TAALSTIMULERENDE MAATREGELEN IN DE PRAKTIJK
Case-studies naar talenbeleid in lagere scholen

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Voorwoord

De Vlaamse overheid stimuleert scholen al een aantal jaren om een actief talenbeleid te voeren. Scholen krijgen daarvoor heel wat vrijheid en verantwoordelijkheid. Een schoolbeleid implementeren is echter geen eenvoudige klus. In deze kwalitatieve studie gingen we na hoe zes lagere scholen hun talenbeleid vormgeven: Welke maatregelen nemen ze om de taalontwikkeling van leerlingen te stimuleren? Welke strategieën hanteren ze om hun talenbeleid te implementeren in de volledige school? En wat maakt het talenbeleid in de ene school effectiever voor de taalontwikkeling van leerlingen dan in de andere? Met de inzichten uit deze studie hopen we het Vlaamse onderwijsbeleid te informeren en het talenbeleid in scholen te versterken.

Inhoud

Beleidssamenvatting

De Vlaamse overheid stimuleert alle scholen al zo'n tiental jaar om een talenbeleid uit te werken met als doel de taalvaardigheid van leerlingen te verhogen (Crevits, 2014; Smet, 2011; Vandenbroucke, 2007). Een schooltalenbeleid omvat alle schoolbrede maatregelen die een schoolteam neemt om de taalontwikkeling van leerlingen te stimuleren en om het leren via taal te stimuleren (Van den Branden, 2010). Uit een studie die de Vlaamse Onderwijsinspectie uitvoerde tussen 2009 en 2014 (Onderwijsinspectie, 2015) blijkt dat een groot deel van de scholen aan de slag is gegaan met de ontwikkeling en implementering van een talenbeleid. Het rapport bevat evenwel geen gegevens over de specifieke maatregelen die schoolteams nemen om de taalontwikkeling van leerlingen te bevorderen, of concrete gegevens over de implementatiestrategie van scholen. Bovendien werden er geen gegevens op leerlingniveau verzameld. Het is dus ook onduidelijk of de maatregelen die scholen nemen in het kader van hun talenbeleid daadwerkelijk bevorderlijk zijn voor de taalontwikkeling van hun leerlingen.

In deze kwalitatieve studie proberen we inzicht te verwerven in de manier waarop schoolteams in lagere scholen hun talenbeleid vormgeven en implementeren. Aan de hand van focusgroepgesprekken met leden van het talenbeleidsteam en leerkrachten in zes scholen gingen we na welke taalstimulerende maatregelen schoolteams nemen in het kader van hun talenbeleid. Daarnaast gingen we na welke strategieën ze hanteren om hun talenbeleid te implementeren. Tot slot gingen we na of er een verband is tussen het talenbeleid van de school en de leesprestaties van leerlingen op basis van eerder verzamelde toetsresultaten in de scholen (zie Vanbuel et al., 2018).

Talenbeleid bleek in elke school een belangrijk aandachtpunt te zijn. Over het algemeen namen scholen heel wat maatregelen om een leerklimaat voor leerlingen te creëren op het vlak van taalontwikkeling (bv. aankoop van boeken, een schoolbib uitbouwen, taaltesten afnemen …). In elke school werden uitgebreide remediëringsmogelijkheden voorzien voor taalzwakke leerlingen. In vier van de zes scholen werd ook gesproken over gezamenlijke pedagogische en didactische maatregelen. Die maatregelen zijn tot op zekere hoogte evidence-based, maar ze leidden doorgaans niet tot erg ingrijpende veranderingen in de klaspraktijk van leerkrachten. Voorbeelden van zulke maatregelen zijn kwartierlezen, waarbij leerlingen elke dag een kwartiertje lezen, of het spenderen van aandacht aan woordenschat binnen WO-lessen. Bovendien hebben alle scholen een 'Hoofdzakelijk Nederlands' beleid. Leerlingen worden gestimuleerd om zoveel mogelijk Nederlands te spreken, al wordt er in sommige scholen minder streng gereageerd op sporadische uitingen van leerlingen in hun moedertaal dan in andere. Die bevindingen komen overeen met eerder onderzoek dat uitwees dat Vlaamse leerkrachten en schoolteams over het algemeen sterk overtuigd zijn van het belang een eentalig schoolbeleid, waarin thuistalen zoveel mogelijk worden vermeden (Agirdag, Avermaet, & Van Houtte, 2013; Clycq, Timmerman, Van Avermaet, Wets, & Hermans, 2014; Pulinx, Van Avermaet, & Agirdag, 2017; Strobbe et al., 2017).

In de onderzoeksliteratuur wordt een school(talen)beleid als 'effectief' beschouwd wanneer het 1) focust op een verbetering in (talen)onderwijs, en 2) een leeromgeving creëert voor leerkrachten

(Kyriakides, Creemers, Antoniou, & Demetriou, 2010; Kyriakides, Creemers, Antoniou, Demetriou, & Charalambous, 2015). Slechts een van de zes scholen in deze studie is erin geslaagd om een 'strategisch' talenbeleid uit te werken dat inzet op beide dimensies. Twee scholen zetten in op de eerste dimensie, maar een krachtige leeromgeving voor leerkrachten ontbreekt. Hun talenbeleid identificeren we als een 'inert talenbeleid'. Eén school slaagt er daarentegen wel in om samenwerking tussen leerkrachten te realiseren en voldoende leermaterialen te voorzien, maar focust dan weer in beperkte mate op evidence-based taalstimuleringsmaatregelen. Het talenbeleid van die school classificeren we als 'ad hoc'. Twee scholen slagen er niet in om verandering te realiseren in beide dimensies en hebben slechts een 'papieren' talenbeleid.

Uit onze analyses blijkt dat de implementatiestrategieën van schoolteams een belangrijke rol spelen in de impact van het talenbeleid van scholen. Hoewel er geen 'one-size-fits all'-aanpak bestaat op vlak van talenbeleidsimplementatie, kunnen we toch een aantal trends identificeren op basis van onze analyses:

- De school die erin geslaagd is een strategisch talenbeleid te implementeren, verschilde van de andere scholen op één punt: er waren duidelijke afspraken gemaakt over de taakverdeling;
- Om de eerste dimensie van schooltalenbeleid te verbeteren, i.e., om taalonderwijspraktijken te verbeteren, is het daarnaast belangrijk dat schoolteams gezamenlijk duidelijke, haalbare doelen stellen en concrete acties nemen die zijn afgestemd op die doelen. In scholen met een papieren talenbeleid ontbraken gezamenlijk bepaalde concrete acties, waardoor er van een echt schoolbreed talenbeleid geen sprake was;
- De scholen die erin geslaagd zijn een leeromgeving voor leerkrachten te creëren, stemmen hun talenbeleid horizontaal af op andere types van schoolbeleid (i.e., zorgbeleid, professionaliseringsbeleid) en gaan strategische, langdurige partnerschappen aan met externe experts. Bovendien evalueren ze de effecten van hun talenbeleid aan de hand van leerlingdata.

