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The perceived value-relevance of open data in the parents' choice of Dutch primary schools

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the perceived value-relevance of open data published by the Dutch Inspectorate of Education in the parents' choice of Dutch primary schools.

Design/methodology/approach – Empirical data were collected through a mixed method strategy including quantitative and qualitative methods: quantitative surveys among parents of pupils in 25 primary schools; and semi-structured in-depth interviews using a topic list.

Findings – Parents make little use of the Inspectorate's website compared to other information sources. The perceived usefulness of this website to parents choosing a primary school is also relatively low. Personal information gathered by school visits, written information from schools and information from other parents are more important sources.

Research limitations/implications – Subjective considerations, such as the atmosphere and ambience of a school, play an important role in parents' choice behavior. Pragmatic considerations also play a role, such as a school's nearness. This study shows that it is necessary to rethink the rational assumptions behind publishing performance data.

Practical implications – This study observed a mismatch between the demand and supply of open data about primary schools. The Inspectorate's publication strategy is based on "hard" and "written" data presented on a website, but parents also appreciate "soft" and personal "oral" data. Parents state that the Inspectorate should not only focus on negative school results for censuring ("naming and shaming"), but also give attention to schools that perform well ("naming and faming").

Originality/value – Research about parents' and citizens' use of quality information in general is scarce. These findings show that parents' choice behavior is less rational than assumed. Relativistic notions about decision-making processes are recognized in other studies also, but they suggest that highly educated parents are over-represented in the group of parents who actively make school choices, whereas this study found no indications that parents' educational level affects their choices.

Keywords Choices of parents, Dutch Inspectorate of Education, Dutch primary schools, Open public data, Utilization of performance data

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Open data have become important on many governments' policy agenda, for example to achieve greater policy transparency, to increase legitimacy, to strengthen public participation and to decrease the distance between governmental agencies and citizens (Chapman and Hunt, 2006; Wuyts, 2008; Lathrop and Ruma, 2010; TNO, 2011; de Kool, 2011). Nevertheless, this is easier said than done, for example in the field of education.

Parents on average have low information about the schools (Buckley and Schneider, 2003, p. 122). Basic information about local schools is generally not widely circulated, and local school officials have few incentives to disseminate information widely (Buckley and Schneider, 2007, p. 101). Against this background the Dutch Inspectorate

of Education (*Inspectie van het Onderwijs*), publishes data on the internet regarding the outcomes and quality of education in primary and secondary education.

The Dutch Inspectorate of Education – part of the Dutch Ministry of Education – oversees primary schools to ensure that they are complying with Dutch educational laws. Another aim is to improve the quality of Dutch school education. To achieve this, the Inspectorate carries out school inspections. Each school is assessed by a standard set of measures, consisting of questionnaires, observation instruments and pre-structured interviews.

On an annual basis, the Inspectorate collects and analyzes information to assess the quality of education in all schools. The results of the analysis indicate whether a school needs to be investigated more extensively, or whether the school can be trusted to perform adequately during the next year. If the analysis does not reveal any risks, the Inspectorate has sufficient trust in the quality of the education provided to qualify the school for the so-called basic inspection program. If a school performs inadequately, the Inspectorate specifies the shortcomings that have to be improved and subsequently monitors these improvements. After each inspection, the inspector writes a report on the inspected school and makes recommendations as to how the school can improve. The Inspectorate also publishes an annual report on the state of education in the Netherlands. This report is sent to Parliament and to the Minister of Education and generally attracts a lot of media attention.

Since 1998, the Inspectorate's individual school reports, which were formerly exclusively provided to the school itself and to the minister, have been made public. All school reports, including an actual list of (very) weak schools, are now available on the Inspectorate's website (www.onderwijsinspectie.nl) for public consultation.

An important assumption in education policy is a critical engagement of empowered actors around schools (e.g. parents) and that these actors are able to form and express their opinions about the quality of education and use their opportunities to try to improve it. This is also called educational governance (Fusarelli and Johnson, 2004; Shatkin and Gershberg, 2007). In line with this assumption, good education can be approached as a result of collaboration between different actors who are mutually dependent on one another (Rhodes, 1997). In this context, the term "partnership" is also used to indicate the meaningful partnerships between schools and parents (Leming, 2002; Taylor, 2004). Recent research shows that the opportunity for parents to make a more informed school choice can really help to empower and activate parents (Stewart and Wolf, 2014).

The Dutch Inspectorate of Education's publication strategy is based on various considerations. The first aim is to stimulate educational institutions to maintain and improve their quality because they feel "the public eye" on them. The second consideration is that the digital availability of education data improves parents' information position and creates a level playing field that enables all stakeholders to obtain validated information on the basis of a shared perception of the quality of education at each school (Bekkers and Homburg, 2002). The third consideration is that the Inspectorate's public education data should allow parents to better assess and choose suitable schools for their children. The underlying assumption is that parents behave like rational consumers dealing with different sources of information in order to make optimal choices (Van de Walle and Roberts, 2008). That is, citizens will seek out performance information, interpret it, and make a reasoned choice between different public service providers, or use the information indirectly by putting pressure on suppliers to improve their performance. In terms of school choice, this implies that

parents use performance information to assess the performance of schools and to make a more informed school choice for their children. When performance is below their expectations, parents have two rational options, namely, to put pressure on the school to improve its performances or to transfer their child to another school. This implies that parents have real choice options, because parental school choice begins when parents have access to multiple school options (Stewart and Wolf, 2014, p. 3).

