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Understanding the influence of teachers' cognitive and affective responses upon school inspection feedback acceptance

Amy Quintelier[1] · Jan Vanhoof[2] · Sven De Maeyer[3]

Abstract

Despite the developmental perspective of school inspections, teachers in inspected schools are not always willing to accept the school inspection's feedback for their further improvement of teaching and learning processes. Literature distinguishes several aspects of feedback that stimulate or hinder the acceptance of feedback, such as recipient's cognitive and affective responses to feedback. This study investigates teachers' cognitive and affective responses to school inspection feedback in relation to feedback acceptance. It draws on data from 21 in-depth interviews with teachers in eight primary schools. We found that positive perceptions of the inspectors' credibility enhance teachers' feedback acceptance. This is also the case for positive, clear feedback. Under these circumstances, emotions of joy, happiness and relief are expressed. Conversely, respondents tend to reject feedback when inspectors are perceived to be inadequately informed, arrogant or disrespectful. When negative feedback is rated as unfair, negative emotions, such as anger and sadness, interfere with feedback acceptance. In essence, we conclude that both feedback content and feedback source characteristics are decisive in the acceptance of process. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest there is a need to build on supportive relationships between teachers and school inspectors.

Keywords School inspection · Cognitive responses · Affective responses · Feedback acceptance · Feedback source

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1 Introduction

School evaluation can have two purposes, accountability and improvement. While the first perspective is primarily about providing a guarantee of compliance to legislation and administrative regulations, proponents of the second perspective view an inspection as a lever for improvement of educational quality (Ehren et al. 2013). The school inspection stimulates this improvement through providing feedback—information on the school's strengths and weaknesses—in accordance with a set of preconceived standards (Ehren 2016). Schools are supposed to accept this feedback and to implement actions in order to eliminate deficits (Coe 2002). Apart from school improvement, some authors associate school inspections with the intended outcome of changing the behaviour of teachers as the inspectorate provides feedback to develop teachers with the ability to deliver high-quality teaching as well (Ehren et al. 2013; Nelson and Ehren 2014). Despite these expectations regarding school inspections' formative functions, research on feedback in general demonstrates that feedback very often does not have this intended effect (Kluger and DeNisi 1996).

Although it is widely accepted that providing teachers with individual feedback is valuable to improve their academic and social-behavioural performance (e.g. Cheetham and Chivers 2005; Colvin et al. 2009), it remains unclear whether teachers receive this kind of feedback during a school inspection process. While school inspections can be targeted at teacher level, in some areas, the inspection focuses particularly on the school as a whole, taking into account the interactions between the school board, teachers, parents and pupils (Ehren 2016). Especially in the latter case, teachers denounce the lack of clear, concrete feedback about their teaching quality in inspection reports, which leaves them inadequately informed to initiate and implement improvement actions (e.g. Chapman 2002; Plowright 2007). Therefore, the first goal of this study is to describe the sources of feedback that teachers report as beneficial, fair and helpful for their development during the school inspection process.

Secondly, the fundamental transfer of feedback does not consist solely of sending and receiving the message, as recipients' cognitive responses to feedback are crucial in the feedback acceptance process. These perceptions (or thoughts) about the credibility, fairness and characteristics of respectively feedback source, feedback process and feedback content have been widely discussed as significant factors for feedback acceptance in organisational psychology (e.g. Brett and Atwater 2001; Greller and Herold 1975; Ilgen et al. 1979; Leung et al. 2001). For example, feedback literature considers sign (positive or negative feedback) to be one of the key characteristics of feedback acceptance as individuals are generally more likely to accept positive feedback (e.g. Baron 1993). However, prior school inspection research indicates that an open and connected dialogue between inspectors and teachers encourages the acceptance of unfavourable feedback (Ehren and Visscher 2008; Erdem and Yaprak 2013). While in most educational research, teachers' and principals' cognitive responses are being narrowed to their perceptions of school inspectors' credibility, studies upon feedback fairness and feedback content are rather scarce. So, if we want to broaden our understanding of teachers' feedback acceptance during

school inspection processes, it is important to investigate the overall picture of teachers' cognitive responses and their impact upon feedback acceptance.

Feedback does not only elicit cognitive reactions, it also enhances affective responses to feedback. Furthermore, feedback research in general shows that these responses can interfere with feedback acceptance as well (e.g. Brett and Atwater 2001; Kluger and DeNisi 1996; Sargeant et al. 2008). Affective responses to feedback refer to how the feedback makes a recipient feel (Chen et al. 2017). In educational research on school inspection, it is generally accepted that school inspection visits bring with them unintended negative consequences, such as an emotional impact on the school staff (e.g. Ehren et al. 2013; Gray and Gardner 1999; Penninckx and Vanhoof 2015; Perryman 2006, 2007, 2009; Quintelier et al. 2016; Scanlon 1999; Sutton and Wheatley 2003). On a positive note, McCrone et al. (2007) and Scanlon (1999) stated that the inspection can give teachers a moral boost if they are left with a feeling of being appreciated by the success of pupils and with pride about their own share in this result. Positive emotions, such as relief, satisfaction and pride, related to the inspection may be a powerful source for teachers' motivation, resilience, perseverance and job satisfaction (Gu and Day 2007; Ofsted 2007). Negative emotions, such as anxiety, anger, depression and guilt, are reported when teachers' ideas and practices are being questioned (Jeffrey and Woods 1996; Kelchtermans and Deketelaere 2016). Scanlon (1999) observed the existence of negative emotions in schools with a negative judgement and concluded that a special measures regime, due to the negative advice, caused extreme stress and anxiety. Non-educational research points to the importance of the relationship between feedback sign and affective responses in the feedback acceptance process. Positive feedback will generally lead to positive emotions, while negative feedback, inconsistent with respondents' self-perceptions, appears to elicit negative emotional responses, such as anger and sadness. The presence of these negative emotions can obstruct the acceptance of feedback (Anseel et al. 2011; Brett and Atwater 2001; Hattie and Timperley 2007; Kluger and DeNisi 1996). Additionally, perceptions of feedback (un) fairness tend to be emotionally charged as well (Cohen-Charash and Spector 2001; Sargeant et al. 2008). For example, anger may be elicited by the appraisal of being treated unfairly (Lazarus 1991). Interestingly, the influence of teachers' affective responses to feedback with regard to feedback acceptance in school inspection processes is relatively unexplored.

Given their importance to achieve teachers' professional learning and development, further research is needed to understand which responses lead to feedback acceptance and rejection during a school inspection process. Therefore, this study aims to identify teachers' cognitive and affective responses to feedback during a school inspection process and their influence upon the feedback acceptance process. The following set of research questions (RQ) is set forward:

RQ 1. What are the sources of feedback that teachers report during a school inspection process?

RQ 2. Which cognitive responses to feedback do teachers report during a school inspection process? Which influence do these responses have upon the acceptance of school inspection feedback?

RQ 3. Which affective responses to feedback do teachers report during a school inspection process? Which influence do these responses have upon the acceptance of school inspection feedback?

2 Conceptual framework

In this section, we will explore in more detail the concepts presented in the introduction. In Fig. 1, the outline of the conceptual framework for this study is visualised. We conceptualise feedback and distinguish the different sources of feedback that teachers can refer to within the context of a school inspection. Next, we provide an overview of the existing literature on cognitive responses to feedback. In this study, we categorise teachers' perceptions regarding the source's credibility, feedback fairness and feedback characteristics as cognitive responses. In line with Parrott's classification of emotions (2001), joy, love, surprise, anger, sadness and fear is used to describe teachers' affective responses to feedback. As we will show, these affective responses can have a mediating role in the feedback acceptance process. Both concepts are expected to influence the acceptance of feedback.

2.1 Conceptualization of feedback (acceptance)

In order to conceptualise 'school inspection feedback', we have adopted the definition of Kluger and DeNisi (1996, p. 235), who define 'feedback' as 'actions taken by an external agent to provide information regarding some aspect(s) of one's task performance'.