Tot slot vinden we aanwijzingen voor een verband tussen het talenbeleid van scholen en de taalleerprestaties van leerlingen; deze moeten echter met de nodige omzichtigheid benaderd worden aangezien het hier om een beperkte steekproef gaat. Hoewel in implementatieonderzoek wordt beweerd dat een beleid slechts een positieve impact kan hebben wanneer zowel de inhoud als de implementatiestrategie als effectief kunnen worden bestempeld (Fixsen et al., 2005; 2013), vinden we aanwijzingen dat zowel scholen met een strategisch als een ad hoc talenbeleid beter in staat lijken de leesprestaties van leerlingen te stimuleren dan de andere scholen. De scholen met een papieren of inert talenbeleid slagen er in mindere mate in om de taalontwikkeling van hun leerlingen te bevorderen. Beide types van talenbeleid onderscheiden zich van de andere in de creatie van een krachtige leeromgeving voor leerkrachten. Deze bevinding bevestigt alleszins het belang van de tweede dimensie: het is erg belangrijk dat schoolteams bij de uitwerking en implementatie van hun talenbeleid investeren in de samenwerking tussen leerkrachten, in partnerschappen met ouders, externe experten, scholen in de buurt en andere stakeholders, en voldoende leermaterialen en professionaliseringsmogelijkheden voor leerkrachten voorzien. Die uitkomst sluit aan bij recenter geformuleerde hypotheses binnen onderwijsvernieuwingsonderzoek. Die gaan ervan uit dat het realiseren van verandering in scholen in de eerste plaats neerkomt op de investering in het professionele kapitaal van scholen – het

leerkrachtenteam dus (Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Spillane, Hopkins, & Sweet, 2002; Van den Branden, 2019). Verder onderzoek is uiteraard nodig om die hypotheses te bevestigen.

Onze studie wijst uit dat een talenbeleid implementeren niet zonder horten of stoten verloopt. Die bevinding stemt overeen met de resultaten van nagenoeg alle studies over de implementatie van schoolbeleid (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; D. L. Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Levin, 2008; Viennet & Pont, 2017). Hoewel talenbeleidsimplementatie in iedere school anders verloopt, konden we toch een aantal trends identificeren. Bovendien vinden we eerste, voorzichtige aanwijzingen dat vooral de tweede dimensie van een krachtige schooltalenbeleid, namelijk de aanwezigheid van een krachtige leeromgeving voor leerkrachten, gerelateerd is aan betere taalleerprestaties van leerlingen.

1   Introduction

Since language is the means for pupils to acquire and demonstrate competencies in all school subjects, language skills are considered indispensable for educational achievement (Cummins, 2015a; Elbers, 2010; Menken & García, 2010; OECD, 2004, 2011). As a result, most national education systems strive for high-quality and equitable education that promotes pupils' language development (Cummins, 2015b; Cummins, Mirza, & Stille, 2012; Faas, 2014; Grek, 2009; Sahlberg, 2016; Van Avermaet, Van Houtte, & Van den Branden, 2011; Verger, Parcerisa, & Fontdevila, 2018; Volante, Fazio, Univeristy, & Ritzen, 2017).

In order to improve the quality of (language) teaching, school teams in several countries (e.g., the UK, the US, New Zealand, The Netherlands and Belgium) are encouraged by the Ministry of Education to implement or even design a school-based policy for language (SPL) (Britton et al., 1975; Corson, 1990; Elbers, 2012; May, 2007; Van den Branden, 2010). This is in line with a global trend in education policy, which emphasizes the crucial importance of school autonomy in bringing about change and enhancing the quality of education (Grek, 2009; Neeleman, 2019; Sahlberg, 2016). At the same time, the practice of empowering teachers to take charge of policy matters resonates with insights from school improvement research, which considers building professional capital within schools as the most effective way to change or improve schools (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Levin, 2008; Van den Branden, 2019).

Irrespective of the growing importance of school-based policies (for language) in national education policies and of educational effectiveness and school improvement research (Fullan, 2015; Hattie & Yates, 2012; Reynolds et al., 2014; Spillane et al., 2002), few studies have questioned how and why school teams configure and implement (language) policy (Kyriakides et al., 2010, 2015). Adopting a qualitative approach, this study examines the implementation of SPL in six primary schools in Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium where Dutch is the official language of instruction. Specific attention was given to the joint practices that school teams adopt in order to improve pupils' Dutch language skills. In addition, we examined how the implementation strategy affects the implementation of each school's SPL. As the schools in this study had previously participated in a larger study on school effectiveness in reading skills (Vanbuel et al., 2018), the schools' SPL could also be linked with student performances regarding reading comprehension.

2   Theoretical framework: School-based policies for language (SPL)

In their synthesis on the impact of school factors on learner outcomes from a dynamic model perspective, Kyriakides et al. (2010; 2015) argue that a school policy is effective when it leads to change in the actions of school team members in terms of 1) teaching practices at the classroom level and 2) the school learning environment (SLE). As for the first, teaching practices at classroom level should preferably be informed by educational effectiveness research, more in particular research that has identified effective teaching practices for language and literacy development. The second dimension (SLE) mainly refers to the opportunities the school environment offers to

teachers to develop their professional expertise. Schools that work on both dimensions of school policy are likely to (indirectly) promote student learning (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008; OECD, 2015; Reynolds et al., 2014; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000).

A specific type of school policy, school-based policies for language subsume all arrangements and measures school teams take concerning the use of pupils' home languages inside the school, the use of language across the curriculum, and the development of their pupils' literacy and language development. With regard to the implementation of SPLs, Corson (1999, p.2) claimed that effective reform should be local, context- and school-specific, with the school as the 'key site' for educational improvement. As such, SPLs are tailored to the specific needs of pupils and teachers in a particular context. Furthermore, Corson (1999) argued that some 'language problems' cannot be tackled by individual teachers or a single department, but need to be handled by the entire school team, as a whole.

For years, SPL appears on the agenda of national and local education policies. In the late sixties of the previous century, the UK government had established for the first that education did not work for all students: non-native pupils and pupils with a low socio-economic status were significantly lagging behind their peers (Britton et al., 1975; Bullock et al., 1975). It was emphasized that from now on, every teacher needed to pay attention to language during class, and schools needed to implement a so-called school policies for language across the curriculum' (Corson, 1990; 1999) or 'whole-school language policies' (The Department for Children, 2009). Other countries such as New Zealand (May, 1997; May, 2007), the Netherlands (Elbers, 2012) and Belgium (Flanders) followed, encouraging schools to implement an SPL.

Of course, giving schools the autonomy to design and implement their own school-specific policies with regard to language development presupposes a reliance on schools' local capacity to deal with the policy, to sort out and act upon it (Fullan, 2015). An essential decision school teams have to make applies to the content of the policy, i.e. *what* needs to be done in order to promote students' language skills. In order to bring about true change, it is important that these actions are evidence-based (Kyriakides et al., 2015; World Bank, 2018).

In second language acquisition and language education research, a large body of relevant evidence on the features of effective language teaching has accrued. First of all, students need opportunities to interact with their teachers and with each other: they need sufficient exposure to rich, elaborate input (Klein, 1986; Long, 2009) and opportunities to produce meaningful output (Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Swain, 1993). Cooperative learning is a very effective way to create such opportunities (Long, 2009; Puzio & Colby, 2013). Apart from interaction, it is important that (meta)linguistic strategies are explicitly taught, since students do not necessarily apply strategies automatically when using language (De Smedt & Van Keer, 2014; Plonsky, 2011; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). A focus on form embedded in such functional and meaningful communication too is necessary, as some linguistic aspects are not likely to be acquired without explicit attention (Ellis & Shintanti, 2014; Goo & Mackey, 2013; Long, 2009; Lyster & Saito, 2010; Lyster, Saito, & Sato, 2013). In this respect, and since language acquisition is a dynamic process (Verspoor, de Bot, & Lowie, 2011), providing feedback, together with formative assessment, is essential (Hattie, 2009; De La Paz, 2007; Graham et al., 2012; Graham, Hebert & Harris, 2015; Koster et al., 2015; Van den Branden, 2019). Besides offering high-quality instruction, it is also important to provide extracurricular opportunities for pupils to develop

their language and literacy skills outside the school (Dixon et al., 2012), for instance by visiting to the local library or organizing field trips, and by enhancing students' motivation to read for pleasure during leisure-time (van Steensel, van der Sande, Bramer, & Arends, 2016). It is also beneficial to positively approach the students' home languages (Reljic, Ferring, & Martin, 2015; Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2008).

