The role of evaluation in local school governance in Sweden: Editorial introduction

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Introduction

This special issue is devoted to gaining a better understanding of evaluation in local school governance. A closer look at evaluation at the local level in Sweden provides an insight into evaluation in a decentralised education system, an insight that actors operating in other education systems can relate to and learn from. As education systems and the discretion of local authorities vary significantly, we need better knowledge of evaluation at this level in different education systems. This issue explores how local school actors (i.e. politicians, administrators, municipal auditors, school principals, teachers and parents) are responding to the growing accountability pressure emerging from the recentralisation and globalisation of education governance, and how these actors organise and apply evaluation in local school governance and school development. Although Sweden’s and other countries’ education systems increasingly rely on evaluation at all levels, the role of evaluation at the local governance level is paid insufficient attention. The Swedish school system is one of the most market based in the world (Musset 2012; Ravitch 2010; Rönberg 2011). This may affect local school governance and makes Sweden an interesting case to explore.

The issue was developed as part of the research project “Consequences of evaluation for school practice: governance, accountability and school development” (2012–2015), financed by the Swedish Research Council, which explores evaluation and evaluation systems in Swedish compulsory education (for students aged 13–15 years). This project is guided by three research questions: What characterises the prevailing evaluation systems and what knowledge and information do the systems (not) provide? Which functions do evaluations and evaluation systems have in governance, accountability, and school development? What are the consequences of evaluation and evaluation systems for school praxis and the main actors, i.e. decision-makers,
school principals, teachers and parents? In this issue, these questions are explored in the context of local school governance with a focus on the role of evaluation in governance, accountability, and school development.

Four medium-sized municipalities with populations of 75,000–100,000 were strategically selected to reflect differing local conditions and contextual factors that may affect education and the role of evaluation in local school governance. The municipalities differ in political majority, school performance, and share of independent schools, with eight schools being selected for in-depth interviews. The articles concentrate on the role of evaluation in local school governance at the municipal, school and classroom levels. The municipalities are anonymised in the articles, being referred to as “North”, “West”, “East” and “South”. The selection criteria are not used for systematic comparisons, but some articles discuss them when interpreting the results.

The articles are based on analysis of documents, reports and studies treating global and national evaluation systems, national and municipal policy documents addressing school governance and evaluation, minutes from municipal education committee meetings (2011–2013), municipal websites, and 76 interviews. Four politicians from majority parties and three from opposition parties, 10 administrators (i.e. Head of the Education Department, senior administrators and evaluation experts), five politically elected local auditors, three representatives of independent schools, eight school principals and 43 teachers were interviewed in person or, in a few cases, by phone. In addition, an electronic questionnaire sent to teachers was used to complement the interviews with them so as to obtain an overview of teachers’ experiences of evaluation in the studied municipalities. Each article provides additional information about the specific material used. All articles are informed by and reflect the entirety of the material. Conclusions about the functions, effects and consequences of evaluation presented in the articles were generated by interpreting interviewees’ responses and various texts (e.g. policy documents, minutes and websites).

“Evaluation in local school governance: a framework for analysis” (Hanberger 2016) develops a conceptual framework for exploring the role and consequences of evaluation at the local level of school governance. It also provides a frame of reference for the articles in this issue. It consists of key concepts, three models of decentralised governance (state model, local government model and multi-actor model of governance) and four types of evaluation (indicator-based monitoring and evaluation systems; stand-alone evaluations; synthesis studies; and informal, occasional or everyday evaluations). The article demonstrates how the framework can be applied in an analysis of the role of evaluation at the municipal level of school governance, and discusses the framework’s advantages and limitations.

“Evaluation systems in a crowded policy space: implications for local school governance” (Lindgren, Hanberger and Lundström 2016) examines the web of evaluation systems in the Swedish school sector. The authors describe the main
characteristics of five significant evaluation systems and the knowledge they provide. This study conceives and describes the growth of evaluation systems from a policy space perspective, finding that these systems have been developed in an overcrowded education policy space, implying that evaluation systems affect and are affected by other systems. The article interprets and compares these systems’ intended functions. The results indicate that the evaluation systems have somewhat different intended functions and that all are ultimately meant to advance local school development. All these evaluation systems, except OECD/PISA, are based on the same national school statistics. They also address problems of how evaluation systems can fulfil their intended functions in an overcrowded policy space.