The assumptions of this rational decision-making model have frequently been challenged. Rather than making informed choices, citizens may employ an inquisitorial search process, whereby they seek out information that confirms their choices already made (Van de Walle and Roberts, 2008, p. 218). Another critical point is that research on citizens' use of quality information is scarce and not proportional to the expectations that policymakers have regarding the effects that should occur (Van de Walle and Roberts, 2008). Marshall *et al.* (2003) found that performance data on the quality of hospitals in the USA and Scotland are usually hardly used. The empirical literature dealing with the effect of transparent quality information on school choice is also rather limited (Koning and Van der Wiel, 2010, p. 9). The empirical data on school choice behavior are mainly based on interviews, schools in specific districts or desk studies (Goldring and Philips, 2008; Waslander *et al.*, 2010).

Using both qualitative and quantitative research methods among 25 primary schools, the goal of this paper is to examine the perceived value-relevance of open data published by the Dutch Inspectorate of Education in the parents' choice of Dutch primary schools. The central research question is:

RQ1. To what extent and under what conditions does the information about primary schools provided by the Dutch Inspectorate of Education on the internet play a role in Dutch parents' choice behavior?

To answer this question, the theoretical framework and conceptual model are first presented (Section 2). Section 3 presents the research methodology. Section 4 describes and analyzes the empirical results of the empirical study. The paper ends with conclusions (Section 5).

2. Literature review
The use of performance information is receiving increasing academic attention (Van Dooren and Van de Walle, 2008; Hammerschmid *et al.*, 2013). However, little research has been done on whether and how citizens perceive and use the performance information published in evaluation and monitoring reports, quality assessments and inspections (Pollitt, 2006; Van de Walle and Bovaird, 2007; Van de Walle and Roberts, 2008; Andrews and Van de Walle, 2013; Hammerschmid *et al.*, 2013). Most studies focus on the supply side of performance data, namely, governments that publish data. Fewer studies pay attention to the demand side, namely, the needs of (potential) users (Askim, 2009). Hence it is important to find out when and how citizens use performance data and to identify which citizens use performance data (Pollitt, 2006). Meijer (2004) observed that research about the use of quality information by parents and citizens in general is scarce.

Existing studies about public performance results in the public health sector – most of them based on qualitative research methods – show varying results. Marshall *et al.* (2002) note different actors' objections to the disclosure of information in healthcare. The expectation of stakeholders, and especially professionals, is that publication of public performance results will have negative consequences. Other research (Marshall *et al.*, 2003;

Mason and Street, 2006; Askim, 2009) shows that performance data are used less frequently than expected. Some people use the information, others do not consult these data (Schneider and Epstein, 1998; Askim, 2009). Age, education and gender play a small role, but so too does the importance that a patient attaches to certain information. The higher the education and the closer he/she is to surgery, the sooner the patient will make use of it (Schneider and Epstein, 1998). Information, if used, is used selectively. There is a need to tailor information to the target groups and use suitable communication tools to effectively reach these groups. It also appears that there is some suspicion in respect of the reliability of public performance data (Schneider and Epstein, 1998).

The question is whether these observations also apply to parents' use of performance data about schools. A broad study about the use of quality information provided by the Inspectorate of Education made clear that parents hardly use this information (Vogels, 2002). That study showed that the number of parents using information from the internet to choose a school is only one percent. Vogels distinguishes three roles for parents in a school. Their first role is that of constituents: parents are "carriers" of education. An example is participation in schools. In this role, parents have a strong influence on the school and they are in the position to (co)decide on the establishment, organization and content of education. Their second role is that of clients: parents are approached as users of services being provided by professionals. The content and quality of those services are determined by the professionals and possibly controlled through monitoring. The clients have limited rights, the most important right being the right to complain. Their third role is that of consumers. The role of consumer is particularly relevant when a school must be chosen. Schools must "sell" their public services by showing what they stand for and how they perform. Parents compare the offered "products" and then make a choice. In this role, parents especially exert their influence by "voting with their feet." Hirschmann (1970) makes a distinction in this context between exit and voice. Voice refers to the outside pressure on public organizations to improve services. In education, one can think about parents who "sound the alarm" at school when they are not satisfied with the school's performance. Exit implies that people who are dissatisfied with the performance will no longer use the services of an organization and will "consume" products and services elsewhere. In the educational domain however, the exit option is usually not an obvious option, because withdrawing a child from school implies that parents have to look for another school further away. Withdrawing a child from school can also have profound social consequences for the child, for example losing friends. In practice, the role adopted by parents depends on their child's school stage and/or specific situations. Not only one role is applicable to any given parent. However, which role a parent will adopt in a particular situation is partially connected with parental background (Vogels, 2002). Recent research about the empowerment of disadvantaged parents in urban areas shows a transition from clientism to consumerism to citizenship. Citizenship refers to active and empowered parents (Stewart and Wolf, 2014). One of the most consistent "rational" concerns expressed by parents is the importance of reliable, easily accessible and accurate information. Parents indicated that this information is important for making an informed school choice (Stewart and Wolf, 2014).