The actions schools take with regard to their SPL can apply directly to classroom teaching (e.g., pedagogical approaches, learning and assessment materials …), but they can also apply to school organization (e.g., the school culture or stakeholder relationships), staffing (e.g., teaching assignments, recruitment, professionalization, appraisal and evaluation) (Neeleman, 2019), and to creating a learning environment for teachers. For instance, effective schools provide teachers with opportunities to collaborate and interact. As Spillane and colleagues (2002, p. 408) stated, 'collaboration means access to new ideas and knowledge, [and] can provide incentives to try out new things'. Apart from teacher collaboration, schools with a powerful SLE provide sufficient learning tools to foster teachers' professional development, and enter into strategic alliances with stakeholders such as parents, other schools, the community and experts (Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hattie, 2009; Kyriakides et al., 2015).

Bringing about change is not only a matter of deciding what needs to be done, but also of determining how that can be accomplished. In fact, a large number of school-based policies do not lead to the desired outcomes because the implementation process was found to be far more complex than initially assumed (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fischer, Miller, & Sidney, 2006; Fixsen, Blase, Metz, & Van Dyke, 2013; May & Wright, 2007). There is now a wide consensus that policy implementation is a complex endeavour (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Honig, 2006; Viennet & Pont, 2017; Young & Lewis, 2015), impacted by a variety of variables.

First, it is important that the policy is clear and justified, follows a clear logic, addresses a specific need, and is feasible. Policies with these characteristics have a higher chance of effective implementation than policies that are only vaguely described or do not address a real problem (Ball et al., 2012; Spillane et al., 2002; Viennet & Pont, 2017). Many studies emphasize the role and agency of local actors (see Menken & García, 2010; Spillane et al., 2002 for an overview). Stakeholders should perceive a 'need' or 'sense of urgency' for a certain policy (Kotter, 2012). In addition, they need to be convinced of its benefits, need to believe that the policy will lead to improvement, and perhaps most importantly, they need to perceive themselves as skilled and capable of implementing it (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Spillane et al., 2002). School-based policy is often value-laden, and usually suggests or implies that teachers' actions leave room for improvement (Fullan, 2015). As a consequence, school-based policy that is not carefully communicated may threaten teachers' self-image, making them less inclined to change (Kelchtermans, 2007). Another factor affecting policy implementation is the school context (Ball et al., 2012; Elmore, 1979; Fixsen et al., 2013; Honig, 2006). As all schools are characterized by the demographic composition of the student population, team capacity, local history, culture and other policies, they have different 'capacities for 'coping' with language policy and assembling school-based policy responses' (Author, under review; Ball et al., 2012; Spillane et al., 2002).

An adequate implementation strategy can bring together all the determinants mentioned in the previous section in a coherent manner (Viennet & Pont, 2017; p. 43). Schools that effectively

implement a policy, manage to set clear goals: they know what they want to achieve with their SPL and why they are implementing it (Kotter, 2012; Levin, 2008; Van Petegem et al., 2005). In addition, the actions they take are aligned with these goals (Viennet & Pont, 2017). In this respect, the importance of the role of the school leader has been highlighted in many studies (Ascenzi-Moreno, Hesson & Menken, 2015; Ball et al., 2012; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fullan, 2001; Hallinger, 2018; Tuytens & Devos, 2010, 2014). School leaders are often the deliverers of new policies. They are the initial enthusiasts that can inspire the team and 'translate' the policy into concrete actions. They have the authority to legitimize particular changes, while simultaneously offering support to teachers to implement them (Ball et al., 2012; Coburn, 2006; Fullan, 2001). It is important to note that school leaders do not need to do everything on their own. School leaders appoint a policy management team and allocate them with the task to configure an SPL, but even then, it remains important that the school leader actively supports the implementation of the policy (Kotter, 2012; Scheerens, 2013). Once a certain policy plan is shared with the entire school team, implementation preferably happens in a collaborative way. Moreover, it is important that teachers are involved in the design and implementation of the SPL from the start, are given sufficient autonomy, and can gain a sense of 'ownership' of the SPL (Scheerens, 2013). In this way, resistance or unwillingness to change current teaching practices can be countered. As Fullan (2001, p. 29) states, changes in beliefs and understanding are the foundations of achieving lasting reform. In addition, effective schools use data to monitor the implementation process, and to evaluate and adjust their policies at frequent times (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Van den Branden, 2019). At the same time, they remain focused on the goals they set for themselves. Effective schools are able to cope with distractors and manage multiple demands by integrating their SPL in other types of school policy (cf. horizontal alignment; Coburn, Hill & Spillane, 2016; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Levin, 2008). In addition, effective schools make strategical use of tools to support the implementation. For example, schools are advised to write up a policy making plan to support the implementation of their SPL (Corson, 1990; 1999).

Even though the importance of the implementation of school-based policies (for language) has been emphasized in national education policies and educational effectiveness and school improvement research (Fullan, 2015; Hattie, 2009; Reynolds et al., 2014; Spillane et al., 2002), and many factors affecting policy implementation in schools have been identified (Viennet & Pont, 2017), few studies have addressed the question of how and why school teams configure, and implement, their SPL or school policy (Kyriakides et al., 2015).

3   Research context

This study examines the implementation of a school-based language policy in six primary schools in Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Since 2007, the Flemish Ministry of Education explicitly encourages all schools to develop their own 'school-based policy for language' (Corson, 1990, 1999; Crevits, 2014; Smet, 2011; Vandenbroucke, 2007). In 2004, PISA results indicated that the social achievement gap with regard to language skills, i.e., the gap between the performances of low-SES and ethnic minority students on the one hand and ethnic majority and

high-SES students on the other hand, was nowhere as large as in Flanders (OECD, 2004). The Ministry of Education spearheaded the idea of promoting the creation of a dedicated SPL in every school to boost the literacy skills of all students, and of low-achieving pupils in particular.

Schools in Flanders are given great autonomy to design and implement their SPL. The Flemish Inspectorate checks whether schools comply with the Ministry's guidelines and design and implement a school-based SPL. However, to date, it has not been fully examined how school teams go about designing and implementing their language policies, and which concrete measures they take to promote pupils' language skills. In 2015, the Flemish Inspectorate (2015) reported that around 40% schools had not (yet) implemented a language policy. They also reported that schools that did, had largely taken organizational decisions, such as the appointment of a language planning team or the writing of a language policy plan. A more recent, small-scale study by the Flemish Inspectorate showed that ten years after the policy was officially issued, many schools have still not structurally implemented a language approach across the curriculum (Flemish Inspectorate, 2019). These reports, however, do not provide any details on teaching practices and teacher perceptions, nor do they provide detailed information on the factors affecting the implementation process.

4   Research questions

This study specifically aims to examine to what extent schools manage to design and implement an effective SPL. Two research questions were formulated. Our first research question addresses the SPL of schools in terms of its content:

a)   Which measures do schools take to promote student language development as part of their school-based language policy? To which extent are those measures based on/consistent with evidence regarding effective language teaching?

In order to bring about change, designing an evidence-based policy is not sufficient: it needs to be successfully implemented. From the literature, it seems crucial that schools adopt an implementation strategy that takes into account the many factors that affect the process of implementing an SPL (Fixsen et al., 2005; 2013; Viennet & Pont, 2017). Hence, our second research question is related to the implementation strategies of schools:

b)   Which strategies do schools adopt to implement their SPL and how are they related to SPL type?