Although literature distinguishes different sources of feedback, such as organisations, supervisors, co-workers, the task environment and the self (e.g. Greller and Herold 1975; Hattie and Timperley 2007; Ilgen et al. 1979), the definition of Kluger and DeNisi (1996) excludes self-generated feedback. Although self-assessment is
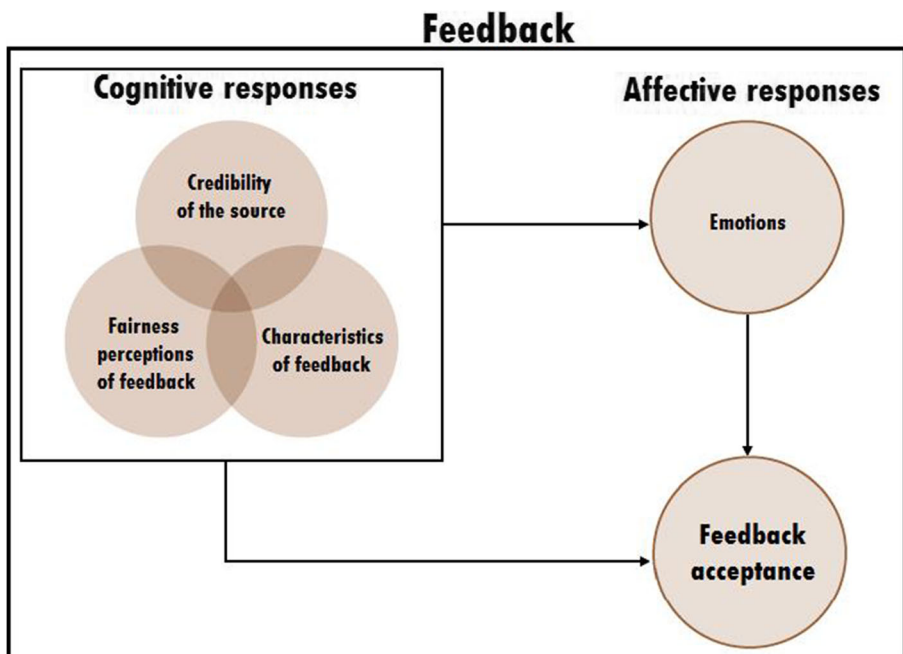

Fig. 1 Conceptual model for feedback in school inspection processes

considered as an effective tool which helps teachers to improve their performance, research indicates that self-perception differs from how the performance is viewed by others as individuals have blind spots about their abilities that prevent them from reaching the next stage of professional development (Dunning et al. 2003). Just like Kluger and DeNisi (1996) put the emphasis of feedback on task performance, OECD (2013) limit teacher feedback to information that teachers receive about their teaching (p. 130). Often, performance feedback is defined in terms of an evaluation of a certain task measured against preconceived standards to communicate to individuals about their current level of behaviour (e.g. Noell et al. 2005). This is in contrast to other researchers, who suggest that performance is more than the ability of teaching alone and who refer to non-academic outcomes of education as well (e.g. Otley 1999; Visscher and Coe 2003). Therefore, in this study, performance includes the recipient's cognition, motivation, behaviour and even the attitudes about the task as well (Duijnhouwer et al. 2012; Hattie and Timperley 2007; Shute 2008).

Multiple studies suggest that individuals' acceptance of feedback is critical to the overall success of performance management and its effectiveness for further development, because attitudes have a powerful influence on behaviour (Kim and Holzer 2014). However, accepting feedback from inspectors does not necessarily lead to school improvement actions (Ehren et al. 2013; Ehren and Visscher 2008). Ilgen et al. (1979) make a clear distinction between the acceptance of feedback and the desire to respond to feedback. While feedback acceptance refers to the recipient's belief that the feedback is an accurate portrayal of his or her performance, the willingness to respond to feedback is depending on many other factors, such as the timing, the source's power and the feedback's incentive. In this study, we have opted to solely examine the acceptance of feedback, since feedback must be accepted before it can be used (Ashford et al. 2003).

2.2 Teachers' feedback sources

Providing teachers with feedback on their teaching on a regular basis can significantly improve teaching practices (Santiago and Benavides 2009; Hattie 2008). Educational research distinguish teachers' feedback from principals, mentors, colleagues, students and parents (e.g. Garza 2009).

Teacher evaluation is common across OECD countries, and school inspections have an important role in demonstrating good practices, although in some countries, the inspectorate cannot take responsibility for individual teacher evaluations as this is seen as a task of school boards (OECD 2013). Sometimes, these inspectors have no legal rights to give any advice to schools and teachers on how they can improve their current practices (Penninckx et al. 2014). Their inspection framework controls schools and only holds them accountable in 'a transparent and comparable manner' (Ehren 2016, pp. 13). Instead, in other contexts, these school inspections have a stimulating role in the school's quality development processes. For this reason, the inspection report can only contain feedback at school level. However, studies indicate that among teachers, there is a need to seek advice from school inspectors after lesson observation. When school inspectors provide feedback or suggestions for improvement of their classroom practice, teachers can feel appreciated and recognised. Conversely, when this feedback was not provided, the uncertainty and self-doubt of teachers can increase (Kelchtermans and Vandenberghe 1998). Recent research indicates that school

inspectors sometimes provide a number of practical tips off the record, to strengthen the classroom practice directly to teachers (Penninckx et al. 2014; Dobbelaer et al. 2017). Nevertheless, the extent to which teachers receive feedback from various sources, formal and informal, during a school inspection process and make use of this feedback is not explored yet.

2.3 Cognitive responses

Cognitive responses to feedback are defined as the recipient's perceptions (or thoughts) about the credibility of the source, fairness of the feedback and the features of feedback information (e.g. Ilgen et al. 1979; Brinko 1993).

2.3.1 Credibility of the feedback source

People are more likely to accept feedback when the source of this information is perceived as credible (e.g. Audia and Locke 2004; Ilgen et al. 1979; Gray et al. 1999). According to Brinko (1993), credibility has two key components: expertise and trustworthiness.

Expertise (or knowledge) refers to the degree to which a feedback source is perceived to be capable of making accurate assertions. In order to deliver high-quality feedback, a school inspector requires abilities to identify areas for improvement in teachers' practices and to indicate the specific changes needed to achieve this improvement (Brimblecombe et al. 1995). In his study of 48 teachers and head teachers, Dean (1995) found that teachers in primary schools are often reluctant to accept feedback from inspectors with a secondary background. In addition, a more HR-related study by Geddes and Linnehan (1996) points to the extent to which a feedback source is aware of the circumstances under which the recipient performs the job. Respondents in this study were more likely to accept feedback when the feedback provider reflected a good understanding of their work conditions.

Besides the ability to provide good feedback, many authors stress also the importance of the trustworthiness of the source in relation to the degree of feedback acceptance (Brinko 1993; Ilgen et al. 1979). Trustworthiness represents the degree to which an individual trusts the feedback source's intentions and motives, free from biasing factors, at the time of feedback (Kinicki et al. 2004; Steelman and Rutkowski 2004). Although almost every teachers experience fear and anxiety in advance of a school inspection, these emotions decrease when inspectors are perceived as professional, collegial and nonthreatening (McNamara and O'Hara 2006). The perception of the school inspectors' trustworthiness affects the teacher's motivation and receptiveness to accept inspection feedback (Erdem and Yaprak 2013). While an authoritarian attitude triggers reactions of resistance and rejection towards the inspectors, a more open and connected dialogue between both parties improves teachers' receptiveness to feedback (Kelchtermans 2007; Leeuw 2002; Ouston et al. 1997). Dobbelaer et al. (2017) points to the importance of inspector training on communication skills to enhance teachers' acceptance of unfavourable inspection results. Finally, a positive relationship between school inspectors and teachers results in more acceptance of the feedback, and more favourable reactions towards the report and an increased willingness to use it as a start for further improvement (Ehren and Visscher 2008; Kogan and Maden 1999).

2.3.2 Fairness perceptions of feedback

If school inspections attempt to drive quality improvements in schools, then it is essential that the inspection procedure and the inspection report are acknowledged by the school staff as a valid and reliable evaluation of the school's efforts and achievement as this increases the staff's willingness to accept the recommendations in the report (Kelchtermans 2007, p. 484). Moreover, feelings of distrust in organisations can not only influence individuals' attitudes and behaviour towards the organisation, such as theft, vandalism or resistance, but they can also form the basis for (psychological) withdrawal and quitting intentions (e.g. Jermier et al. 1994; Nadiri and Tanova 2010). The term 'organisational justice' refers to the extent to which individuals perceive evaluation outcomes, processes and interactions to be fair in nature (Cropanzano and Greenberg 1997). Literature distinguishes three types of organisational justice: distributive, procedural and interactional justice (e.g. Colquitt 2001). There have, to our knowledge, been no studies to date of the effects of organisational justice in school inspection context on teachers' acceptance of feedback.

Distributive justice is related to the fairness of outcomes (or consequences of the decisions). Assessing outcome fairness concerns whether the level and type of information is perceived as fair by comparing their feedback to those of others, whereby individuals compare whether the ratio of their contributions and outcomes (or rewards) is similar to that of their peers (Colquitt 2001). This was substantiated by Leung et al. (2001) who show that recipients are more readily to accept negative feedback when they perceive the feedback to be correct.