A literature study on the position of parents and pupils in the governance policy of the Dutch Ministry of Education shows that there are differences between (groups of) parents in terms of education orientation and expectations about schools (Karsten et al., 2006). This implies that parents have different needs regarding (primary) schools and use various measures to assess school quality. It is difficult for schools to meet these

differentiated needs, especially when the school population is heterogeneous. Furthermore, it is not only difficult, but also unusual, for parents to assess the quality of schools in a real way (Karsten *et al.*, 2006). This observation is at odds with the assumption, articulated in the governance policy of the Dutch Ministry of Education (Ministerie van Onderwijs, 2005), that involved parents are able and willing to form an opinion about the quality of education. Another relevant but small-scale study was conducted in four different districts in the city of Utrecht (Gilsing and Tierolf, 2010). This study shows that there are important differences between parents regarding school choice motives. Highly educated and indigenous parents often pay more attention than less educated and immigrant parents to the teaching approaches, the atmosphere at school and the fact that the school is attended by children from the neighborhood. The main reason for choosing or not choosing a school has to do with the number of children from different ethnic backgrounds. The information that parents use in their school does not come from written sources. Visiting a school is the most used source of information. Less educated and immigrant parents gather less (broad) information than highly educated and indigenous parents (Gilsing and Tierolf, 2010). In a literature review on market mechanisms in education, Waslander *et al.* (2010) argue that parents use various sources of information that say something about the quality of a school, including social networks. Their choice of a particular school is not only determined by the quality indicators as officially established by the Education Inspectorate. Other factors also play a role. Koning and Van der Wiel's (2010) study shows that the effect of quality information, for example published in the newspaper *Trouw*, is limited with regard to individual schools. The study shows that the distance to school is clearly important.

The process of choosing a school consists of different phases, namely, the orientation phase, the selection phase, the visiting phase and the decision phase. For primary school, parents usually go through the process once. They choose a particular school for their first child, and their other children usually attend the same school. Highly educated parents usually start earlier with the orientation phase than less educated parents. The higher their education, the more parents actively seek out information. The literature shows that parents' choice behavior is determined by several factors and that they use different sources to get an idea about a school. Parents usually have a preference for face-to-face information at the school. The information that parents get from other parents also plays an important role. In addition, oral information from the school management or from teachers is important (Vogels, 2002). This process is only partly based on parents' rational behaviors. Waslander *et al.* (2010) observed that the process of parental choice is only partly based on rational decision making and that geographical, social and cultural factors play a role in parents' construction of a choice, for example the distance between home and school, the atmosphere, the composition, the reputation, denomination and distinctive features of a school such as didactic concepts. The benefits of attending a school close to home are that it takes less time to get children to and from school, older children can walk or cycle to school alone, the neighborhood is well-known (and therefore perceived as safe) and the children can make (school)friends in the neighborhood. Vogels' (2002) study revealed that parents mainly measure the quality of education by the experiences and perceptions of their own children at school and their own perceptions about the teachers (Vogels, 2002, p. 5). A follow-up study showed that parents' preferences usually differ from their final choices. Regarding choice motives, parents attach importance to schools with a wide, child-centered approach and schools that pay attention to their pupils' well-being. A good atmosphere at the school in which a child

feels happy is therefore a very important subjective consideration (Stewart and Wolf, 2014). Pragmatic considerations, such as accessibility, and philosophical considerations are lower in the hierarchy of choice motives. However, when parents finally choose a particular school, then pragmatic and ideological considerations are often decisive. So, the rational image of knowledgeable and quality-based school choices plays only a minor role in reality (Herweijer and Vogels, 2004).

A school's atmosphere is partly determined by interpersonal aspects, characteristics of the school building and school policy (e.g. in the field of safety and attitudes toward truancy). A school's denomination is usually only relevant for parents who actively profess a belief. Secondary motives may include: communication from the school with parents, extra support for pupils, extra creative subjects for pupils, additional facilities or a separate entrance for toddlers (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2003). Conversely, there are factors that militate against parents choosing a particular school. Parents' main negative consideration is traveling distance between home and school, followed by pupils' behaviors at school, ethnic composition, the school environment, the staff and management, the reputation of the school and bullying by other pupils (Bagley *et al.*, 2001). Obviously, pragmatic reasons play a role in choosing to withdraw a child from school, for example when parents are moving to another city.

Highly educated and involved parents are often over-represented in the group of parents who actively make school choices for their children (Waslander *et al.*, 2010). These parents use diverse sources of information, including their social networks. In addition, a discrepancy is visible between parents' preferences ("choice motives") and their final choices (Schneider and Buckley, 2002, cited in: Waslander *et al.*, 2010, p. 36). The impact of school performance indicators on parents seems to be small. This observation is consistent with the observation of Van de Walle and Roberts (2008) who found that the use of quality information by citizens is highly over-estimated. In addition, these researchers raise the question of whether and to what extent performance rankings lead to an improvement in the quality of public services. Rather, there seems to be an "illusion of control" (Van de Walle and Roberts, 2008). This also seems to apply to parents' use of the Inspectorate's quality data, although research in this area is scarce (Vogels, 2002; Meijer, 2004, 2007).

