their interests and remake institutions accordingly (Fligstein, 2001). Our results show indeed that the institutionalization of the external evaluation in District B operates through the agency exercised by individuals, but that this agency is distributed over different types of actors (the inspectors, the principals and the teachers). Certainly inspectors as well as school principals in District B can be described as institutional entrepreneurs who initiate

and promote an output-based regulation, partly in order to maximize their own interests (e.g., re-appropriate the pedagogical domain confiscated by recent reforms of their status) and increase their control on the teaching practices. But our analyses emphasize mainly that the institutionalization is a more complex process, which largely depend on the nature of the social interactions initiated by the inspectors and the development of local forms of “self-reinforcing feedback dynamics of heightened legitimacy and deeper taken-for-grantedness” (Colyvas & Powell, 2006, p. 305). What matters are the social exchanges, alliances, commitments of the actors involved. The networking between schools principals and inspectors are in fact forms of social alliance and reciprocities that reinforce the process of institutionalization of the output-based regulation.

Second, it renews the discussion related to the forces that stimulate the institutional change. The dominant view of institutional change is that it is evolutionary and driven by organizational competition (Ingram & Clay, 2000). By showing that the network mode of implementation increases the recoupling through the internalization of the cognitive principles underlying the accountability policies, this study tends to emphasize that horizontal patterns of exchange between the organizations of a given field belonging to a common space is positively associated with the institutionalization of the output-based regulation in District B. This finding opens a new important field of enquiry concerning the nature of collaborative and horizontal exchange between organizations that would drive the institutional change. Research on institutions and networks has proceeded on largely separate trajectories over the past few decades (Owen-Smith and Powell, 2008). The present study makes a first contribution in this sense, by pointing out that competitive and collaborative relationships between the organizations are not exclusive. We could indeed suggest that a side-effect linked to the collaboration between organizations in District B is the reinforcement of the competitive relationships between them, in particular because the accountability rationale is basically comparative and competitive. It appeared indeed that most teachers in District B gave much credit to the relative value of their performance and perceived the space of comparison as legitimate, while teachers from District A criticized the meaning of the comparison process and the

necessity of it to make sense of their results. Set differently, it could be argued that the horizontal patterns of exchange between organizations reinforce and legitimize the competitive forces which in turn drive the institutional change.

Third our study shows that the organizational analysis of the institutionalization process cannot be limited to the study of the reform's reception at the organizational level, but needs to be opened to the interactions between the organizations, the "intermediaries" and the institutional field. Most studies using neo-institutional theory in the field of education to analyze the implementation of educational policies (Coburn, 2001, 2006; Spillane et al., 2011) limited the scope of their investigation to the intra-organizational factors and dynamics that influence the institutionalization of reforms and the sense given to them by the teachers. The results of the present study (despite being analyzed only at the micro level) make appear that the institutionalization is better described as a multi-level process incorporating macro (institutional), mezzo (organizational), and micro (intraorganizational) levels of analysis (Cooney, 2007), since the social and cognitive dynamics at work at the micro level showed to be largely connected to the process of implementation, at the meso-level. That conception of the institutionalization as a multi-level process makes particularly important to understand the processes by which the different "scenes" become connected and influence each other.

The results of our study are obviously limited in several ways. First, our data provides only a cross-section and not a view of the institutionalization process over time. The longitudinal aspect of change is only captured through the perception of the teachers. But repeating observations and interviews would have certainly increased the validity of the results analyzed here. Second, the paper does not present detailed analyses of the implementation processes (bureaucratic vs. network) at the meso-level in the two Districts (for this kind of analyses, see citation removed), and how they relate to the institutionalization of the policy at the school level. It only captures these connections by contrasting social and cognitive correlates observed at the micro-level. Nonetheless, linking more directly both levels of analyses would reinforce the understanding of the mechanisms through which "inter-organizational networks serve as conduits for the diffusion of practices and ideas"

(Owen and Powell, 2008, p.596), or the way by which bureaucratic processes affect the reception of policies in education. Third, the study does not explore the mid and long-term consequences of the accountability policies on the teachers' practices and morale. The study showed that teachers in the District B were not highly critique vis-à-vis the external evaluation and its implications for the alignment of their class practices. But that would be important to investigate whether this re-coupling maintains over time and becomes taken-for-granted, or gives way to resistance by the teachers (Hallet, 2010). These last considerations emphasizes that the main implications of the present study are not so much for the accountability polices per se, for which the benefits remain unclear (Lee, 2008), but for the design of educational policies.

Notes

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2 The term "district" is used in this paper to make reference to a local geographical entity and not to a local authority or an intermediate administration. It will be later explained that the regulation of the educational system in the French-speaking Community of Belgium is rather centred on the repartition of the authority between the State and different competent authorities than on a territorial basis.