Procedural justice relates to the fairness of the decision process in which information was gathered to determine the outcomes (Colquitt 2001). When individuals perceive these procedures as transparent and bias-free, the feedback will be more likely accepted (Nojani et al. 2012). When individuals have the opportunity to express their concerns before decisions are made, their perceptions of procedural justice increase. In a study of Thomas (1996), teachers report a sense of injustice when the dialogue with school inspectors is lacking. A more recent study of Gustafsson et al. (2015) indicates a higher level of feedback acceptance when school inspectors set clear expectations regarding the quality of education.

Interactional justice can be defined as the recipients' perceptions of the fairness and quality of the interpersonal treatment they receive from the feedback source (Colquitt 2001). A review of Tyler and Bies (1990) indicates that perceptions of fairness are sensitive to interactions between the feedback source and recipient. When treated with respect, respondents mentioned less bias and were more likely to respond to the received feedback. As this latter dimension involves perceptions of the interaction and attitudes of the feedback source, such as demonstrating respect and dignity towards the feedback recipient (Colquitt 2001), it is, in this study, associated with the credibility of the source (see Section 2.3.1).

2.3.3 Characteristics of feedback content

Sign, constructiveness, clarity, relevance and specificity are defining characteristics of feedback (e.g. Geddes and Linnehan 1996; Ilgen et al. 1979; Kluger and Denisi 1996). Ilgen et al. (1979) indicate the importance of the sign of the feedback as key characteristic for feedback acceptance.

Ilgen et al. (1979) indicate the importance of the sign of the feedback—that is, whether the feedback signals success or failure—as key characteristic for feedback acceptance, as he states that 'almost without exception positive feedback is accepted more than negative' (p. 357). Positive feedback is not only seen as more accurate than negative feedback (Ilgen and Hamstra 1972); individuals are also more likely to accept positive feedback from any source as it enhances one's self-image (Brinko 1993; Kluger and DeNisi 1996; Van-Dijk and Kluger 2004). In the case of negative feedback, feedback acceptation increases when the source is perceived as credible (Ilgen et al. 1979; Kluger and DeNisi 1996).

With regard to feedback constructiveness and clarity, research emphasises the importance of clear and explicit feedback (Matthews and Sammons 2004). Teachers prefer constructive, practical feedback. Constructive feedback includes feed forward (e.g. improvement suggestions) and must be given in a directive sense, with regard to strengths and limitations (Hattie and Timperley 2007; Ehren and Visscher 2008). Despite the evidence that accurate and straightforward feedback regarding the recipient's performance increases the willingness to respond to the message (Ilgen et al. 1979), many inspectorates are not allowed to give this kind of information to schools and teachers (Francis 2011; McCrone et al. 2007; Penninckx et al. 2014).

Finally, teachers accept feedback more easily and are more likely to change their behaviour, when the content is relevant to them and consistent with their goals and expectations (Dobbelaer et al. 2017; Ehren and Visscher 2008). This is substantiated by other empirical research that indicate that negative feedback is better accepted when the recipients' self-image or self-perceptions are consistent with or even lower than the received information. Conversely, recipients who agreed with their feedback saw it as generally consistent with or higher than their self-perceptions (e.g. Jussim et al. 1995; Sargeant et al. 2008).

2.4 Affective responses

2.4.1 Conceptualisation and classification of teachers' emotions

Feedback does not only elicit cognitive responses, it also evokes emotional reactions. In literature, the conceptualisation of emotions remains often elusive as authors may assume there is a general consensus about the content of this concept (Gendron and Feldman Barrett 2009; Scherer 2005; Sheppard et al. 2015). Yet, this perception is not reflected in research (Sheppard et al. 2015), because scholars use a definition of emotion that reflects the theoretical viewpoints including affective, cognitive, physiological, disruptive, adaptive and motivational definitions (Sander 2013). As a result of this variety of interpretations, a lot of researchers advocated the need for a conceptual framework and a common vocabulary in order to discuss and analyse emotion research (e.g. Linnenbrink-Garcia and Pekrun 2011; Meyer and Turner 2006).

One definition delineates emotions as 'brief, rapid responses involving physiological, experiential, and behavioural activity that helps humans respond to survival-related problems and opportunities' (Keltner and Ekman 2003, p. 163). More recently, Sander (2013) compared and integrated different theories and models on emotions and distinguished similar characteristics (e.g. multiple components, brief duration, rapid changeable), but focused on the importance of appraisal as the cognitive antecedent of

emotion. This perspective, originally introduced by cognitive psychological theoreticians (Frijda 1993; Lazarus 1991), emphasises that individuals evaluate whether a certain situation is relevant to their needs or well-being and whether this situation is consistent with their goals.

Researchers point to the existence of strong relations between these appraisals and specific emotions (e.g. Frijda 1993; Lazarus 1991; Scherer 2005; Turner and Schallert 2001), whereby these emotions occur as a response to this evaluation of the event, rather than to the event itself (Roseman and Smith 2001; Smith and Lazarus 1990). Therefore, different perceptions of events cause different appraisals and thus different emotions in individual people (Frijda et al. 1989; Sutton and Wheatley 2003).

Most literature about teachers' emotions distinguishes positive and negative emotions (e.g. Sander 2013; Sutton and Wheatley 2003). Positive emotions refer to emotions that evoke when an individual is making progress towards a goal, such as happiness, pride, relief, hope, satisfaction and excitement. Negative emotions arise from goal incongruence and include anger, anxiety, fright, guilt, sadness, envy, jealousy, disgust and sadness (Hargreaves 1998; Lazarus 1991; Sutton and Wheatley 2003). Another classification of emotions, however, is of the hand of Parrott (2001) who follows the perspective where basic emotions are further divided into non-basic secondary and tertiary emotions. Parrott identified more than a hundred emotions grouped within six primary emotions: love, joy, surprise, anger, sadness and fear (see Fig. 2). The secondary division contains more emotions within each primary emotion group. Table 1 shows also the third level, an extension of the branches from the secondary emotion group. This tree structure of emotions will provide a framework to analyse the emotions of teachers in this study, as it gives a comprehensive overview of human emotions and provides an insightful awareness of how emotions are interrelated at different levels (Chen 2016).

2.4.2 Teachers' affective responses to school inspections

Teachers' efforts to address the (perceived) inspection expectations are found to go together with the experience of intense emotions (Hargreaves 1998; Perryman 2007). In a recent review study of Penninckx and Vanhoof (2015), 28 out of the 35 studies (80%) provided data on the emotions caused by inspection. Although evidence of negative emotions amongst school staff as a result of school inspections were found in each of these studies, only 16 studies were the result of teachers' personal experience of emotional effects.

The notification period is generally considered to be a very stressful period (Brimblecombe and Ormston 1995), although other studies also found severe emotional effects during or after the inspection (Penninckx and Vanhoof 2015; Perryman 2007). During inspection, teachers say they feel stress and uneased when the inspector carries out lesson observations (Macbeath 2008; Varnava and Koutsoulis 2006). This was substantiated by Wilcox and Gray (1996) who found that teacher anxiety is related with being observed teaching. According to Perryman (2006), teachers feel that way in any form of evaluation because they feel like they have to perform in order to demonstrate their competences. Macbeath (2008) points to the support of the director as a decisive factor in the level of teachers' stress experience. Teachers in the study of Hopkins et al. (2016) experienced stress because there is so much depending on the results of the

Primary emotion	Secondary emotion	Tertiary emotion
Love	Affection	Adoration, Fondness, Liking, Attractiveness, Caring, Tenderness, Compassion, Sentimentality
	Lust	Arousal, Desire, Passion, Infatuation
	Longing	Longing
Joy	Cheerfulness	Amusement, Bliss, Gaiety, Glee, Jolliness, Joviality, Joy, Delight, Enjoyment, Gladness, Happiness, Jubilation, Elation, Satisfaction, Ecstasy, Euphoria
	Zest	Enthusiasm, Zeal, Excitement, Thrill, Exhilaration
	Contentment	Pleasure
	Pride	Triumph
	Optimism	Eagerness, Hope
	Enthrallment	Enthrallment, Rapture
	Relief	Relief
Surprise	Surprise	Amazement, Astonishment
Anger	Irritation	Aggravation, Agitation, Annoyance, Grouchy, Grumpy, Crosspatch
	Exasperation	Frustration
	Rage	Anger, Outrage, Fury, Wrath, Hostility, Ferocity, Bitter, Hatred, Scorn, Spite, Vengefulness, Dislike, Resentment
	Disgust	Revulsion, Contempt, Loathing
	Envy	Jealousy
	Torment	Torment
Sadness	Suffering	Agony, Anguish, Hurt
	Sadness	Depression, Despair, Gloom, Glumness, Unhappy, Grief, Sorrow, Woe, Misery, Melancholy'
	Disappointment	Dismay, Displeasure
	Shame	Guilt, Regret, Remorse
	Neglect	Alienation, Defeatism, Dejection, Embarrassment, Homesickness, Humiliation, Insecurity, Insult, Isolation, Loneliness, Rejection
Fear	Horror	Pity, Sympathy
	Nervousness	Alarm, Shock, Fear, Fright, Horror, Terror, Panic, Hysteria, Mortification