Conceptual model
The Dutch Ministry of Education's rational assumption is that quality information from the Inspectorate plays an important role in the choice behavior of parents and their final decision about a school for their child(ren). This study's conceptual model makes two important additions. First, the information gathering scope is broadened by including other potential sources of information in the model. Second, the possibility of irrational choice behavior by parents is included. See Figure 1.
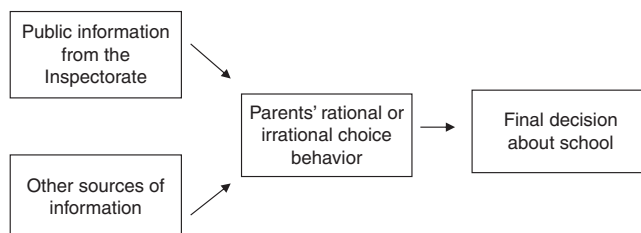
Figure 1.
Conceptual framework

3. Research methodology
The empirical data for this study were collected through a mixed method strategy or triangulation (Greene, 2005), consisting of both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Surveys and semi-structured interviews
To gather insight into parents' perceptions, quantitative surveys were conducted among parents of pupils in different school classes. The questions in the survey have been carefully tested. More than 30 primary schools in the Netherlands were approached to participate in our research; 25 of them participated. These primary schools were selected on the basis of variation and distinguishing characteristics, namely geographical spread, schools located in the city vs the countryside, denomination, (very) weak, normal and excellent schools, and varied didactic concepts. Within each school, 60 questionnaires were distributed among parents (1,500 in total). The questionnaire was divided into four parts (quality of education, information about school, information and school choice, and general questions) and contained 34 questions. The questionnaires were spread, in agreement with the school management, over two different types of pupils in every school, namely, a low (choice made recently) and a high (choice made longer ago) group. Parents could complete the questionnaire in writing or online. A total of 293 questionnaires were returned, representing an average response rate of 23.4 percent. Given that Dutch primary schools are intensively surveyed for various reasons, this is a reasonable score. Of these returned questionnaires, 245 were answered completely. On 14 written questionnaires returned, the school that the parents' children attended was not indicated. It was decided to include these 14 questionnaires in the follow-up analyses because the level of analysis was not focused on individual schools. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted using a topic list (general questions, perceptions toward the Inspectorate, the Participation Council (PC), parents' roles and perceived impact of contextual factors). In total, 35 interviews were conducted among respondents from the Inspectorate of Education, school management and parents on schools' PCs. These interviews were useful for gaining insight into the motives and considerations underlying stakeholders' perceptions.

Characteristics of the sample
Of the parents who completed the questionnaire, 0.4 percent had primary education only; 2.4 percent had completed pre-vocational education; 5.7 percent, pre-vocational secondary education; 6.9 percent, senior general secondary education; 3.4 percent, pre-university education; 26.6 percent, senior secondary vocational education; 35.5 percent, higher professional education; and 13.1 percent, a university degree. In total, 44 and a half percent of parents indicated that they had a religious background, and 55.5 percent indicated that they were not religious. Over 36 percent indicated that they felt it was important for their child to be educated according to a particular faith. Only 11.4 percent said that they played an active role, in the sense that they were or had been members of the school board, the school council, the PC, or the Joint Participation Council (JPC). In contrast, the vast majority (over 81 percent) of parents were involved in supporting activities in the school, such as reading with pupils in class or accompanying school trips.

4. Empirical results
Introduction
This section describes and analyzes the empirical findings by answering several sub-questions. These sub-questions deal with parents' perceptions about (the website of)

the Inspectorate of Education (Section 4.2) and the information sources that Dutch parents use for choosing primary schools for their children (Section 4.3).

Perceptions about the (website of) the inspectorate of education
What is parents' perception of the role of the Inspectorate of Education in general?.
The survey contains ten sub-questions to measure parents' perceptions about the Inspectorate of Education in general. The response scale ranged from 1 (totally disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (agree) to 4 (totally agree). Figure 2 shows the average scores for each sub-question.