“Navigating the evaluation web: evaluation in Swedish local school governance” (Hanberger, Lindgren and Lundström 2016) explores the role of evaluation in local school governance at the municipal level. The authors demonstrate that how evaluation systems function depends partly on contextual factors. The primary functions of evaluation at this level include maintaining and legitimising results-based management and supporting governing, accountability, and school development in the interest of goal achievement. Local decision makers have learned to navigate the web of evaluations and to develop response strategies for dealing with external evaluations. Navigation skills and local strategies for responding to external evaluations also affect how external evaluations are used and the functions they are allowed to serve in local school governance. In contexts with high issue polarisation, the use of evaluation differs between the political majority and opposition, responses to external evaluations following the same pattern.

“Balancing managerial and professional demands: school principals as evaluation brokers?” (Hult, Lundström and Edström 2016) explores the role of school principals in the education evaluation system and in local school governance, reflecting the multi-actor model of governance. The authors analyse the principal’s role in Swedish school governance, treating the principal as an actor subjected to governing and accountability pressure from above (the state and school provider) and below (teachers and parents/students). Evetts’ (2009) two ideal types of professionalism, i.e. occupational and organisational professionalism, are used in analysing the principal’s roles. The former type implies that the profession is constructed ‘from within’ together with teachers, whereas the latter conceives the principal’s professionalism in managerial terms and as constructed ‘from above’. The results show that principals operate more or less according to these professional ideals, and that they conceive, respond to and use evaluation differently if they are driven by occupational or organisational professionalism. However, taken together, the evaluation systems the interviewed principals are subjected to clearly imply a shift in the principals’ professional role towards organisational professionalism.

“Teacher ambivalence towards school evaluation: promoting and ruining teacher professionalism” (Hult and Edström 2016) explores teachers’ experiences of
the web of evaluation and the value of different evaluation systems for school practice. The article illustrates how teachers are subjected to growing accountability pressure from the state, school providers and parents, and how they are held accountable for school results and student performance. The authors analyse teachers’ responsibility in relation to the same ideal types as were treated in “Balancing managerial and professional demands”, that is, occupational and organisational professionalism. They demonstrate that teachers’ enactment of responsibility is best reflected by occupational professionalism and professional or internal accountability. External evaluations and evaluation systems, if not transformed and adapted to teachers’ practices and needs, cannot be used for school development. In contrast, teachers’ own unofficial evaluations are used for continuous learning and teaching development.

“Customers, partners and right-holders: school evaluations on websites” (Carlbaum 2016) explores evaluation from a parent/citizen’s perspective, reflecting on how a key actor in local school governance is represented. The author draws on Dahler-Larsens’ (2012) concept of ‘constitutive’ effects when analysing which evaluation data is provided on municipal and school websites and how it shapes parent roles. The dominant type of evaluation represented on the websites was performance data for accountability and an informed school choice. Parents were foremost positioned as customers with an influence through choice and exit options reinforcing the almost unquestioned norm of parental right to educational authority. But the results indicate that the representations of evaluation differ due to contextual factors and the positioning of parents as customers is not hegemonic.

“School evaluation in Sweden in a local perspective: A synthesis” (Hanberger, Carlbaum, Hult, Lindgren and Lundström 2016) synthesises the role of and consequences of evaluation at the municipal, school, classroom and parent levels and interprets and discusses the results. The discussion concerns the role of evaluation in school governance, its value for local school development, the constitutive effects of evaluations, and what can explain the results, and how this knowledge can be used. The article ends with conclusions about the role and consequences of evaluation in local school governance. For example, the results show that national and local evaluation systems legitimatise and support governance by objectives and results, parents’ school choice, and accountability for compliance and performance at all these levels. The evaluation systems also foster a performance-oriented school culture, and promote single-loop learning and confirm rather than question current policies and routines at the municipal and school levels.

The issue ends with a commentary on the findings by Peter Dahler-Larsen.

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Note

1. The interviews lasted from 0.5 to 1.5 hours.
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