5   Method

5.1   Participants

Six primary schools were selected from a sample of 28 schools which had participated in a larger study on school effectiveness in terms of promoting pupils' reading development. In the larger study (Vanbuel, Vandommele & Van den Branden, 2018), tests in decoding skills for reading and reading comprehension were administered to pupils in first, third and sixth grades of primary school. In addition, all teachers and administrative team members were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their SPL. In this study, only schools that indicated that they had been working on SPL were included ($N = 20$). In addition, schools and parents had to agree to participate in the follow-up study. As such, three schools could not be included. Three effective and three less effective schools were selected. Schools were considered effective when their students in the final, sixth grade achieved higher overall test scores in comparison with the other schools in the sample, while controlling for student characteristics that are known to significantly affect language achievement (i.e., gender, age, home language and socioeconomic status) (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000; Reynolds et al., 2014). Schools were considered ineffective when their students in sixth grade performed lower than the other schools in the sample. In particular, schools 67, 45 and 52 were considered effective schools. Students performed significantly higher than average in schools 45 and 52 at the end of sixth grade. By contrast, schools 23, 28 and 63 were considered 'ineffective' in terms of promoting students' language development. In school 23 and 63, students performed significantly lower than average. In school 28, pupils performed average. As such, this school cannot be labelled truly 'ineffective'. This school's team, however, indicated that it had been working for many years on SPL and was therefore considered an interesting case to include in the study. It could be argued that, despite the long-term efforts of the school team to implement an SPL, it did not manage to promote student language development more than the average school in the sample. Table 1 presents an overview of the six schools included in this study and their characteristics and Figure 1 displays the average test performance of the selected schools relative to the larger dataset.
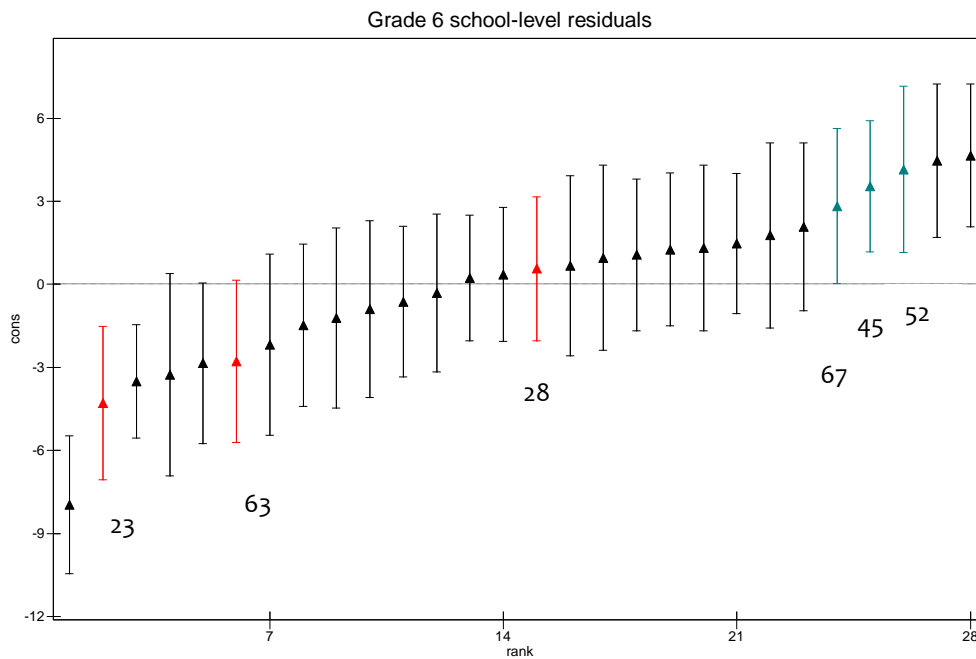
Figure 1 Netto differences between schools (80%CI)

Table 1 Sample: school characteristics

	Pupils reading performances	**% low-SES**
23	Ineffective*	21-40%
28	Average	21-40%
63	Ineffective	> 40%
52	Effective*	21-40%
45	Effective *	< 20%
67	Effective	> 40%

* Significantly different from the average school (p < .05)

In each school one to three members of the school's SPL management team (93% female) were interviewed (N = 14). The SPL management team participants were appointed by the principal as the team members that knew most about the school's SPL. In most cases (except for 28), the principal considered him/herself part of that team. The members of the policy management team had on average 10.6 years of experience in their current school (sd = 6.5). They had various responsibilities related to staffing, supporting students with special needs and implementing school policies.

Since we wanted to obtain an insight into the reach of the SPL throughout the entire school, in addition, in all schools except one (45), three to six classroom teachers from different grades participated in the study (N = 24, 79% female). Given that the conversation with the teachers had to be scheduled outside of school hours, participation was mainly on a voluntary basis. Still, a balanced distribution of different grades was aimed for; this was also achieved (1st level n = 7, 2nd level n = 7, 3rd level n = 9). Teachers had on average 1 to 33 years of experience in their current school (Mean = 9.4, sd = 9.4). In school 45, the principal did not want to involve classroom teachers in the study,

since the school was only recently investigated by the Inspectorate. This is typically perceived as a stressful period for a school team (Penninckx & Vanhoof, 2015).

5.2   Research design & instruments

In order to identify how and why school teams configure their SPLs, we opted for a qualitative research design. By using a qualitative research method involving semi-structured (focus group) interviews, we gave school team members the opportunity to express their opinions and thoughts about their school's approach to SPL. As such, a qualitative approach helped us to gain a more 'truthful' and detailed insight into local agents' perceptions of their schools' SPL-related practices and the factors affecting the implementation process.

Given the complexity of the topic is, three participants was considered the absolute minimum for a focus group, six the maximum (Mortelmans, 2013). Since power issues can impact the dynamics of a focus group and the views expressed by participants we conducted separate semi-structured open-ended focus groups for administrative team members and for teachers. This way all team members could talk freely about their schools' approaches regarding their school policy for language. Moreover, this helped us to obtain data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Morrow, 2005; Shenton, 2004).

Apart from questioning respondents with different perspectives, we used a research method that leads to sufficiently in-depth data, and used an explicitly described analysis method involving multiple researchers in order to obtain data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Morrow, 2005; Shenton, 2004). Each focus group was guided by an interview protocol. Different topics were covered: the way the school team conceptualizes and designs their SPL, the actions team members have agreed upon and that are part of their SPL, their motivation regarding the implementation of SPL, the implementation process and the experienced or desired outcomes. In order to avoid socially desirable answers, questions such as 'What do you hope to achieve with your school language policy?' were asked at the end of the interviews, whereas concrete practices were discussed at the beginning of each interview. All interviews were conducted by the first author.

School-specific reports from the Inspectorate, field notes of classroom observations, and focus groups with five to seven students from 3rd to 6th grade (63% girls, 50% non-Dutch background) in the schools were used to cross-validate our classification. The focus groups with pupils mainly clarified the schools' tolerance towards the use of home languages and revealed differences between teachers in teaching practice, while the reports from the Inspectorate confirmed the schools' SLP focus. The classroom observations revealed differences between teachers in instructional quality.

5.3   Data collection & analyses

Each focus group was guided by an interview protocol with key questions and some additional questions that could be asked if necessary. Each interview lasted on average 60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Within-case and cross-case analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were used to explore the data. A sense-making perspective was adopted (Spillane et al., 2002; Coburn 2006). First, the interview transcripts were read and reread and coded in-vivo by extracting the codes from the data itself (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In a next step, the open codes were further reduced and structured into axial codes (e.g., policy measures, implementation strategy, perceived policy effectiveness, etc.).