Fig. 2 Parrott's emotions by group

inspection. With regard to the inspection outcome, several studies have provided evidence that teachers felt depressed, ashamed, traumatised and even shocked when the school received a negative judgement (Thomas et al. 2000; Wilcox and Gray 1995). When teachers find themselves under intense pressure as the result of special measures, intense emotions such as anxiety, frustration and anger were found (Nicolaidou and Ainscow 2005). Jeffrey and Woods (1996) conclude that teachers experience these strong negative emotions when their conceptualizations of well-nourished ideas and practices are being questioned. Discrepancies between teachers' actual performance and school inspectors' desired goals generally result in negative emotions (Brunsden et al. 2006; Scanlon 1999). Despite the above-mentioned studies where stress was reported in schools with a negative outcome, Brunsden et al. (2006) found that even in schools with a positive judgement, an increased degree of stress and anxiety was registered. This made the researchers conclude that 'it is the inspection experience itself and not its outcome that is generating the psychological distress' (p. 28).

On a more positive note, McCrone et al. (2007) and Scanlon (1999) stated that the inspection can give teachers a moral boost if they are left with a feeling of being appreciated by the success of pupils and with pride about their own share in this result. Positive emotions related to the inspection can be a powerful source for teachers'

Table 1 Overview of the participants

School	Participant	Gender	Age	Teaching experience	School type
A	1	F	51	25 +	Preschool teacher
A	2	F	28	0–5	Pupil care coordinator
A	3	F	39	15–20	Primary school teacher
A	4	F	57	25 +	Preschool teacher
B	5	F	49	25 +	Primary school teacher
B	6	F	54	25 +	Primary school teacher
B	7	M	35	10–15	Primary school teacher
C	8	F	54	25 +	Preschool teacher
C	9	M	43	20–25	Pupil care coordinator
D	10	F	44	20–25	Preschool teacher
D	11	F	38	15–20	Pupil care coordinator
D	12	F	39	10–15	Primary school teacher
E	13	F	49	25 +	Pupil care coordinator
F	14	F	30	5–10	Primary school teacher
G	15	F	45	20–25	Primary school teacher
G	16	F	35	10–15	Primary school teacher
G	17	F	47	20–25	Primary school teacher
G	18	F	44	20–25	Preschool teacher
H	19	F	50	25 +	Preschool teacher
H	20	F	34	10–15	Primary school teacher
H	21	F	34	5–10	Pupil care coordinator

motivation, resilience, perseverance and job satisfaction (Gu and Day 2007). In a report commissioned by Ofsted (2007) on English schools removed from Special Measures, teachers' describe feelings of relief, recognition of success, euphoria, pride and delight when they feel their work is rewarded. Dealing with the aftermath of an inspection can also be emotionally draining for teachers. Different studies found that absenteeism amongst teachers due to stress or illness is high in the period after the inspection (Brimblecombe et al. 1995; Ferguson et al. 1999; Kogan and Maden 1999), although these nonappearances seem less likely to occur in schools with a constructive approach towards the inspection (Brimblecombe et al. 1995; Penninckx et al. 2014). In addition, as a result of the increased workload, fatigue, a decreased teaching effectiveness and a reduced professional enthusiasm were reported too (Case et al. 2000; Chapman 2002; Perryman 2009). Although this amount of extra work depends on the starting point of each school (Brimblecombe et al. 1995; MacBeath 2008), these unintended effects were noticeable for a significant period of time following the visit (Lee-Corbin 2005).

As mentioned earlier, these studies investigated teachers' emotions before, during or after a school inspection, rather than to focus on the feedback acceptance processes. This shows that the role of teachers' affective responses to feedback during a school inspection remains relatively unexplored and undervalued. Nevertheless, research in general indicates that performance feedback is emotionally charged and can diminish the recipients' self-esteem and pride (e.g. Ashford et al. 2003). Kluger and DeNisi

(1996) found that negative feedback discouraged feedback recipients and decreased their motivation to improve. This was confirmed by a study of Sargeant et al. (2008), who examined physicians' acceptance and use of their multi-source feedback (MSF) reports. One-third of their respondents experienced strong emotions of anger and depression as a result of negative feedback and did not tend to use the feedback for further improvement. Earlier research concluded that unfavourable feedback resulted in negative emotions, such as shame and anger, and made recipients feel demoralised (e.g. Kernis and Johnson 1990). In a study of Brett and Atwater (2001), recipients perceived negative feedback as less accurate and negative responses were reported.

These results suggest that both cognitive and affective responses to feedback seem to be essential for altering teachers' attitudes, perceptions and behaviour. In addition to theory development, understanding how individuals receive and react to feedback not only can enhance its acceptance, but also can contribute to quality-improvement in schools on the base of the provided inspection feedback.

3 Methodology

3.1 Approach

To understand the complexities of emotional processes, Schutz and Pekrun (2007) argued for the need to study emotions in real-life contexts. Therefore, we opted for qualitative research with semi-structured interviews. This type of research provides an in-depth understanding of perceptions and emotions (Cohen et al. 2011).

3.2 Data collection

Convenience sampling was used to select the respondents in this study (Cohen et al. 2011). There were 34 primary schools in Flanders, who were inspected between February and March 2017. By the end of March, every school leader received a phone call, followed by an email informing them about the study. The school leaders were asked to contact teachers for participation in this study. In order to capture a broad view, Braster (2000) indicates that including five or more schools in the study enables to distinguish between individual and general features of schools and inspections. Although retrospective research suggests that individuals remember their emotions accurately after 90 days (Barrett 1997) as well as after 1 year (Röcke et al. 2011), current beliefs can influence the memory of prior emotional experiences (Robinson and Clore 2002). Therefore, in this study, the period between inspection and the interview was kept as short as possible to capture the emotions as respondents initially experienced. In total, 21 teachers out of eight primary schools were interviewed between April and June 2017 (see Table 1). The respondents' level of teaching experience in primary education varied from five to 36 years. Some teachers (24%) had a management or coordination task at school.

Regarding the school network, both private and public schools were included. With regard to the school inspection advice, an equal amount of schools with a positive and restricted positive advice were included. An overview of the main characteristics of all participating schools is provided in Table 2.

Table 2 Overview of the participating schools

School	Nr of pupils	Nr of staff	Type of school	Context of the school inspection judgement
A	250–300	15–20	Subsidised free school	The inspection found that one education area was insufficient in preschool. Nevertheless, the school received the judgement 'positive' regarding education because the inspectors ruled 'the school team has sufficient policy-making capacity to continue this development process under the leadership of the director and the core team'.
B	150–200	10–15	Subsidised free school	The school received a positive inspection report regarding education. The school needs to address infrastructural problems.
C	200–250	15–20	Subsidised public school	The inspection found that both of the selected education areas were insufficient. The school received the judgement 'restricted positive'.
D	250–300	20–25	Subsidised public school	The school received a restricted positive' judgement for one education area, despite the good reviews of the teaching staff and principal.
E	300–350	25–30	Subsidised free school	The school received a positive inspection report regarding education.
F	200–250	15–20	Subsidised free school	The school received a positive inspection report regarding education.
G	200–250	20–25	Subsidised public school	The inspection found that both of the selected education areas were insufficient. The school received the judgement 'restricted positive'.
H	300–350	20–25	Subsidised free school	The inspection found that one education area was insufficient. The school received the judgement 'restricted positive'.

Interviews lasted about 50 min. First, respondents were asked to fill out a three-column worksheet. The first column held the source of feedback that provided information during the inspection process; the second showed the phase of the feedback reception and the third column held the content of the feedback. In order to obtain complete and accurate information on all sources of feedback during the school inspection process, respondents were asked to say out loud everything they thought about when answering the question. After that, we asked respondents to concentrate on and recall in detail moments of feedback they specifically accepted whether rejected in relation to school inspection feedback. This technique was used to recall data and explore the responses that influenced feedback acceptance. Semi-structured interviews were used to recall two till four feedback-related situations. Open-ended questions were asked to elicit rich descriptions of these situations. The interview schedule was used in all interviews to assure methodological consistency and control for reliability (Cohen et al. 2011; Corbin and Strauss 2008). Interviews were all administered face-to-face, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3.3 Data analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The software package Nvivo10, a qualitative analysis tool from QSR International, was used to support the process of moving from inductive to deductive analysis.

