



**Pathways Research Series:**  
**Understanding Effective School Improvement**

# Self-Evaluation

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## About the authors

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*“Self-evaluation can be recognised as a useful ‘guide’ or ‘roadmap’ in a school’s journey towards improvement.”*



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# What is self-evaluation?

School self-evaluation has become a key feature of school improvement cycles in a variety of educational systems across the world. Over the years, educational policy in the UK has seen the practice of self-evaluation (and consequently the completion of self-evaluation forms (SEFs)) going from being essential to discretionary and back again in various forms.<sup>1</sup> However, the basic principles of self-evaluation are difficult to counter.

*“Feedback loops ... allow us to self-construct, letting us travel to places we don't have the instructions for beforehand, and letting us build on the history of our actions. In this way, humanity pulls itself up by its own bootstraps.”<sup>2</sup>*

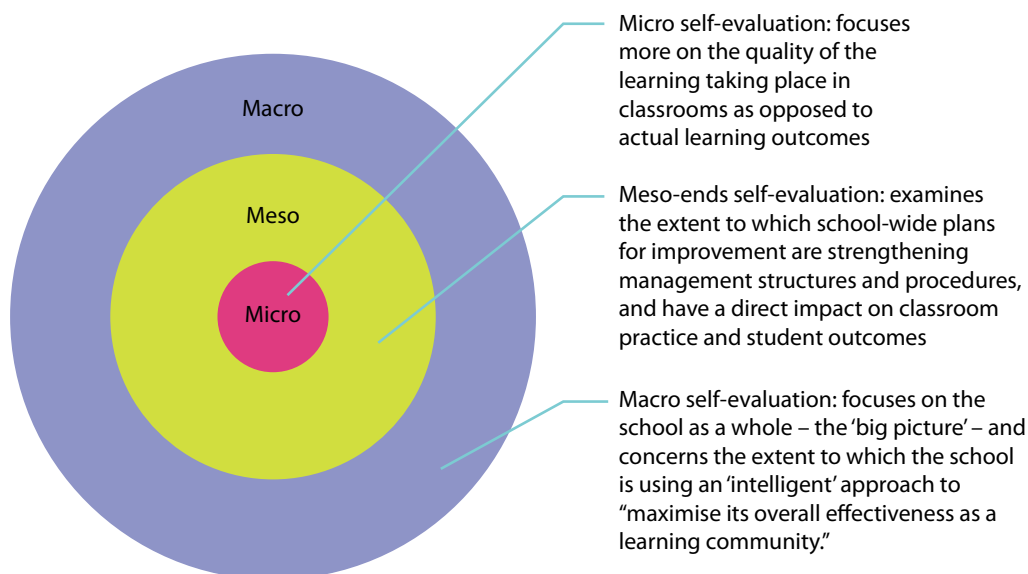
‘Self-evaluation’ is recognised as a multidimensional set of activities that potentially serve a variety of purposes. Evaluation in educational contexts can cover these phases: curriculum and professional development purposes; school development and improvement; public accountability and for individual and organisation learning purposes.<sup>3</sup> The concept of self-evaluation appears to have emerged from ‘review-type’ exercises carried out by different stakeholders and on varying scales. Here are some definitions of key terminology in this area:

Term	Description
<b>Audit</b>	Mentioned more in school development literature of the 1990s. Seen by some as ‘summative’ in nature. <sup>4</sup> Also interpreted as an ‘information gathering’ exercise; identifying current strengths and weaknesses to enable a school to make “informed decisions about future planning priorities.” <sup>5</sup>
<b>Collective review</b>	Based on principle of the “sum of the parts is exceeded by the collective whole”. Seen as analogous to self-evaluation in early educational literature. Involves taking stock of current practices, what other practices take place in other institutions, the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. <sup>6</sup> More formative in nature; can be preparatory ahead of externally-led summative exercises.
<b>Inquiry</b>	Used more often in the US; ‘appreciative inquiry’ seen as a more open-ended activity identifying an organisation’s strengths within their own “frame of reference.” <sup>7</sup> It can be both summative and formative.
<b>Quality assurance</b>	Often externally-led activity for accountability purposes. <sup>8</sup>
<b>Self-assessment</b>	Also often synonymous with self-evaluation, but it is important to make distinction with self-evaluation. In the UK, assessment may refer to an examination of the “knowledge, skills and attitudes” gained by students with less focus on the processes taking place. An evaluation, however, is an attempt to “examine critically the extent to which a process such as assessment is effective, bringing to it an evaluative judgement on the process or outcome.” <sup>9</sup> It can be both summative and formative. <sup>10</sup>
<b>Self-evaluation</b>	Essentially a formative set of activities; defined as: “a process of reflection on practice, made systematic and transparent, with the aim of improving pupil, professional and organisational learning.” <sup>11</sup> This is seen as continuous – a type of ‘moving picture’ – embedded in the ‘daily rhythms’ of the school and its practitioners, flexible and engages a range of stakeholders which celebrates difference. <sup>12</sup>
<b>Self-inspection</b>	Summative in nature; one-off event to examine accountability; uses pre-determined criteria or framework; prefers consensus (as opposed to change). <sup>13</sup>
<b>Self-review</b>	Often taken to be synonymous with self-evaluation but distinctions exist; can denote “an overview of a school’s quality and effectiveness” which is more summative in nature and feeds into a self-evaluation (which is more formative). <sup>14</sup>