The figure shows that parents, on average, gave a 2.82 score on questions about perceptions. So, parents' perception about the Inspectorate of Education is moderately positive. However, the scores are strongly dependent on the type of question. The perceptions are relatively poor with respect to the usefulness of Inspection reports for parents, whereas parents have given relatively high scores for the fact that the reports are made public and that the reports can be an incentive for quality improvement in schools. The interviewed respondents who participate in PCs and JPCs highlighted the importance of an Inspectorate that monitors primary schools, but note that the Inspectorate has a different focus than parents. "The Inspectorate has a strong educational focus on figures and cognitive performances, whereas parents also pay
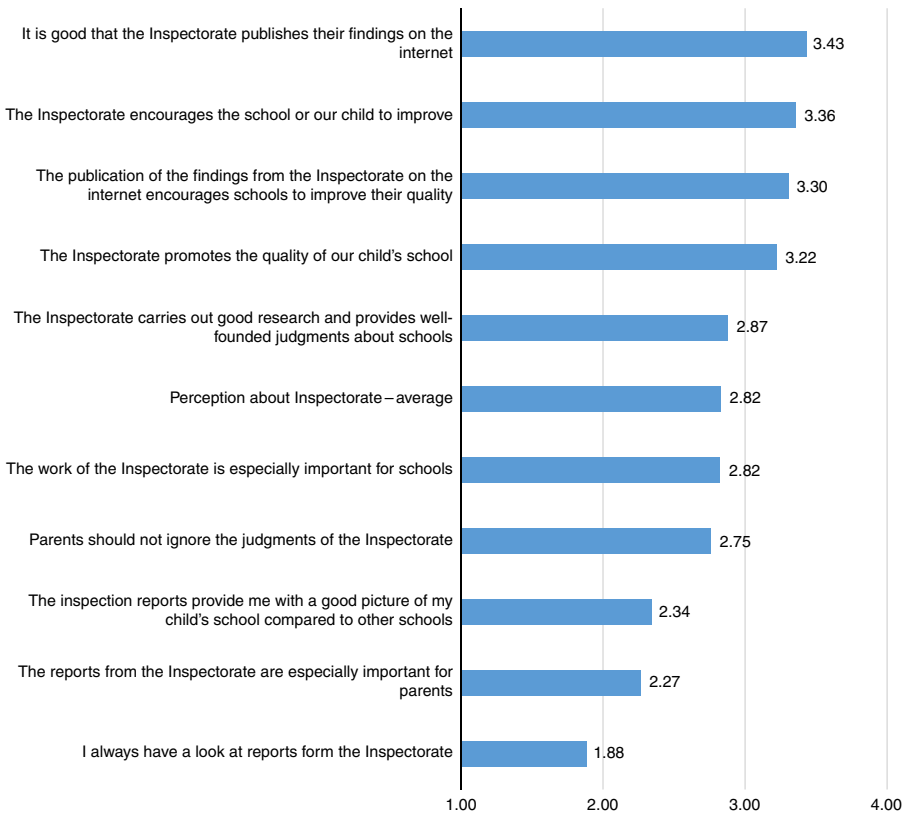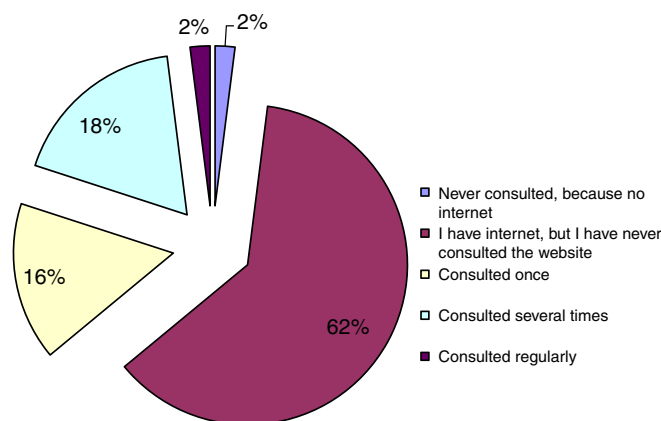
Figure 2.
Parents' perceptions of Dutch inspectorate of education

attention to other factors, like the (social) atmosphere at school and their children's social development and well-being."

How often do parents consult the inspectorate of education's website?. Parents were also asked how often they consulted the Inspectorate of Education's website. The results are shown in percentages in Figure 3.

More than 62 percent indicated that they had access to the internet but never visited the Inspectorate of Education's website. Only 2 percent indicated not having access to the internet. In total, 16 percent had visited the website only once, 18 percent had visited the site several times, and only 2 percent visited the site regularly. However, the website can have an indirect impact because the few parents who do visit the website can spread the information among parents who do not consult it. We did not investigate these possible indirect impacts.

How do parents assess the quality of the Inspectorate of Education's website?. Parents who visited the website once or several times were also asked how they judge the quality of the website in terms of being relevant, usable, understandable, easy to find, reliable, independent and good to make a choice. Parents could answer these questions on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither disagree nor agree), 4 (agree) to 5 (strongly agree). Figure 4 gives an overview of the answers from the parents.