3 Competent authorities are differentiated from one another by philosophical differences. Four educational "networks" coexist in French Belgium: the State network of the French Community of Belgium, the network of local public authorities (towns, municipalities and provinces), the réseau de l'enseignement libre confessionnel (the denominational education network, primarily Catholic) and the réseau d'enseignement libre non confessionnel (the non-denominational education network).

4 The "pedagogical advices" (pistes didactiques) is an official document that follows the tests and that propose pedagogical advices on the basis of the result and the more common errors.

5 The inspectors explained that they did not wish to enlarge the geographical district covered by the mechanism. All the inspectors involved adhered to the initial project and the vast majority of the schools, who had the opportunity to take part in the evaluations voluntarily, participated in the mechanism.

6 The groups were: solids and figures; numbers; magnitudes and data processing; reading; writing; listening; scientific awareness; historical awareness; geographical awareness and computers. The latter group did not formulate an evaluation question but took responsibility for the computer tools needed for the mechanism to work properly (encoding table, macros) and developed a web site.

7 In foundational education, the teaching is organized into three cycles ("cycle 1" corresponding to grades 1 and 2, "cycle 2" to grades 3 and 4 and "cycle 3" to grades 5 and 6).

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Appendix: Coding matrices

Coding matrix for the social practices, roles and categories

	Low	Medium	High
Social practices (teacher collaboration, work division and coordination, etc.)	Social practices related to the external evaluation are coded as low if they are described by the teachers as idiosyncratic and rare (1 per 3 months).	Social practices related to the external evaluation are coded as medium if they are described by the teachers as rather organized and quite frequent (1 per month).	Social practices related to the external evaluation are coded as high if they are clearly scripted and frequent (more than 1 per month).
Roles	Roles related to the external evaluation are coded as low if it is not determined who, in the school, communicate the results, analyze them and organize the responses to them.	Roles related to the external evaluation are coded as medium if some of them only are systematically assigned to a person or to a group of persons.	Roles related to the external evaluation are coded as high if it is unambiguous who assume them.
Categories	Categories related to the external evaluation are coded as low when they are diffuse and vary much from one teacher to another.	Categories related to the external evaluation are coded as medium when some teachers share categories to make sense of the external evaluation.	Categories related to the external evaluation are coded as high when more than 2/3 of the teachers interviewed use common categories to describe and make sense of the external evaluation.

Coding matrix for the social practices, roles and categories

	Definition	Examples from the interviews
Symbolic adaptation	The symbolic adaptation of the classroom practices to the external evaluation does not affect classroom routines, organization, use of materials, or approaches to instruction.	"We (I and my 6th grade colleague) confront students to new types of items and questions to prepare them to the external evaluation ... We also use tests of the preceding school years for that, but never for planning lessons." (Teacher A3 – 32).
Decoupling	Classroom practices are unrelated to the external evaluation.	"I do not find the results useful. We even do not communicate them to the parents. The same is true for the "pedagogical advices" associated with the results; we even do not consult them." (Teacher A3 – 13).
Assimilation	Changes in classroom practices related to the external evaluation fit the teachers' preexisting practices.	"The external evaluation influences the way I teach – how I plan the lesson and choose the material -, but you know, mostly in the way I already intended to teach" (Teacher B1 – C2).
Accommodation	Changes in classroom practices modify substantially the teachers' preexisting practices.	"It is clear that the external tests modify my approach to teaching and the way I conceive some learning sequences. Let's take the example of the "measurement competences" in mathematics. More than before now, we use examples taken from the real life as departure point. We also try to make more connections (in the learning process) between the different types of measurement competences ... Indeed I mix different approaches to teaching. And I select the most appropriate as a function of my objectives" (Teacher B3 – C3).

Coding matrix for the types of legitimacy

	Low	Medium	High
Cognitive legitimacy	The cognitive legitimacy of the external evaluation is coded as low if principles associated with the output-based regulation are explicitly criticized by the teachers.	The cognitive legitimacy of the external evaluation is coded as medium if principles associated with the output-based regulation are partially questioned but globally accepted.	The cognitive legitimacy of the external evaluation is coded as high if principles associated with the output-based regulation are unquestioned and considered as natural.
Pragmatic legitimacy	The pragmatic legitimacy of the external evaluation is coded as low if the procedure of the external evaluation (test taking, test correction, results' communication, etc.) is explicitly contested.	The pragmatic legitimacy of the external evaluation is coded as medium if the procedure of the external evaluation is partially questioned.	The pragmatic legitimacy of the external evaluation is coded as high if the procedure of the external evaluation is considered as "taken-for-granted".
Moral legitimacy	The moral legitimacy of the external evaluation is coded as low when teachers make reference to social values in order to judge the external evaluation negatively.	The moral legitimacy of the external evaluation is coded as medium when teachers mention that the external evaluation only partially fit some of their social values.	The moral legitimacy of the external evaluation is coded as high when teachers mention that the external evaluation makes possible to reach objectives anchored in their social values (most often the equality of treatment).