5.3.1   RQa: SPL configuration & content

In order to answer RQa, the axial codes that captured the interventions schools take as part of their SPL were first deductively coded for the (sub)categories identified by Neeleman (2019): education, organization and staffing. Next, the SPL of each school was scored on the two dimensions of school policy that were identified by Kyriakides et al. (2010; 2015): the policy for improving language teaching on the one hand, and the school's SPL for creating a learning environment fostering teachers' professional development on the other hand (Kyriakides et al., 2010; 2015). We identified five subcategories that were all scored from 0 (not or limitedly present) to 2 (strongly present) for each school (see Table 4). In order to achieve reliable outcomes, a second trained researcher coded the transcripts separately. Inconsistent codes (range > 2) were discussed and resolved by discussing the interview transcripts and the inconsistent codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A total score for each dimension was calculated by adding all scores of their subcategories. Schools can rank high (≥ 3 for the first dimension, ≥ 4 for SLE) or low on both school policy dimensions. For this study, we built a typology by combining both dimensions. As a result, we identified four types of school policy (Table 2).

Table 2 Typology of school policy for language

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2" rowspan="2"></td><td colspan="2">Creating a learning environment for teachers</td></tr>
<tr><td>low</td><td>high</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Improving teaching practices</td><td>high</td><td>phantom policy</td><td>strategic policy</td></tr>
<tr><td>low</td><td>paper policy</td><td>arbitrary policy</td></tr>
</table>

The first type of school policy is labeled 'strategic'. Schools that fall within this category can be considered (close to) role models when it comes to SPL configuration. Their SPL mentions or focuses on teaching practices in the classroom in a way that is consistent with the available research on effective language teaching, while simultaneously creating a learning environment for teachers.

The arbitrary policy and the phantom policy types are related. The first type characterizes schools that invest a lot of effort in creating a learning environment by having team members collaborate, and by providing teachers with learning resources and/or creating partnerships with parents and the local community. However, these schools do so without a clear focus on learning and teaching in the classroom and/or taking into account the teaching practices that can be considered effective to promote language development. Schools with a phantom SPL, on the other hand, do demonstrate a fairly good insight into the effectiveness of certain language practices, but they do not succeed in creating an effective learning environment for their teachers and fostering ownership, agency and professional development among their staff members.

The fourth type of SPL can be identified as a paper policy. This means that an SPL may exist within the school, but it is not focused on improving teaching at the classroom level in a evidence-based way. Simultaneously, the learning environment for staff members is poor. This type of SPL basically exists only on paper or in the heads of school team members rather than in practice.

5.3.2   RQb: SPL implementation strategies

In order to answer RQb, the axial codes related to the subcategories of the implementation strategy of the schools were more closely examined. Every school was scored from 0 (not or marginally present) to 2 (strongly present) for six criteria that are identified as beneficial to successful implementation (Fullan, 2015; Levin, 2016; Kottler, 2007; Viennet & Pont, 2017; Table 5): task allocation, engaging and communicating with stakeholders, setting clear goals, enhancing the vertical and horizontal alignment of the policy, finding the right professional partners and evaluating the policy. Again, three trained researchers each coded one or two transcripts separately. Inconsistent codes were discussed and resolved by returning to the interview transcripts and specific codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The scores for all criteria were added up; a school with a total score of ≥ 7 ranked high on the strategy scale.

6   Results

6.1   RQa: Which measures do schools take to promote student language development?

The focus groups show that the participants in all schools consider SPL a priority. They define SPL as 'something they have been quite occupied with in the past couple of years', a 'big factor', 'something that is always in the picture', or 'something we devote all our staff development days to'. The schools try to take numerous measures to create an SPL that effectively promotes student (language) development. Their motivation to implement an SPL is mainly driven by the socio-ethnic composition of their school population. One teacher framed it this way:

> *Well, of course, we always need to factor in our student population; we have a lot of immigrants and you just have to take that into account anyway.*

> *(Teacher, 67)*

There are a lot of similarities between these actions of the different schools in our sample. With respect to the pupils' home languages, for example, in every school there appears to be a strong focus on prioritizing Dutch over students' home language. Although all schools but one claim that they do not have a Dutch-only policy, they perceive the systematic use of Dutch as important. One special needs teacher puts it this way:

> *If it is functionally needed, that's what we mean, isn't it? And they also know that we try to speak Dutch as much as possible at school.*

This mostly-Dutch policy is justified by the argument that students have to learn Dutch in order to participate in a Dutch-medium society. In all schools but one (45) it is specifically mentioned that exceptions are made for newcomers. The latter are allowed to use their home language with one of their peers that shares the same mother tongue. The teachers believe that newcomers' development will be hampered otherwise, because they do not feel at ease at school if their mother tongue is not valued. In addition, all schools provide pull-out programs for remedial teaching for low-performing students and all schools but one have appointed a language coach. In all cases, a teacher who was already part of the team, is assigned to the job.

As stated above, the SPL of each school was scored for two language policy dimensions, 1) improving language teaching and 2) creating a learning environment. Those scores allowed us to assign each school to one of four types (see table 3 for the SPL types per school and table 4 for the scores).

Table 3 SPL typology

		Creating a learning environment for teachers	
		High	low
Improving teaching	high	phantom policy 23, 28	strategic policy 67
	low	paper policy 45, 63	arbitrary policy 52

Paper policy

The SPL of two schools (63 and 45) was classified as a paper policy. This type of school does not succeed in impacting on the practices of teachers inside the classroom in ways that are consistent with the available evidence on effective language teaching. This is not to say that these schools lack insight into evidence-based language teaching practices; however, the concrete actions that are part of their SPL are predominantly situated at the domains of school organization and/or staffing,

and apply to the practice of language education only to a limited extent. No suggestions regarding language teaching practices at the classroom level are mentioned. In one school, team members of the policy management team believe that SPL is not something that can be implemented across the school:

> It's part of the freedom that you have as a teacher, to decide what suits your style – what is the most suitable manner of teaching. You cannot impose such things. While a reading project could easily be a school project.

> (special needs teacher, 45)

Neither does the SPL result in an effective learning environment for teachers. The policy management team of this school provided small-scale opportunities for teachers to discuss and collaborate with colleagues and used the extra resources they receive for newcomers and low-SES pupils to employ an extra special needs teacher. However, the principal indicates that this has mainly resulted in a change in 'their attitude towards language' so far:

> 'teachers are more aware of it [the role language has in learning and teaching], that's also why we used the symbolism of language glasses, you put these on in everything you do'.

> (principal, 63)

Collaborative goals and actions are absent, and the same is true for long-term, structural relationships with other stakeholders. The special needs teachers (63) mentioned at the beginning of the interview that 'SPL has always been present in the school in a way, they are now just 'dotting the i's'. According to the teachers, however, the school team has just started with SPL. This might partly explain the finding that their SPL is restricted.

> Well, we just started last year. And before that, it was basically 'follow your manual, determine pupils' needs and plan it yourself', but not really a policy.

> (2nd grade teacher, 63)

The other school (45) invested in new books for the school library, designed materials to help pupils choose a book to read and promoted leisure reading at home (including tips and tricks for parents) and during school breaks. In addition, they enhanced stakeholder relationships in the sense that they stimulated pupils and parents to participate in extracurricular activities for language learning provided by the city (e.g., a summer camp fostering language learning). When team members of one of the schools were asked what teachers do with the materials the policy management team developed in order to implement the SPL interventions regarding reading for pleasure, they answered: 'At this moment, I don't think they are doing much with it' (special needs teacher, 45).