To analyse data, a thematic approach was used (Braun and Clarke 2006). Firstly, all transcripts were read in an active way—searching for patterns and interesting ideas. Secondly, meaningful units in the transcribed interviews were generated. In a third step, codes were collated into themes and sub-themes. Fourth, themes were refined by reviewing their suitability for the data set. Fifth, a final code tree was constructed, which represented the data as a whole. In the last step, the report was produced. The selected categories are used in the next session to present our findings (see Appendix Table 5).

The first author independently coded and analysed all the interviews. Throughout the research process, memos and theoretical notes were written by the first author. Reflections on the theoretical framework, interview questions, research sample as well as remarks on the coding and analysis have been regularly and thoroughly discussed in the research team during several peer debriefing sessions whereby unbiased peers assist in probing the researcher's thinking around all or parts of the research process to assure internal validity in the rest of the coding process (Mortelmans 2007).

3.4 Context of this study

The Flemish educational context is characterised by a large degree of school autonomy as schools develop their own curriculum, school work plan, teaching methods, student assessments and certification (OECD 2013). Since there are no central examinations, external evaluation of Flemish subsidised schools is only reserved for the inspectorate, an independent body under the direct jurisdiction of the Minister of Education and Training of the Flemish Government. The Decree declaring the Quality of Education (2009) explicitly stipulates Flemish schools as primary bodies responsible for the quality of the education they provide. Yet, the inspectorate evaluates whether the school meet the legal requirements, such as attainment targets, development goals and safety and hygienic aspects of school infrastructure.

The inspectors handle the CIPO-model (an acronym for context, input, process and output) (Scheerens 2006). Each of these components—and its further divisions—is assumed to have an impact on the educational quality. The inspection process contains three phases: (1) a preliminary enquiry, (2) an audit and (3) an inspection report.

The preliminary enquiry includes, besides brief meetings with the school staff, a detailed analysis of the school's previous inspection reports and output data. When a school is visited during the audit phase, inspectors conduct lesson observations, analysis of school documents and interviews with members of the management and school staff. The data from these sources of information are accumulated throughout the evaluation process, resulting in a profile of a school's strengths and weaknesses (OECD 2013).

Finally, feedback is conveyed to the school in the form of an inspection report. This report is developed following a generic template for all levels of education and for all institutions, although it can be adjusted to a specific level when necessary or relevant. The outcome of the audit phase leads to an advice about two independent topics: on educational matters and on school infrastructure. These judgements are either 'positive', 'restricted positive' or 'negative'. This advice is based on a description of the school quality as inspected. Together with the above-mentioned school profile, this report is meant to be the basis for further school improvement. In Flanders, inspectors are not allowed to provide individual feedback on teachers or principals. For this reason, the inspection report can only contain feedback at school level. When feedback

is targeted at teacher level, strict anonymity must be guaranteed (Shewbridge et al. 2011).

4 Results

4.1 Sources of feedback

In order to examine the sources of feedback that teachers report during a school inspection process (research question 1), we present descriptive results to emphasise the extent to which teachers receive feedback in the primary schools involved in the study. As summarised in Table 3, two main categories of feedback sources were distinguished during the school inspection process, namely feedback from the school inspection and feedback from other sources.

4.1.1 School inspection

In chronological order, respondents declared to receive feedback directly from the school inspectors during the preliminary enquiry conversation, the observation debriefing and the final debriefing session. Furthermore, most respondents consider the final inspection report as a feedback instrument from the school inspectors as well. From the most useful to least useful, respondents distinguish feedback from the (lesson) observation debriefing, final debriefing session, inspection report and preliminary school visit conversation.

Half of the respondents (12 out of 21) attended a short interview with the school inspectors during the preliminary enquiry. According to the respondents, the inspectors were mainly looking for additional evidence to complete their analysis of the school's strengths and weaknesses and gave hardly substantive feedback. Yet, we found that nine respondents received reassuring feedback at organisational level during that talk, while three other respondents did not receive any feedback at all during this phase.

During the audit phase, almost every respondent encountered an inspector observing a lesson. Sometimes, inspectors visited a second lesson for a shorter period. After these

Table 3 Sources of teachers' feedback during the school inspection process and their absolute frequency

	Total
School inspection	
Preliminary enquiry: one-day school-visit	12/21
Audit phase: observation debriefing	18/21
Audit phase: debriefing session	8/21
The inspection report	20/21
Other feedback sources	
Principal	14/21
Colleagues	10/21
Other (Pupil care coordinator, counselling services, parents)	7/21

observations, inspectors had a brief professional conversation with the individual teacher—or in large schools together with parallel teachers. Other respondents, who are responsible for key aspects of pupil care, had an interview with an inspector after the inspector gathered information about aspects of teaching and learning. The majority of respondents (18 out of 21) reported this post-observation debriefing as their most powerful feedback moment, although many respondents remained dissatisfied about the amount of received feedback. This feedback on lesson observation was generally at organisational level (information about lesson plans, teaching materials and activities) and less on the individual level. Still, the results indicate that many respondents gained new perspectives on their teaching activities. Only three of the participating teachers received no feedback during this personal interaction moment.

> We kind of missed that a little. Even though, we had an answer to everything, she just nodded, but apparently, she wasn't allowed to confirm whether it was good or not. So, that was something we couldn't infer. (respondent 10)

At the end of the audit phase, inspectors met with a sample of staff to discuss the preliminary findings of the inspection team and provided an explanation for the final advice. Only a minority of respondents (8 out of 21) was present at this debriefing session. Half of these respondents reported that this session provided insights into how their teaching processes can be improved. Two other respondents mentioned that the inspectors gave nuance to the meaning of the restricted positive judgement and provided practical and useful feedback to stimulate school improvement. The two remaining respondents were both surprised by the negative feedback and used the opportunity to achieve more information about the underlying causes.

Finally, almost every respondent (20 out of 21) stated that they have read (or at least parts of) the final inspection report. According to these respondents, the report was considered to be helpful, although the content did not deliver new insights into school and teacher performance. Most respondents had already a good idea of the content of the final report as they were informed during or after the debriefing session. Other respondents were already aware of these priorities for improvement before the inspection. A last group of respondents thought the inspection report was less helpful because the report was not targeted at the individual teacher.

> On one hand, I think it is super that the report is so general, 'cause I wouldn't appreciate it at all if it would say "in fifth grade this". On the other hand, I find it really tough, as a teacher, to assess if what it says now, is that referring to me or not (…) You can't ask anyone, 'cause other people don't really know either. (respondent 3)

4.1.2 Other sources of feedback

While the feedback of school inspectors was mainly interpreted in terms of usefulness for their own practice, respondents looked at feedback of principal and colleagues from a different perspective. We did not find citations in which respondents suggested that

feedback, gathered from their principal or colleagues during the school inspection process, resulted in the growth of new ideas, conceptions or beliefs.

According to many respondents (14 out of 21), the principal served mainly as a source of encouraging and supportive feedback rather than a provider of substantive feedback. Two respondents, however, specifically felt abandoned by their principal and expressed the need for more supportive feedback during the school inspection process.

> He recognized the amount of work has been done (…) He's absolutely supportive and makes sure there's energy in the team (...) He once said we had to respect our limits, and I thought that was awesome. (respondent 2)

Nearly half of the respondents (10 out of 21) reported that they consulted their colleagues during inspection, although the information gathered was limited to supportive feedback. The small amount of evidence of substantive peer feedback compared with the extent to which respondents report supportive feedback is remarkable. Only four respondents indicated that the outcomes in the inspection report were discussed in teacher working groups during a staff meeting afterwards.

During some interviews (4 out of 21), the pupil care coordinator was mentioned as a key figure in the school inspection process—especially when the principal was absent (illness, family circumstances), although his/her role in giving feedback was limited to motivating and encouraging feedback as well. The counselling services were only reported by respondents who were attending the debriefing session. Although their main task was to refine the school inspections' statements, respondents revealed that they felt acknowledged, listened to and understood because of the counselling services' rejection of some inspection feedback.

In sum, the results show that respondents viewed feedback from school inspectors most useful. Respondents received substantive inspection feedback during the observation debriefing and, when invited, the debriefing session at the end of the school inspection process. However, many respondents were still seeking more detailed feedback about their own performances and remained, therefore, unsatisfied. Reassuring feedback of principals and colleagues was appreciated by the respondents, who did not expect additional information about their own performance from these parties during the school inspection process. As the results show that there was no substantial feedback given by other sources than school inspectors, the rest of this article will focus on teachers' cognitive and affective responses to school inspection feedback and its acceptance only.