Figure 3.
Number of consultations of the inspectorate of education's website by parents in percentages
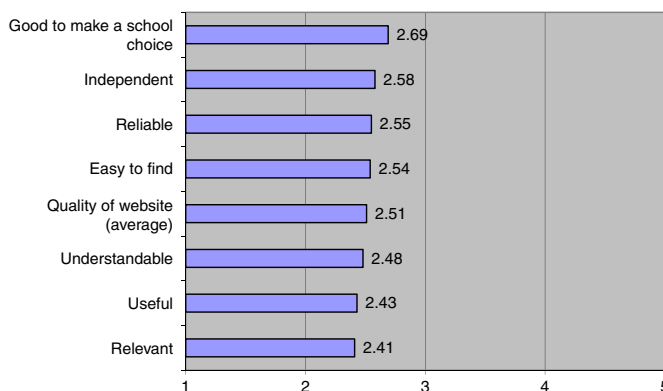
Figure 4.
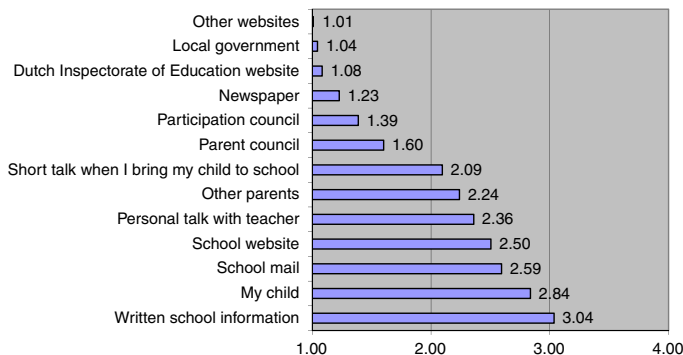Parents' quality assessment of the inspectorate of education's website

The figure shows that parents, on average, have slightly negative judgments about the website's quality. Both the scores for the overall average and the averages for each characteristic are under 3.

To what extent is the education inspectorate's website used as a resource by parents, compared to other sources of information?. Parents were asked to what extent they use the Inspectorate of Education's website as a general source of information about their children's school, compared to other sources of information. Parents could indicate how often they used a particular source of information, with response categories ranging from: 1 ((almost) never), 2 (sometimes), 3 (regularly), to 4 (very often). Besides the Inspectorate's website, the following information sources were reviewed: information from my child, from other parents, by visiting school website, e-mail from the school, letters from the school, short conversations at school, talks with the teacher, through the school council, through the PC, from the municipality, from other websites and/or from newspapers. Figure 5 shows the averages per information source.
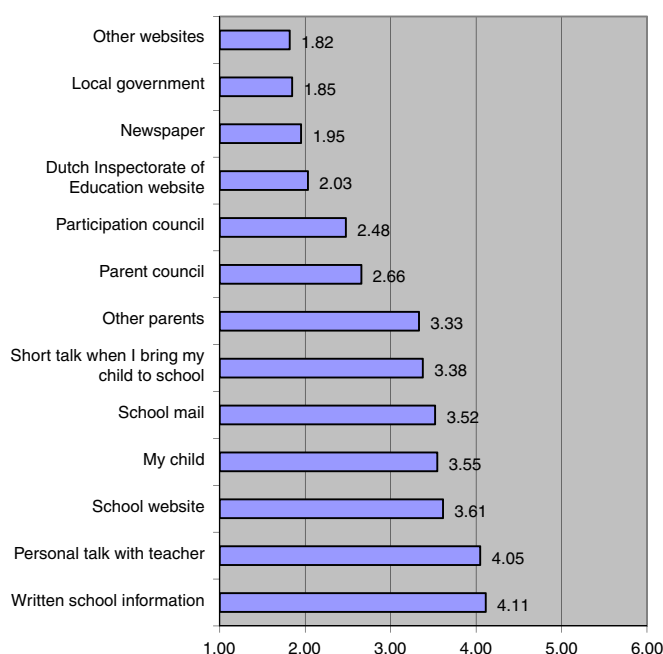
We can conclude that the parents make little use of the Inspectorate of Education's website compared to other sources of information. Only "information from the municipality" and "information from other websites" are relatively less frequently used than the Inspectorate's website. Paper communication from the school, information from the child and e-mails from school scored highest. Respondents who participate in PCs and JPCs said that they used the website only for "first orientations" before having personal talks with managers and teachers about the school.

What is parents' perception of the usefulness of the Inspectorate of Education's website as an information source, compared to other sources of information?. The next question is whether the parents perceive the Inspectorate of Education's website as relevant and useful, compared to other sources of information. Parents were asked to indicate the extent to which they regarded the information from various sources as useful. The main question was: "Very useful information about the school, I get from […]," followed by a enumeration of the same information sources as mentioned in the previous question. The response categories ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) with the neutral point 3 (neither disagree nor agree). Figure 6 shows the averages per data source.

From the results it is clear that the Inspectorate's website scores relatively lowly in terms of usability compared to other sources of information. Only "other sites" and the "municipality" score lower as a useful source of information, and "newspapers" do not

Figure 5.
Information sources used by parents

Source	Value
Other websites	1.82
Local government	1.85
Newspaper	1.95
Dutch Inspectorate of Education website	2.03
Participation council	2.48
Parent council	2.66
Other parents	3.33
Short talk when I bring my child to school	3.38
School mail	3.52
My child	3.55
School website	3.61
Personal talk with teacher	4.05
Written school information	4.11