## Accountability and development

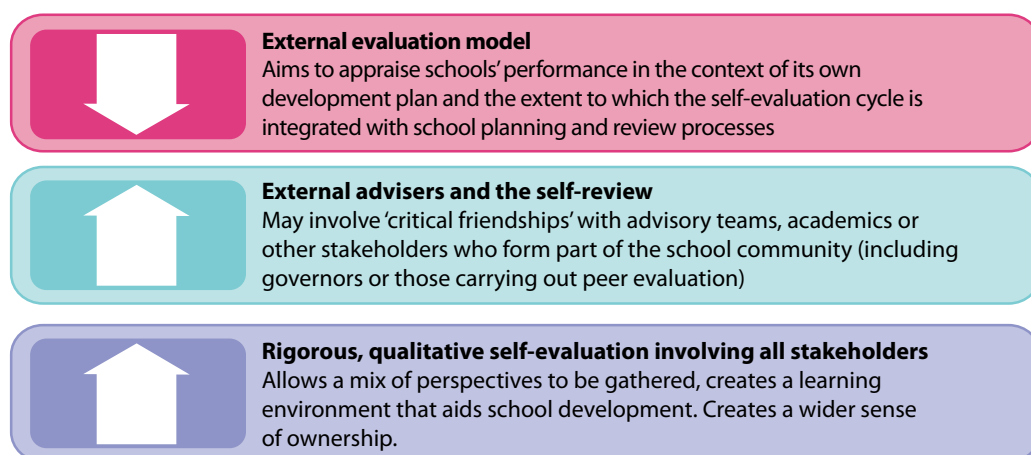
Self-evaluation can be seen to encompass three dimensions that serve dual purposes; accountability and development:<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 1: A proposed 'improved' model of self-improvement encompassing its multidimensional and multi-purpose nature**



Self-evaluation can also contribute towards developing the "intelligent school"<sup>16</sup> whereby knowledge and experience of various stakeholders become 'owned' by the school as a learning institution and do not get lost when staff move on.

**Figure 2: An alternative model of evaluation: the 'top-down' exercise is counter-balanced by the two 'bottom-up' approaches<sup>17</sup>**



With the tensions inherent in the multidimensional, multi-tiered approaches to evaluation outlined here, how are decisions to be made in order to balance the top-down with the bottom-up?

Key questions to ask include:

- 1 Where should an organisation place itself on each dimension to optimise the impact of school self-evaluation on professional and student learning?
- 2 What sort of relationship should there be between school self-evaluation and external review/inspection?
- 3 To what extent do the following roles, structures and processes within the system, school and classroom promote internally driven, bottom-up approaches to self-evaluation to promote student and professional learning?<sup>18</sup>
  - i) leadership at different levels
  - ii) tools for monitoring progress, planning and standard operating procedures
  - iii) relationships and politics
  - iv) capacity for change and improvement: can development be ignited and sustained at an appropriate level?
  - v) time and resources.

## View from the field

Schools that are developing an awareness of self-evaluation processes may exhibit the following characteristics:<sup>19</sup>

- clarity of purpose regarding the principles driving the school's approach to self-evaluation
- clear understanding of the purposes of self-evaluation and its relationship with school improvement
- skills to collect and analyse data
- data used proactively, with knowledge of which data is confidential or shared
- range of evidence-gathering strategies
- criteria by which to analyse evidence made explicit and shared with stakeholders
- able to lead and manage evaluation cycle and involve all stakeholders
- understanding and management of tensions inherent in self-evaluation (e.g. development ↔ accountability; internal ↔ external)
- clear links between self-evaluation and other school processes (e.g. continuous professional development, responses to external initiatives)
- "The school has a secure, trusting and open climate."

Diagnosis remains an important first step in identifying the school's current state and position as schools are at various stages in terms of the improvement journey.

*“It is clear that schools at different stages of development require different strategies not only to enhance their capacity for development, but also to provide a more effective education for their students ... Strategies for school development need to fit with the “growth state”, or culture of the particular school. It is also clear that strategies that are effective for improving performance at one “growth state” are not necessarily effective at another.”*<sup>20</sup>

## Positive self-evaluation

### View from the field

A positive self-evaluative culture is one where teachers can:<sup>21</sup>

- generate questions amongst their peers and students about learning
- engage in regular dialogue to explore students' experiences in and orientation towards learning
- develop a critical interest in current research about learning and use the knowledge to reflect on their own practice
- be willing to take a step back from their own position and apply a more systematic use of research evidence on which to explore individual classroom practice and learning context (rather than the use of unexamined assumptions).

Self-evaluation and the concepts of school improvement and effectiveness are all multidimensional 'entities' and can serve a variety of purposes at any one time. Self-evaluation should allow schools to function as more autonomous and active participants and leaders during school improvement processes. "Self-evaluation, school improvement planning, professional development and performance management need to be integrated so that they are manageable, evidence-based and systematic without

being over-bureaucratic."<sup>22</sup> Self-evaluation can therefore be recognised as a useful 'guide' or 'roadmap' in a school's journey towards improvement.

“How the process of school self-evaluation is led and managed is vital to its success. Leadership and management actions are likely to determine how staff perceive the process, how they engage with the process and also to influence the action and outcomes of the process.”<sup>23</sup>

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