Phantom policy

The SPL in two other schools (23 and 28) was identified as a phantom policy on language. This can be inferred from the strong ambition/willingness of the policy management team to change teaching practices, and their expertise with regard to the principles of effective language instruction and policy implementation. The actions these schools take in order to change teaching

practices are evidence-based to some extent, but they do not succeed to integrate them fully into the classroom practices of teachers. For example, school 28 invested a great deal of effort and attention to reading strategies, but only by displaying cards with reading strategies in the classroom. The policy management team in the other school (23) decided to remove the general mark for language from the report card, and to replace it with several marks for the different language skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening, speaking, orthography, grammar). In order to mark these skills, teachers had to make changes to their teaching practices. Support on how to change their current practices, or a critical reflection or discussion with the teachers on the effectiveness or aims of these pedagogical practices, however, is missing:

> *I: Do you see anything of these measures today, of the SPL as you designed it back then?*
> *ST1: yes, we have this new teaching method [which includes more activities for oracy],*
> *these lessons.*
> *(Special needs teacher, 23)*

> *During French class, with a group of 27 pupils, it is just not feasible to involve all of them in reading or speaking exercises. If you would only time how many seconds a child is talking … So we [from the special needs team] try to support classroom teachers in class [by being present].*

> *(Special needs teacher, 28)*

Both schools made some small changes in terms of organization: they lowered the age at which foreign language education was started, and one school enhanced stakeholder relationships in the sense that they stimulated pupils and parents to participate in extracurricular activities for language learning provided by the city (e.g., summer camp for language).

Schools with a phantom SPL particularly have difficulties in creating a learning environment for their teachers. Partnerships with other stakeholders may exist, but these partnerships only involve part of the team (or even exclusively the policy management team). Teachers themselves only collaborate occasionally. Moreover, they have the feeling that resources to promote language learning are limited:

> *I: Is this part of the SPL of your school?*
> *T1: This is something we come up with ourselves, but we are used to …*
> *T2: to manage on our own.*

Arbitrary policy

The SPL in one school (52) was identified as arbitrary. This school made substantial changes with regard to the pupil grouping between the first and fourth grade. Students are now divided in one of three homogeneous groups, based on their level of language proficiency. The organizational changes also had an impact on teaching assignments. All teachers were assigned to a group based on their own expertise and capacities. In addition, special needs teachers specialized either in

teaching grammar, technical reading or vocabulary – particularly in order to help newcomers to develop those specific skills.

This reorganization resulted in an extensive range of initiatives promoting collaboration among teachers: some teachers literally opened the doors that used to separate their classrooms and are now working together. Also, the policy management team has invested a lot of money in new teaching materials (e.g., iPads, new teaching methods to support teachers) and they have built up strategic, structural partnerships with language experts from the city's municipal services to some extent.

A focus on a change for more effective teaching practices, however, is largely missing, since classroom practices are hardly discussed with the entire team. Within the newly established groups, teachers still have to decide for themselves which approach is the best. As a result, teachers stick to more traditional teacher-initiated teacher-student interaction, providing students with limited opportunities for more elaborate output. In addition, teacher input is hardly elaborated on or contextualized, and cooperative learning is strongly teacher-dependent. Moreover, the practice-based solutions the policy management team suggests to better meet the needs of students are largely restricted to the purchase of new materials and not to the pedagogical implications these new materials come with. The policy management team also indicates that the new teaching materials are not always used in an effective way:

> *We noticed that pupils were not making the progress we were hoping for. So we adjusted it and one of us went inside the classroom, and worked together with the teacher in question, uhm, and we tried to solve it this way.*
>
> *(special needs teacher, 52)*

Strategic policy

One school (67) was identified as adopting a strategic SPL: this school managed to both have a policy on enhancing effective language teaching in the classroom and foster a learning environment for their staff members. Team members of the policy management team see SPL as something that is about 'everything you do for language, from smaller classroom-related things to parental involvement'. It is more than just 'smaller moments of consultation among teachers'. This school manages to have teachers collaborate and to bring about change in most teachers' classroom practices. Teaching materials are provided and new, effective pedagogical approaches are implemented. For example, the didactics regarding vocabulary instruction have changed: all teachers now aim to promote vocabulary learning by providing rich, contextualized input (e.g., pictures, referring to common experiences …), and focus on it while students are performing meaningful tasks (i.e., focus on form). Furthermore, in each classroom, pupils read for pleasure every day for at least a quarter of an hour. In addition, this school specifically invested in stakeholder relationships: concrete initiatives were taken to involve parents in the SPL of the school, and connections were made with the neighboring kindergarten and secondary school.

Initiatives fostering staff members' professional development are not limited to members of the policy management team, and are tailored to the needs of individual teachers.

> *I think we are doing a lot about this in a small group, but also opening it up on staff meetings. [...] we also have a parent group that thinks about it. [...] also a teacher who goes to refresher courses on vocabulary and who gives feedback to the team. I also followed one on reading comprehension, yes that was a few years ago. [...] and this year we have held a staff meeting on respect for Turkish. Because teachers are struggling with that, whether pupils should be or should not be allowed to speak Turkish in class.*
>
> *(special needs teacher, 67)*

Table 4 SPL configuration in schools

School	Improving teaching				Creating a learning environment for teachers				
	Focus on teaching	Effective practices	Total		Collaboration & cooperation	Partnerships (parents, community)	Learning resources (for both students & teachers)	Total	
23	2	1	3	HIGH	0	0	0	0	LOW
28	2	1	3	HIGH	1	1	1	3	LOW
45	0	1	1	LOW	0	1	1	2	LOW
52	1	1	2	LOW	2	0	2	4	HIGH
63	1	0	2	LOW	0	1	1	2	LOW
67	2	1	3	HIGH	1	2	1	4	HIGH

Table 5 SPL implementation strategy

	Task allocation	Engaging & communicating with stakeholders	Clear goals (high-priority, measurable, ambitious but feasible)	Vertical alignment (logical, feasible, well justified solution)	Horizontal alignment (professionalization, strategic partnerships, tools)	Policy evaluation (use data to evaluate, adjust)	Total	Ranking
23	1	0	1	1	1	0	4	LOW
28	1	1	1	1	0	0	4	LOW
45	1	0	1	0	1	0	3	LOW
52	1	2	0	0	2	2	7	HIGH
63	0	1	1	0	1	0	3	LOW
67	2	1	1	1	2	1	8	HIGH

6.2   RQb: Which strategies do primary schools adopt to implement their SPL and how are they related to SPL type?

In order for an SPL to promote student learning, it needs to be strategically implemented. As such, we examined which implementation strategies the school teams deployed in order to effect change. Overall, the schools with the strategic SPL and the arbitrary SPL obtained a high score on the implementation strategy scale. What is more interesting for our study, however, is either the overlap or the divergence between the particular strategies that were adopted across SPL types.

The implementation strategy of the school with the strategic SPL differs in only one aspect from the one in the other schools, being task allocation. Both the principal and special needs teacher were specified as the SPL management team and were considered the main policy makers in the school. In addition, one teacher was assigned with the job of SPL manager of the parent group, together with the principal. Another teacher was assigned as vocabulary expert, which implied that she participated in professionalization initiatives and shared these insights with the rest of the team. In the other schools, the task to implement an SPL was implicitly taken on by the special needs teachers and the principal.