Figure 6.
Perceived usefulness
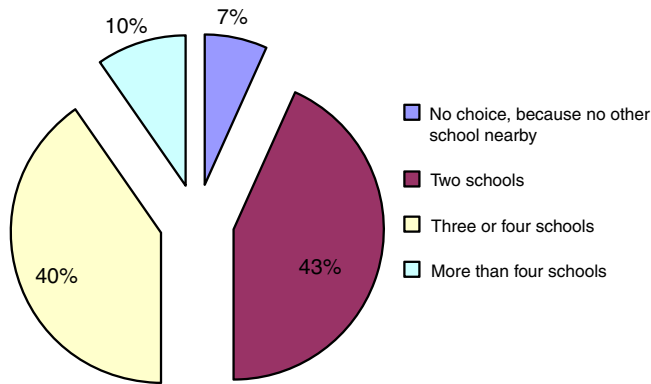of information from
various sources

differ significantly in comparison with the Inspectorate's website. All other information usability scores are significantly higher than that of the Inspectorate's website. The highest scores go to "written information from the school," "conversations with the teacher" and "the school website." An observation from the interviewed respondents, both school managers and parents, is that the Inspectorate of Education publishes mainly "hard" indicators, whereas many parents pay attention to "soft" performances from schools, like their children's social development and well-being.

Information sources for choosing primary schools
Do parents have sufficient freedom of choice with regard to their children's school?. In this regard, it is first important to determine whether there is any choice for parents who participated in this study. One can imagine that sometimes parents have few options, for example when they live in a small community in which only one primary school is available. Hence, parents were first asked between how many schools they could make a choice. Figure 7 shows the empirical results.

The figure shows that only 7 percent of the parents in our sample experienced absolutely no freedom to choose an alternative to the school in their neighborhood. However, over 43 percent could choose between two schools, 40 percent could choose between three or four schools and 10 percent could even choose between more than four schools. These numbers indicate that information about school choice, including the Education Inspectorate's website, could potentially play a significant role in parents' final school choice. The interviewed respondents who participate in PCs and JPCs observed that parents with a specific religious background have fewer options. "Parents with a reformed background, logically opt for a reformed primary school."

Figure 7.
Choice options
for parents

What kind of information do parents use to choose their child(ren)'s school?. Parents
were asked to what extent they used various information sources to choose their child
(ren)'s school. Information sources related to: people in education, friends, other parents,
family, childcare (including playgroup and childminders), primary school website,
written information from the school, a visit to the school (e.g. attending an open day),
the municipality, the Inspectorate's website and/or other websites. The answer
categories ranged from 1 (no), 2 (a little), 3 (a lot) to 4 (very much). Figure 8 shows the
averages for each information source.

The empirical results show that parents' perceived usefulness of the Inspectorate
of Education's website for choosing a primary school is relatively low compared
to other sources of information that parents consult. The most used information
sources for choosing a primary school are "visiting a primary school," followed
by "written information from the school" and "information from other parents."
The interviewed respondents who participate in PCs and JPCs claimed that the
Inspectorate's website hardly plays a role in their choice behavior. "The Inspectorate
provides information passively on their website, so parents have to actively search
for these data. The Inspectorate's data are not so accessible and also not easy to find."
The interviewed school managers share the same perceptions: "The impact of
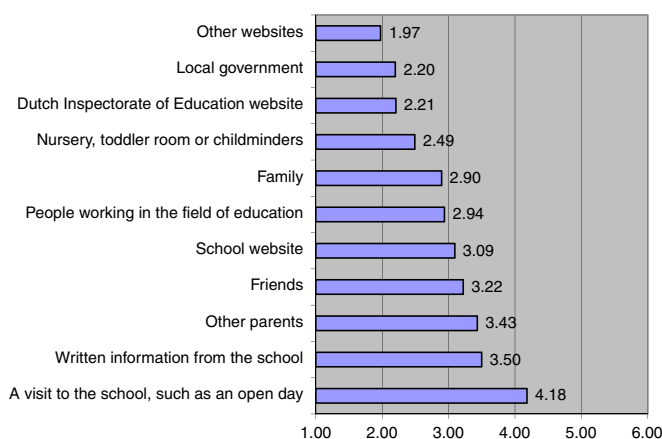
Figure 8.
Information sources
that parents use for
school choice
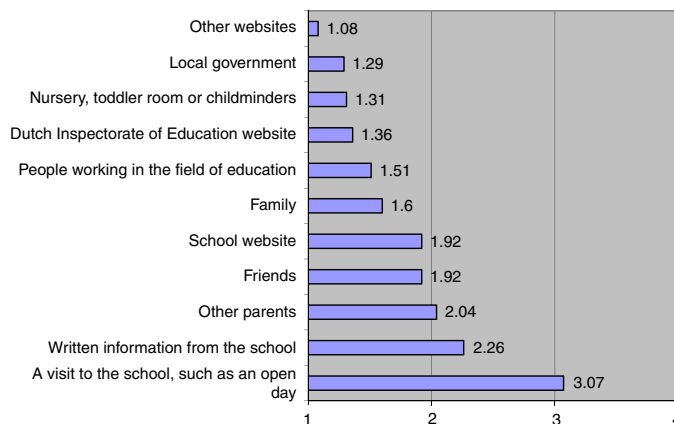
written information on parents is limited. It is more likely that parents visit a school to get informed. Personal information from other parents can also play an important role."