4.2 Cognitive responses to feedback

In order to answer our second RQ (teachers' cognitive responses to school inspection feedback), three main cognitive responses to school inspection feedback were discussed by our respondents. First, we describe their perceptions of the school inspectors' credibility, which refers to one's expertise and trustworthiness (attitudes and motives). After that, respondents' perceptions of feedback fairness are described. During interviews, two types of organisational justice were distinguished by our respondents: distributive and procedural justice. Finally, in regard to the feedback content, respondents' cognitive responses were largely determined by the sign of the

feedback. In addition, respondents' perceptions about feedback constructiveness, clarity and consistency have been discussed during interviews as well. Each of these feedback characteristics can be seen as important subthemes.

4.2.1 Credibility of the feedback source

Expertise With regard to content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, half of the respondents mentioned the inspectors' broad knowledge about various domains in primary schools. The inspectors' feedback matched, to a large extent, respondents' own perceptions and was, therefore, easier to accept. Several respondents mentioned the balanced composition of the inspection team which facilitated the exchange of complementary know-how.

In contrast, less than one-third of respondents believed that inspectors were unable to link their knowledge and insights into current classroom situations. This was especially the case when inspectors arrived from a non-educational background. For that reason, these respondents reported they were unwilling to accept feedback that indicated a need for change.

> I then heard one's a sexologist and the other 's a speech therapist. There's nothing wrong with that. But then these people come and bring us down. (respondent 9)

Some inspectors were perceived to be inadequately informed of educationally relevant cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic differences and corresponding—often financial—problems to meet these new demands. Also, the general ignorance on teachers' administrative workload was explicitly mentioned during the interviews.

> I said: madam, that's administration, again: that's nothing like reality at all. But she wouldn't have any of it, 'cause it wasn't written down anywhere. So, these people have clearly lost all touch with reality. (respondent 15)

Trustworthiness During interviews, the importance of inspectors' positive attitude towards the respondents was notable. Respectful, warm and supportive behaviour increased respondents' trust and confidence in the inspectors. According to respondents, this behaviour encouraged the acceptance of unfavourable feedback. This is in sharp contrast with one-third of the overall respondents who experienced difficulties with the inspectors' attitude. Those respondents described the inspectors' attitude as arrogant and disrespectful. Some inspectors displayed an inappropriate, sceptical attitude when they underscored the lack of reliable, accurate and adequate source documentation. These respondents assumed that this attitude signified the inspector's distrust in school staff and teachers. In return, these respondents mistrusted the school inspectors as well.

> Yeah, I wondered if they really appreciated what we're doing. Maybe that's putting it a little crudely, but I sometimes thought: are they making fun of us now? (respondent 8)

More than half of respondents defined their relationship with school inspectors as one in which they could communicate openly and honestly. They noticed that these

inspectors communicated in a thoughtful, correct and quiet manner. The relaxed atmosphere throughout the evaluation was frequently mentioned. Two respondents reported a somewhat 'instructive' tone during their conversations.

> The observation and went rather nicely, the inspector also interacted smoothly with the children. The atmosphere was quite informal. I can't say a negative thing about it, he'd have been welcome for much longer for all I'm concerned. He wasn't impossible or didn't ask any difficult questions. (respondent 19)

During the interviews, about one-third of respondents reported mistrust regarding the inspectors' motives. According to them, some inspectors arrived with preconceived ideas and were gathering information to affirm them. This is in contrast to the majority of respondents, who started with the presumption that inspectors ensure an honest and open dialogue, though they admitted that there were initial difficulties to operate collaboratively. These respondents were worried to expose too many details about the schools' weaknesses in this 'determining' evaluation process. These worries were put at ease when inspectors were perceived as interested and concerned about teaching resources and approaches. Where respondents had the opportunity to reflect formally on the inspectors' preliminary findings and to influence recommendations, their positive perceptions about the school inspectors' motives were strengthened.

In sum, we find that the perception of school inspectors' credibility is an important factor in the respondents' feedback acceptance process. School inspectors are landed with the crucial task of creating trust among school staff and teachers in order to foster an open evaluation culture. However, when respondents mistrust the inspectors' motives and question their credibility, defensiveness and unreceptive reactions towards the school inspectors and their feedback occur.

4.2.2 Fairness perceptions of feedback

Distributive justice The decisive importance of paper documentation was the most reported concern of outcome fairness among respondents. According to about half of the respondents, inspectors minimised the significance of papers in favour of actual teaching and learning processes at the start of the school visit. As an afterthought to this moment, one-third of respondents were sceptical of this statement. According to them, inspectors were looking for documented evidence of what was taught and criticised lacks in this area heavily.

In order to meet these requirements, more than half of respondents mentioned small adaptations of teaching materials (classroom walls, fabrication of documentations) and an adapting teaching style during the inspection process. Conversely, the other group of respondents refused to adjust materials for the forthcoming inspectors in order to provide a better image of the school. When these ambiguous activities took place in schools within the same school community, and these 'misleading' schools received a more favourable outcome, feelings of injustice among the non-misleading respondents were reinforced.

> These teachers are performing less well, but they are far keener to sell themselves. Therefore, they receive a better report. It is a shame inspectors don't notice that. (respondent 1)

To a lesser extent, respondents contested the assigned weight of shortcomings in their feedback as inspectors did not take into account an important part of potentially visible points of the schools' progress. These respondents sensed inspectors' dilemmas between letting the teachers and principal work autonomously and intervening to keep control. Four of these respondents drew the short straw and received a restricted positive outcome for a subject that was already under development. Although their negative feedback was perceived to be accurate, they felt distrusted and were disappointed in the final outcome.

In case of negative circumstances, a small group of respondents felt insufficiently supported as the inspectors did not respond to the needs of the staff and students after an occurrence that impacted the school environment. For example, death or a debilitating disease of a student or school member caused the staff to focus on other priorities to the detriment of the curriculum. According to these respondents, the inspectors refused to take into account these unfortunate circumstances for the final inspection advice which lead to unfavourable feedback. Although these respondents agreed with the feedback, they contested the assigned weight.

Procedural justice The inspection procedure was generally perceived as a very subjective process. Regarding the role of school inspectors, different values, standards and ideas were mentioned by almost all respondents, even by those respondents who received favourable feedback. Almost half of respondents criticised school inspectors for bias and inconsistent behaviour. For example, different approaches between experienced and less experienced inspectors decreased respondents' trust in the process. Negative feedback, provided by less experienced perceived inspectors, was less readily accepted by these respondents. Respondents reported the inspector's perceived experience mostly when they received negative feedback, whereby more experienced inspectors were considered to be more reliable and less critical.

> Their expectations and aims are always a bit different. One may observe a class and not find anything wrong with it, while another will have loads of comments. You'll always have to wait and see. (respondent 6)

In addition, when feedback between previous and current inspections differed significantly, despite the steps undertaken in light of previous recommendations and determinations, respondents reacted bewildered and did not agree with it.

In regard to the above-mentioned concerns, respondents were generally in favour of periodic (re-)visits with the same inspection team among schools within the same school community to ensure consistent and fair outcomes, and an improved trust in this external school evaluation.

Clusters of comments around the credibility of the feedback fairness revealed the importance of transparency and objectiveness given by the school inspectors during the school inspection. School inspections characterised by greater distributed and procedural justice resulted in a better understanding of school inspectors' expectations. Nevertheless, when there is doubt about the objectivity or unbiased nature of the inspectors' approach, a culture of compliance is endorsed whereby schools seek to meet the demands of inspection rather than to embrace feedback as a learning opportunity.

4.2.3 Characteristics of feedback content

Feedback sign Regarding feedback sign, most respondents referred to negative comments. Three respondents confessed they could not recall positive information since they were overloaded by information and absorbed negative feedback more strongly and in more detail. The maldistribution of positive and negative feedback determined the participants' willingness to respond to feedback.

> All kind of things. For example, for history I used the timeline and maps incorrectly. My test were too this and my reports were too that. He kept ranting on, really. Frankly, I found that quite tough. He also mentioned some positive things, but I really thought there were a lot more negative ones. (respondent 1)

When inspectors paid tribute to the school staff, positive feedback was initially suspiciously received. When the overall outcome of the inspection was positive, respondents appreciated the positive findings and identified themselves more easy with the—small amount of—shortcomings. Our data indicated that small amounts of negative feedback were occasionally seen as opportunities to convince the school board to introduce changes or refresh some watered-down activities.

Feedback constructiveness In terms of negative feedback, respondents generally made a difference between negative criticism and constructive feedback. More than half of respondents associated constructive feedback with terms such as 'advice', 'growing opportunities' and 'tips' to improve their teaching performance and—sometimes outdated—approaches.