Given that both a strategic and an arbitrary SPL rank high on the second policy dimension, i.e. the creation of a SLE for teachers, we can also look for similarities in their implementation strategy. Examining the subcategories of the implementation strategy schools with a strategic and arbitrary SPL tick off both, our analyses show that they horizontally align their SPL with other school policies, ongoing professionalization initiatives and tools that are being used. The policy management team members in the school with the arbitrary SPL emphasized their collaboration with an external partner as a supportive factor: 'we can literally ask her anything'. The school with the strategic SPL also set up various partnerships fitting the goals they wanted to achieve with her SPL:

> *There is a language coach who works one-on-one with the teachers. And with the parent language group, [supervisor's name] has helped with that. And she, she is trained to guide parent groups [...] and I always think, the more people the better the outcome will be. (principal)*

> *Teachers also build a relationship of trust with those people, while at the same time the threshold is lower because they are actually not part of the school ... (special needs teacher)*

Secondly, both schools evaluate the impact of their SPL, which helps them to remain focused on its implementation. For example, the principal of the school mentioned that 'SPL is always in the picture'. In both cases, the evaluation of the SPL has led to adaptations to the policy. In the strategic SPL school, student performances for vocabulary did not improve as expected. In consultation with external experts, the measure they used to test students' progress in vocabulary was not considered valid, and was therefore abandoned. They are currently looking for a new test instrument. In the school with the arbitrary policy, members of the policy management team noticed that one of the teachers was struggling with one of the new teaching methods:

> *We noticed that pupils were not making the progress we were hoping for. So we adjusted it and one of us went inside the classroom, and worked together with the teacher in question, uhm, and we tried to solve it this way.*
>
> *(special needs teacher, 52)*

By contrast, merely engaging in partnerships with external experts is not enough, as schools that did not rank high on this dimension also consulted experts. For example, a special needs teacher in one of the schools with a phantom SPL mentioned collaboration with external partners as an enhancing factor as well:

> *Well, if we would present some of the exercises like one of the external partners, then there would be a lot of discussion about topics that are not relevant, but the expert, she is only here for SPL. [...] and we all have so much to do, parents pass by, and many other things, so it helps if someone external supports and helps the team. (special needs teacher, school 23)*

What matters most is not whether school teams make an appeal to external partners, but what they use these partners' expertise for. The expert partners in the phantom SPL school were not only asked to promote the teachers' professional development, but also to act as a mediator to communicate the plans of the policy management team to the rest of the team:

> *They can provide a little bit of support in terms of 'how are we going to present that', 'how are we going to do this', and then there can be agreed ah maybe the external person, you can discuss this [with the teachers] because you also know more about the topic in case they have questions. [...] It works better, we have the feeling that they [the teachers] are also more inclined to accept things from them. (principal, school 23)*

Furthermore, the school teams in the schools with a paper and phantom SPL have trouble to stay focused on their SPL, to evaluate its effects and to horizontally align the SPL with other policies and actions.

In order to examine the implementation strategies that are beneficial for realizing the first dimension, i.e., improving teaching practices, a closer look is given to the strategies which are shared by the schools with the strategic and the phantom SPL. Setting clear goals and aligning these goals with concrete actions seem the most important prerequisites to improve teaching practices. In fact, these strategies are missing in the school with the arbitrary SPL. Unlike the schools with the strategic and phantom SPL, school 52 did not manage to create an evidence-based, goal-oriented SPL (i.e., the first dimension of SPL). The school team started the SPL two years prior to the data collection with concrete actions rather than a well-defined vision and clear goals. Inevitably, vertical alignment between goals and actions is lacking. In the two schools with a paper policy, a similar lack of focus and vision was found: some goals were formulated, but they were quite vague and put in general terms. For example, school 63 indicates that they wanted to change the language teaching practices regarding multilingualism in their school. At the same time, they also wanted to change the use of language across the curriculum. These are general, overarching goals, which failed to be made more concrete.

Engaging and communicating with stakeholders is also an element of the implementation strategy, but it does not seem a distinctive one across SPL types. At least, engaging stakeholders does not mean that all team members have to be involved in all stages of SPL configuration and implementation. The school with the strategic SPL, after all, does consult teachers and discusses their SPL approach with them, but it is the policy management team that outlines and finalizes the plan. They are clearly allocated with the task to implement an SPL, whereas the teachers are not. In some cases, this leads to resistance among the teachers:

> *It seemed like we are not doing anything, but we do a lot and we are working on that language. (teacher school 67, 5th grade)*

> *But there had to be something extra, because I said I do that and that and that. No no, we had to do something extra. (teacher school 67, 1st grade)*

Moreover, the newly established parent group for language has raised a lot of frustration among the teachers in this school; they have the feeling that what they were doing to promote pupils' language skills was not (good) enough. These quotes indicate that even in the school that succeeds in strategically implementing SPL, not everything goes easily or smoothly. Both teachers and members of the policy management team indicate that it requires a lot of effort to implement an SPL: 'We really need to pull and drag and discuss and support, we really need to do that here' (principal, 67). Nevertheless, the teachers are convinced that promoting pupils' language skills is necessary and important.

Engaging teachers might, too, be of great help when no clear goals have (yet) been defined, and vertical alignment is limited. During the interview of the school with the arbitrary SPL, both members of the policy management team and the teachers emphasized the willingness of all team members to work together on a school-based policy on language:

> *But I would like to add that a large group of teachers shows the willingness to work on language, I really see that as a large added value. (principal)*

> *The team consists of people that like to join collaborative initiatives. We will always do things anyway and try things out. (5th grade teacher)*

In schools with a phantom policy teachers seem to be merely executors of the SPL the policy-making team sets out. Initiatives regarding professional development mainly addressed the members of the policy management team:

> *We did a SWOT analysis to decide what we were going to work on, where are the shortages, what strengths can we use here? Then we went looking for more information – you do have more time to build up expertise as a special needs teacher of course (special needs teacher, 28)*

A similar pattern unfolds in schools with a paper policy. They too appear to have difficulties including teachers in the policy management process. This is illustrated by the limited amount of communication about the SPL goals between the policy management team and the rest of the team. Since they are not linked to concrete actions or materials, this makes it even harder to implement them for teachers.

It is not like we have already imposed things, told them what they must do, it is more indeed that attitude, that attitude towards language [...] Yes, the road is clear, so far, not everyone agrees, but there is a certain structure. (special needs teacher)

Well, you don't have much of a choice. It is simply just said that we are going to do it this way. (2nd grade teacher)

However, paper policies can be driven by particular motivations or drives. School 45, for instance, aimed to promote reading for pleasure. The policy-management team bought books and created spots for students to read across the entire school building. Teachers did not need to bother about this action; everything was taken care of by the policy management team. As a result, the SPL of this school is limited to class-external interventions. The policy management team manages to stay focused and to evaluate their own policy, but the teachers are only marginally involved in the policy management and implementation process. The other school (63) aimed to develop a school vision on language development first, rather than jump to implementing some concrete actions.

We took a relatively large amount of time to approach the other aspects just because of their importance because uh all the other subjects actually are reliant on language. [...] In fact, I fear that if you would use the learning domain as a first approach to implement SPL that it would have a narrower meaning than if you first ... [think about the role of language for learning] (principal)

As a result, they did manage to engage stakeholders and to communicate with them to some extent, but their SPL exists only in their discourse about it. From the interviews it becomes clear that policy management teams of phantom and paper SPL schools do not exclude their teachers from the policy management or design intentionally, or think it is not important to involve them, rather the contrary. Both schools with a paper SPL and a phantom SPL repeatedly discussed the tension between SPL and the individuality and freedom of teachers in terms of pedagogy and didactics:

You can definitely alert teachers, make sure that they are working on it, and you must continue to encourage that, at every meeting it must be an item that is discussed, I think, but it is a bit - I think - as they say: you either have it in you or you don't (special needs teacher 28)

By contrast, teachers themselves like to maintain some degree of freedom, especially when it comes to selecting concrete, classroom-based actions that are linked to the SPL goals. At the same time, they do not feel the need to be involved at all times:

I actually think that when you enter a school like that you just have to go along with what lives there (6th grade teacher, 28)

7   Discussion & conclusion

SPLs are described by the Ministries of Education of several countries, including Flanders (Belgium), as a way to effectively reform and improve the quality of language education in schools (Britton et al., 1975; Corson, 1990; May, 2007). While theoretical frameworks and handbooks are available to guide school teams on how to implement an SPL (e.g., Corson, 1999; Van den Branden, 2010), little research has been conducted to investigate the implementation of SPL in schools. This study examined how six primary schools in Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, design and implement their school-based policy on language. By conducting focus groups with both members of the policy management team and teachers, this study aimed to enhance our understanding of the actual shape SPLs have taken in primary schools.