What is parents' perception of the usefulness of the Inspectorate's website in relation to other sources of information for finally choosing their child(ren)'s primary school?. Finally, parents were asked what kind of information they found most relevant and useful for making the final choice of a primary school. We provided parents with the same list of potential information sources mentioned before. Parents gave their answer to the next question: "Very useful information about the school I received from […]," with the response categories ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), with 3 as neutral point (neither disagree nor agree). Figure 9 shows the averages for each information source.

The results indicate that the Education Inspectorate's website gets relatively low scores on the degree of usability for making the final choice of a primary school, compared to other sources of information. According to parents' perceptions, the sources of information that are most usable for making final school choices are "a visit to the school," "written information from the school" and "information from other parents." The interviewed respondents who participate in PCs and JPCs agree with that. For them, personal communication with primary school managers and teachers is the most important source of information. They assume that highly educated people normally pay more attention to educational aspects. These parents can benefit from the Inspectorate data. The interviewed respondents also observed that pragmatic considerations also play a role when they are choosing a primary school for their child. The interviewed parents mentioned, for example the walking distance between their home and the primary school and the fact that parents with more than one child normally prefer to send them all to the same primary school. The interviewed school managers mentioned the atmosphere and reputation of primary schools. "The reputation of primary schools is created or destroyed by parents talking with one another when they are waiting for their children at the gate." These are important relativistic notes to parents' assumed rational choice behavior.

Figure 9.
Perceived usefulness
of different
information sources
for parents to make
a final school choice

5. Conclusions and implications

Information about the quality of education is assumed to be relevant in the parents' choice of primary schools. Nevertheless, research about the use of quality information by parents and citizens in general is scarce. Parents' assumed choice behavior is often based on a rational decision-making model. In reality, their choice behavior can be less rational than expected. This paper investigated the perceived impact of the Dutch Inspectorate of Education's public data about the quality of primary schools on parents' choice of primary schools for their children. The empirical data were collected by both qualitative and quantitative research methods among 25 different Dutch primary schools.

Parents' perception of the Inspectorate of Education is moderately positive. The interviewed respondents highlighted the importance of an Inspectorate to monitor primary schools. Rationally, it can be assumed that Dutch parents use the quality information published by the Dutch Inspectorate of Education. However, parents make little use of the Inspectorate of Education's website compared to other sources of information. More than 62 percent indicated that they never visit the website, and only 2 percent visit the site regularly. Finally, the Inspectorate's website scores relatively lowly in terms of usability compared to other sources of information. Important information sources for parents are "written information from the school," "conversations with the teacher" and "the school website."

Most parents have real opportunities to choose a school for their child(ren). The perceived usefulness of the Inspectorate of Education's website for parents choosing a primary school is relatively low compared to other sources of information that parents consult. Important information sources for choosing a primary school are personal information gathered by school visits, written information from schools and information from other parents. Nevertheless, parents' rationality is often limited because of practical or personal considerations. Besides formal and personal sources of information from schools or other parents, subjective considerations also play a role. The atmosphere and ambience of a school, which are often based on subjective impressions, should not be underestimated. The atmosphere can determine the (un)happiness of children at schools. Pragmatic considerations also play a role, such as a school's closeness. More research is needed to find out which considerations are decisive.

Although parents are critical about the usefulness of the Inspectorate's website, the publication of quality data on the internet is not a topic of debate. The interviewed school managers usually have no problems with the publication of performance data, because they "have nothing to hide." A critical point is their perception that the Inspectorate of Education has a strong focus on weak schools.

Implications

These empirical findings show that parents' choice behavior is less rational than assumed in the literature. Relativistic notions about decision-making processes are recognized in other studies also (Herweijer and Vogels, 2004; Van de Walle and Roberts, 2008; Waslander *et al.*, 2010). A striking difference is that, in existing studies, the picture emerges that highly educated parents are over-represented in the group of parents who actively make school choices (Waslander *et al.*, 2010), whereas in this study no indications were found that parents' educational level affects their choices. This study shows that it is necessary to rethink the assumption of rationality behind publishing performance data.

Second, we observed a mismatch between the demand for, and supply of, open data about primary schools. The Inspectorate of Education's publication strategy is based on "hard" and "written" data presented on a website, whereas parents also appreciate "soft" and personal "oral" data. This mismatch may explain why open performance data are often not used optimally by citizens. Parents perceive it as also important that the Inspectorate of Education should not only focus on negative school results for censuring ("naming and shaming"), but also give attention to (excellent) schools who perform well ("naming and faming"). The idea behind this is that the Inspectorate of Education should not "stigmatize" but "stimulate" schools to improve the quality of education.

Furthermore, it is interesting to see what these results imply for the discussion about open data. Open data are often considered a necessary step to improve the legitimacy of government and to "empower" parents (Stewart and Wolf, 2014). At the same time, citizens' actual use of these open data are rather limited and confined to a specific group of citizens. This has two implications. The first one is to ensure that other groups of citizens, who are not highly educated, may also have access to these data; this implies that it important to see what kind of alternative formats and channels may be of use. The second one is that provision of open data can therefore be viewed rather as a symbolic act, by which governments in a more political way try to give meaning to the idea of transparency.

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