Where feedback was perceived as corrective instead, one-third of respondents felt threatened, certainly when the inspectors did not take into account the feelings of the respondent. When this unconstructive dialogue continued, two respondents mentioned they stopped reacting and processing at all.

> They literally told me our inclusion programme wasn't any good. That the children didn't get what they were entitled to (…) Everything I said to defend myself was rejected. After a while, I felt like: bring it on and I'll just keep quiet. (respondent 9)

One respondent pointed to feedback that was targeted to a physical aspect of the person rather than a behavioural aspect. This information was perceived as personally threatening since this was not something readily changeable.

Feedback clarity Almost all respondents compared the clarity between oral and written inspection feedback. During conversations with inspectors, most respondents received and agreed with clear and understandable feedback about their performances. A small group of respondents did not understand these spoken comments and preferred written feedback as it was formulated more concrete towards the schools' and teachers' teaching and learning processes. In most cases, however, respondents were very critical about the vague, general and abstract language that was used in the inspection report. Respondents were unable to distinguish their own weaknesses as the comments did not refer to individual teachers or grades.

> The inspection report was rather unclear. Whereas my conversation with the inspector was quite clear about our shortcomings, I couldn't always retrace that in the report. With quite a lot of cliché sentences, to me, it felt like there was a lot of copy/paste in it. I didn't enjoy reading it. (respondent 14)

Feedback relevance In general, feedback was considered to be relevant when it was related specifically to the classroom level. Most of the recalled feedback referred to core activities of teaching, such as lesson planning and preparation, learning instructions and the achievement of attainment targets and development goals. Comments about school-level factors (infrastructure and curriculum) were perceived less relevant as the majority of respondents felt less responsible for these domains.

One-third of respondents disagreed with the equal weight for all subjects such as mathematics, language and music education. The reduced attention for spelling and the increasing importance of spoken languages and music education is a hard pill to swallow for these respondents. Although the feedback was perceived to be correct, respondents found it hard to accept it as they claimed that society and higher education are not adjusted to this view.

> I felt it was something that needed our attention, indeed, […] but again, the force with which the hammer came down, was uncalled for, I think. On the other hand, I think, phew, a good thing we passed for maths and failed the arts. (respondent 12)

Feedback accuracy With regard to the perceived accuracy of the school inspectors' feedback, almost all respondents stated that the school inspection did not lead to new insights into their teaching performance as most of the detected deficiencies were already included in the school development plan. Yet, little less than half of respondents were pleasantly surprised by information about colleagues' performances and teaching approaches.

> Yes, of course. I thought the comments we got were fairly constructive, those remarks were correct, indeed. The comments are things we're aware of, but we're still to get started, it still needs to get done. (respondent 7)

Nevertheless, while perceiving most feedback as correct and accurate, one-third of respondents stated that remarks were taken out of context. According to these respondents, the inspectors observed a single event (e.g. lunch break, punishments) which was then generalised although it did not represent the schools' daily practices. One respondent believed there was a misunderstanding between a colleague and school inspector which caused unfavourable—and allegedly incorrect—feedback about the primary teaching resources.

In sum, we find that most respondents agreed with the content of the inspection feedback, although they preferred positive feedback that is consistent with their self-perceptions. When feedback is situated on the classroom level, respondents prefer clear, constructive feedback in the form of concrete tips and tricks. The results indicate that

oral feedback is very often the best way to explain nuances in the inspection report or to improve individual teacher performance. Written feedback in the inspection report is mostly perceived as too vague, technical or general to be acted upon.

4.3 Affective responses to feedback

Respondents described varied emotional responses to the school inspectors' feedback (research question 3) (see Table 4 for an overview). Although most respondents experienced emotions of joy, anger and sadness, we did not find citations in which respondents suggested that they have experienced emotions of love, surprise and fear. However, we did find indications of the absence of emotions among respondents as some respondents stated they rather felt neutral about the feedback. Specially, when feedback indicated need for change in a specific area beyond the respondents' responsibility, feedback seemed processed with little emotional engagement.

In general, receiving positive inspection feedback induced emotions of happiness, satisfaction and relief. These appeared to be in response to feedback moments where respondents' expectations were met (happiness, satisfaction) or exceeded (relief). Furthermore, school inspectors who portrayed a positive attitude and acted in a friendly manner enhanced positive emotions of happiness and relief among respondents as well. These positive contacts stimulated resilience and helped respondents cope with negative feedback. Furthermore, respondents mentioned positive affective responses when the school inspectors supported their ideas in the inspection report.

> I was relieved in the first place and felt better about it after having read the report. At that moment, I was like we're doing alright, a lot remains to be improved, but we're heading in the right direction. I didn't feel that way after the conversation. (respondent 3)

The continuing demand for higher teaching standards and the administrative burden were a source of considerable exasperation for many respondents. In addition, few respondents disliked inspectors' recommendations when these demands were perceived as too challenging to apply in the classroom. Respondents' frustrations and annoyance increased even more when their feedback was perceived as too vague or abstract and respondents could not ask for further clarification. Regarding this unclear communication, one respondent experienced annoyance too.

> From this moment on, we do it strictly by the book. I refer to that little number for the umpteenth time, looks brilliant on paper. I reached the same number of goals, you know, no, I must 've done less. But they're committed to paper more stringently, so it'll be good … . frustrating. (respondent 12)

While the content of the inspection feedback triggered strong emotions of frustration, negative perceptions of the school inspectors' attitude outraged less than one-third of respondents. Negative feedback evoked strong emotions of anger when respondents perceived the inspectors' attitude as arrogant, critical or corrective. Respondents who perceived feedback unfairness were likely to feel resentful or angry about the perceived injustice. When these feelings of unfairness were accompanied with un-empathic

Table 4 Categorisation of experienced emotions among respondents and their frequency

Primary emotion	Secondary emotion	Tertiary emotions	Appraisal
Love	/	/	/
Joy	Cheerfulness ($n = 7$)	Happiness	- Positive outcome - Constructive feedback (useful tips) - Pressure to innovate
		Satisfaction	- Positive outcome - Confirmation of hard work
	Relief ($n = 3$)	Relief	- Outcome beyond expectations
Surprise	/	/	/
Anger	Exasperation ($n = 3$)	Frustration	- Continuing teaching demands - Increasing accountability demands (paper administration) - Unachievable standards - Unclear feedback
	Irritation ($n = 1$)	Annoyance	- Unclear feedback
	Rage ($n = 5$)	Dislike Outrage Resentful Anger	- Unachievable standards - School inspector's negative attitude - Feedback unfairness - School inspector's negative attitude - Negative feedback - Feedback unfairness - Increasing stress and pressure
Sadness	Suffering ($n = 1$) Sadness ($n = 3$)	Hurt Unhappiness	- Feedback on physical aspect - Large amount of negative feedback - Limited amount of positive feedback
		Hopelessness Broken – depression	- Unachievable standards - Feedback as self-criticism
	Disappointment ($n = 3$)	Disappointment	- Restricted outcome, despite recognition of hard work
	Neglect ($n = 2$)	Defeated	- Unexpected, negative outcome
Fear	/	/	/

behaviour towards respondents, respondents mentioned angriness because of increasing levels of stress and pressure.

> Emotionally, I really find it quite tough for everyone […] I think it's not done just to pop in like that after ten years, to put a bomb underneath it all and then go for a nice cup of tea. (respondent 11)

Unhappy emotional responses were associated with the delivery of large amounts of negative feedback and a limited amount of positive, constructive feedback. When school inspectors valued the hard work and dedication of the school staff and teachers, but the school received a restricted advice nevertheless, three respondents felt disappointed. In some cases, when the negative feedback came unexpected, respondents were defeated.

> Mind you, the team, everyone supported and comforted each other. It's not the team that fell apart, but it's as a team that we got a hammer onto our heads. (respondent 11)

When respondents perceived the feedback as correct, but had no solutions to achieve the intended objectives, they reported emotions of powerlessness.

A feeling of hopelessness, not anger, 'cause I agreed with what he said, else I might 've been angry if I hadn't agreed. I could agree with his comments, otherwise, yes, I might have been angry. But now, it was really a feeling of hopelessness. (respondent 3)

One respondent felt broken inside after negative feedback in the inspection report at school level was interpreted as a criticism of the respondent's professional performance. As this respondent felt an emotional distant from her colleagues, she isolated herself socially, which intensified feelings of low self-worth and depression. Another respondent felt hurt when a school inspector gave feedback that was focused on a physical aspect of the person, rather than upon behaviour.

Altogether, positive feedback elicited emotions of joy. When respondents received negative feedback, respondents' self-perceptions and expectations made the difference between experiencing emotions of anger or sadness. With regard to sadness, the received feedback was generally perceived correct or constructive, although it was inconsistent with respondents' self-perceptions, while emotions of anger were reported when respondents disagreed with feedback.