Overall, SPL was considered an important theme in all schools, and it was mainly motivated by the composition of their student population (see also Author, in preparation). The schools' approach towards multilingualism was similar. The mostly-monolingual Dutch policy that characterizes the schools in our sample, was also found in other studies that examined the perceptions of teachers and principals towards multilingualism in Flemish schools (Agirdag et al., 2013; Clycq et al., 2014; Jaspers, 2010; Pulinx et al., 2017; Strobbe et al., 2017). By ranking the schools in terms to the extent to which their SPL reflected evidence-based principles of effective language education, and creating a learning environment for teachers on the other hand (Kyriakides et al., 2010; 2015), four types of SPL could be identified: a strategic, phantom, arbitrary and paper policy. Only one school managed to implement a strategic SPL, and only one other school managed to create a productive learning environment for teachers within the confines of an arbitrary policy. Two other schools managed to include evidence-based teaching practices in their phantom SPL, but they did not manage to create a learning environment for teachers, as the teachers in these schools were largely excluded from the design and implementation of the SPL. The same holds for the two schools with a paper SPL.

This study also investigated the implementation strategies the schools adopted. Our analyses indicate that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to policy implementation. By distinguishing different SPL types, we were, however, able to identify implementation strategies that are more likely to lead to the implementation of certain types of SPL. In contrast to what previous studies inspired by school improvement research emphasize (Fullan, 2015; Kotter, 2012), engaging and communicating with all teachers does not seem to be the most important determinant variable that influences SPL implementation. In the school with the strategic SPL, most stakeholders perceived a need to promote students' language development, because their school population was very diverse and many students had a lower socioeconomic background. However, the teachers in this school indicated that the SPL threatened their self-image and self-confidence (Kelchtermans, 2007). They often felt frustrated when new SPL initiatives had to be taken, leaving them with the idea that all the effort they put in language teaching was insufficient (Fullan, 2015). In other words, SPL can be effective even if it clashes with individual teachers' beliefs, convictions, and self-image. This does, by contrast, not imply that teachers should be treated as merely executers of the SPL. As previous research emphasized, teachers are as much policy makers as the ones who design the policy at a higher level (Shohamy, 2006; Menken & Garcia, 2010). As such, extensive dialogue with all team members is essential. In schools with a paper and phantom policy,

teachers were mostly left out of the policy making process, which resulted in a half-heartedly implemented SPL.

Instead, our analyses show that it is particularly important for school teams to allocate the task to implement an SPL to someone in particular, as it is the one strategy that distinguishes a strategic SPL from the other types of SPL. In addition, it is essential that school teams horizontally align their SPL with other school policies, ongoing professionalization initiatives and tools that are being used. Horizontal alignment is an important, but not a sufficient strategy to lead to change. School teams need to stay focused on their SPL and evaluate its effects. Most schools in our study emphasized that external experts helped them to do so. Other studies (e.g., Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Fullan, 2015; Korthagen, 2017) have emphasized that schools need long-term professional support, instead of merely one-shot trainings in order to lead to sustainable reform. To successfully implement an evidence-based language teaching policy, our findings indicate that it is vital for schools to set clear goals, and mostly to link these goals to concrete actions. This is in line with other research on the implementation of other types of school policy and change management as well (Kotter, 2012; Levin, 2008; Van Petegem et al., 2005; Viennet & Pont, 2017).

Since this study is part of a larger project on SPL and school effectiveness (Vanbuel et al., 2018), data on student performance and development could be linked to the results of the SPL analysis. The selection of the six schools that participated in this study was based on their effectiveness in enhancing student language development. Based on tests measuring student reading performances and the schools' added value in the 6th grade, three schools were considered effective, and three less effective to promote language learning. Fixsen et al (2005; 2013) claimed that both evidence-based policies and effective implementation are needed to lead to change. In particular, we were interested whether schools with a strategically implemented evidence-based SPL produce better results in terms of student output. In our case, this would mean that only a strategic SPL can promote and improve student language learning. At first sight, no association between SPL and school effectiveness seems to exist, as all schools that were identified as effective have a different type of SPL: a paper policy (45), an arbitrary policy (52) and a strategic policy (67) (Table 6).

Table 6 School effectiveness for reading and SPL

	Improving pupils reading performances	SPL type	SPL implementation strategy
23	Ineffective	phantom	low
28	Ineffective (average)	phantom	low
63	Ineffective	paper	low
52	Effective	arbitrary	high
45	Effective	paper	low
67	Effective	strategic	high

During the interviews with the management team of the school with the paper policy, however, it became clear that the school has a strict remedial teaching policy. This finding is also confirmed in

reports from the Inspectorate that specifically discuss this school's policy. Moreover, when students are not able to catch up with their classmates at the end of third grade, they are likely to be sent to special education. In other cases, extensive differentiation in- and outside the classroom is provided in response to the pupils' needs. This finding might well explain the increase in student reading performances between the third and the sixth grade (Author, in preparation).

Both the school with the strategic SPL and the one with the arbitrary SPL in our sample are found to be capable of effectively promoting students' language development. This seems to indicate that it is, first and foremost, crucial for schools to create a learning environment for teachers in order to boost student language development, i.e., that there are ample opportunities for teachers to collaborate with colleagues, that strategic partnerships are constructed and that sufficient learning resources are provided. Schools that were considered ineffective in terms of promoting student language development had either a phantom or a paper policy and did not manage to strategically implement an SPL. This finding resonates with the hypotheses raised by educational reform researchers who claim that effectively reforming schools mostly comes down to promoting collaboration among teachers, and to invest in professional capital in schools (Spillane et al., 2002; Fullan, 2001; 2015; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Van den Branden). However, further research is necessary to confirm this finding.

Clearly, there are limitations to this study. First of all, the sample of schools for this study was small. In addition, data were not measured longitudinally. A longitudinal study could have explored the relationship between policy-making and the specific actions of stakeholders, which is usually reciprocal (Kyriakides et al., 2015). Moreover, policy implementation is a process of sense-making that is repeatedly adjusted (see also Menken & García, 2010). As Durlak & DuPre (2008, p. 334) stated in their systematic review of meta-analytic studies on policy implementation, 'there is credible and extensive empirical evidence that the level of implementation affects program outcomes'. Some SPLs of the schools in our sample may still be in a starting phase. This might well have been the case for at least one of the schools with a paper policy, in which some of the stakeholders mentioned that they 'just started last year'. Moreover, depending on the school context or history, it might be more effective to first start with promoting extracurricular activities in order to deal with resistance from teachers, before passing on to changing teaching practices in the classroom (Schleicher, 2014). This policy would then not be classified as an effective SPL, but it could be – in the long term – turn out be part of a very effective implementation strategy. Future research should thus take a longitudinal approach to the implementation of SPL.

Despite these limitations, this study provided useful insights into the configuration of SPL in schools, and the strategies teams adopt to implement it. In this respect, this study is one of the first to document and explore in depth the efforts of schools to design and implement an SPL. As such, it can inform policy makers and schools on SPL implementation and effectiveness. For instance, all school members in this study mentioned a tension between SPL and the pedagogical and didactic autonomy of teachers, even the ones in the school with a strategic SPL. Whether it is reasonable to expect an SPL to forge extensive changes to the language teaching practices of individual teachers remains an open question for now.

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