5 Conclusion/discussion

When teachers receive feedback about their performance during school inspection processes, their responses to this feedback are crucial to determine whether this feedback is accepted or not. Up till now, little evidence was available on teachers' cognitive and affective responses to feedback with regard to feedback acceptance during a school inspection. Therefore, a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews was carried out in primary schools in Flanders. First, we explored the different sources of teacher feedback and their perceived usefulness during a school inspection. Subsequently, we examined how teachers respond to feedback in order to offer insights into their feedback acceptance process.

Our first important finding is that teachers in this study are dissatisfied with the amount of individual feedback and advice they receive from school inspectors. The descriptive results indicate that teachers receive substantive, individual feedback during observation debriefings, but only to a limited extent. During the final debriefing session and in the inspection report, reference is made to feedback at school level exclusively, which does not always result in substantial new insights. In accordance with earlier studies (Kelchtermans and Vandenberghe 1998; McCrone et al. 2007; Penninckx et al. 2014), the results in the present study clearly show that teachers highly value school inspectors' recommendations at teacher level. In some cases, teachers' desire to respond is hindered by the absence of guidelines to initiate and implement improvement actions. This lack of feedback can be explained by the strict legislation that forbids Flemish school inspectors to provide individual feedback (Shewbridge et al. 2011). Although teachers' feedback seeking is considered as important for their professional development, the question then arise, whether this individual feedback needs to come from a single lesson observation alone, due to the seemingly incompatible roles of both critical friend and assessor (Dobbelaer et al. 2017). Still, this finding underlines the importance of more focused feedback that not only takes into account

the specific school context but also with individual differences between teachers in their class. Only in this way inspection feedback can play a key role in school improvement and teacher development.

Secondly, we find that the cognitive responses of participating teachers to the inspectors' credibility affected both the acceptance of inspection feedback, as well as their affective responses to this feedback. Teachers who mistrust inspectors' expertise and trustworthiness are more likely to display an unreceptive reaction towards negative feedback. Under these circumstances, emotions of anger, even outrage, are reported. Conversely, inspectors who are perceived as helpful and facilitating make it much easier for teachers to accept unfavourable feedback. Our findings are consistent with those of previous studies (e.g. Brett and Atwater 2001; Ehren and Visscher 2008). In terms of feedback fairness, our study suggests that perceptions of organisational injustice negatively affect teachers' acceptance of negative inspection feedback and evoke strong emotions of anger and resentfulness, even depression was mentioned. For many of our respondents, these emotions were still evident during the interview. In addition, the majority of teachers, whether they received negative feedback or not, emphasise how inspectors' expectations and behaviour vary across time. The importance of clear expectations of school inspectors for feedback acceptance was also indicated by Gustafsson et al. (2015).

Finally, feedback, consistent with or higher than respondents' self-perceptions, led to explaining the inspection feedback in terms of feedback characteristics (accuracy and relevance) rather than discussing their perceptions of source credibility. Teachers react surprised, happy and relieved when their expectations are exceeded and are more likely to accept this feedback, even when it is negatively formulated. In contrast, teachers react disappointed, and even defeated, when their feedback falls below expectations. These findings coincide with previous results found in the literature (e.g. Sargeant et al. 2008).

The methodology in this study provided a rich description of teachers' cognitive and emotional reactions, especially their negative responses to inspection feedback and the influence of these responses upon feedback acceptance. However, this study also has its limitations that need to be considered in evaluating the findings. First, the volunteer nature of respondents might have created a potential bias. Principals in schools with a negative inspection outcome refused participation in the study to reduce the levels of stress and anxiety among their teaching staff after the school inspection. Since our conclusions are based on the perceptions of teachers in school with a (restricted) positive outcome, the exclusion of teachers with negative inspection outcome may have drew a more positive image. Second, although our sample was selected to represent the diversity of schools in Flanders, since only 21 teachers from eight different primary schools were interviewed, conclusions and generalisations have to be drawn carefully. Finally, although we examined source and message characteristics, personal characteristics of the feedback recipient (teacher) were not included in this study. Nevertheless, in our study, it appeared that the self-perceptions of participating teachers play an important role in the acceptance of negative feedback. Future research might provide more insight to what extent teacher characteristics are determining the feedback acceptance process.

The findings of the present study may also serve as a valuable starting point for longitudinal research. In order to gain more insight in teachers' affective responses to school inspection feedback, future research needs to look more deeply into the role of emotions in the feedback acceptance process. In this study, affective responses to

feedback were still present, weeks after the school inspection visit. Therefore, a longitudinal study might provide insights into the duration and intensity of these responses.

In summary, we conclude that the acceptance of feedback depends largely on the cognitive and affective responses of teachers. Our findings suggest that, especially in the case of negative feedback, negative perceptions of school inspectors' credibility and organisational justice evoke strong negative emotions, such as anger and frustration, which can prevent feedback acceptance. In order to enhance feedback acceptance and improve performance, we suggest the need for initiatives for school inspectors (and other evaluators) that raise awareness in providing feedback (Kluger and DeNisi 1996).

From a practical perspective, the finding that the acceptance of school inspection feedback is influenced by teachers' cognitive and affective responses opens up new opportunities to support teacher improvement. When policy-makers and school inspectors want to improve teachers' acceptance of feedback, there is a need to foster dialogue and mutual understanding between schools, teachers and school inspectors. Therefore, it is vital that school inspectors are made aware of the benefits in providing feedback in such a way that feedback recipients are more receptive to unfavourable, but substantive feedback.

Appendix

Table 5 Example of code scheme

Theme/subtheme	Conceptual characteristics and example data
Feedback acceptation	
/Acceptance	Respondent accepts feedback, thinks feedback is an accurate portrayal of performance 'That we currently have no vision in language policy is criticism that *I accept*'.
/Rejection	Respondent does not agree with feedback, think feedback is unjustified '*I really did not agree* with that comment, but I could only remain silent because otherwise I would ruin it for the school'.
Cognitive responses	
/Source credibility	
//Expertise	Level of knowledge (both content and pedagogical) Research skills (interrogation, questioning) '*They had a broad knowledge*. They *knew what they were talking about* and *they knew a lot about the school*'.
//Trustworthiness	Attitude of the inspector (s) Communication style of inspector (s) 'I did not know whether what I said was good, but I thought *those people were correct*'.
/Fairness perceptions	
//Distributive justice	Fairness of outcomes/decisions Fairness of consequences Feedback comparison with others (schools/teachers) 'Until recently, *we were the same school*. Some colleagues also work there. They have arranged everything in advance,

Table 5 (continued)

Theme/subtheme	Conceptual characteristics and example data
	so *they received a favourable advice*. That is writhing here. I think we also had *a different advice* if we had prepared better in advance'.
//Procedural justice	Fairness of process Level of transparency Level of bias/subjectivity Involvement in the process (level of dialogue) 'In the other department of the school they were three other inspectors. They are not going to use the same standards or they are not just as critical... I want to show how *subjective* it all is'.
/FB characteristics	
//FB sign	Positive feedback (opportunities, tips, advice) Negative feedback (criticism) 'The report contains *the positive and negative issues*. The *negative ones* were very short'
//FB constructiveness	Serving a useful purpose; tending to build up 'I found these remarks *constructive*, those comments were true. We are aware of them'.
//FB clarity	Degree of clarity; level of understanding by respondent Abstract/vague FB Difference between written and oral FB 'I do not know what they mean, the report was *rather vague*. I had *expected it to be more detailed*, is *so broad now*. I also do not know what certain things mean, like self-management'.
//FB relevance	Relevance teacher-level (classroom): courses, goal achievement, evaluation, learning instructions, lesson planning Relevance on school-level: curriculum, infrastructure, mutual coordination 'It may sound wrong, but this (*infrastructure*) is *not my responsibility*. So this was *less relevant* for me'.
//FB accuracy	The degree of accuracy (correct, precise) FB context 'It was taken *out of context*. He did not say anything that was incorrect; *I think he did not see the bigger picture*'.
Affective responses	
/Love	An intense feeling of deep affection No examples available in the present data set
/Joy	A feeling of great pleasure and happiness 'Yes, I was *very happy* when the inspector said that everything was good'.
/Surprise	An unexpected or astonishing event, fact or thing No examples available in the present data set
/Anger	A strong feeling of annoyance, displeasure or hostility '*Angry*. She asked something three times, just to to verify the truth. I was so *frustrated* afterwards'.
/Sadness	The condition or quality of being sad 'I did not think it was appropriate, I found it kind of *hurtful*'.
/Fear	An unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain or a threat. No examples available in the present data set

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