Customers, partners and rights-holders: School evaluations on websites

Sara Carlbaum

Abstract
This paper explores how evaluation, which has expanded at all levels of school governance across Europe, shapes parental roles by studying how local school governors and schools in Sweden represent evaluation to parents on their websites. Websites are prime locations for public communications and are useful for exploring the functions of evaluations intended for parental use. In recent decades, parental influence over school has increased through ‘choice and voice’ options, while the role of evaluations has continued to expand in school governance. Evaluations construct social roles, identities and relations and, as such, are constitutive of the social world and our place in it. By drawing on Dahler-Larsen’s concept of “constitutive effects”, the discursive implications of evaluation are discussed. The dominant type of evaluation represented on websites is performance data used for accountability and informed school choice purposes. Parents are primarily positioned as customers who exert influence through choice and exit options, reinforcing the almost unquestioned norm of parental right to educational authority. Representations of evaluation differ depending on local political majority, school performance, and public versus independent provider; as such, they are not hegemonic but tend to strengthen the position of parents as individual rights-holders, marginalising forms of collective action.

Keywords: evaluation, local school governance, parents, school choice, user influence

Introduction
This paper explores how evaluation, which has expanded at all levels of school governance across Europe (Dahler-Larsen 2012c; Grek and Lindgren 2014; Lingard and Sellar 2013; Merki 2011; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011), shapes parental roles by studying how local school governors and schools represent evaluation to parents. In contemporary local school governance in Sweden, parents have become more influential in both directly and indirectly governing education in terms of decisions, prioritisations and policy action through ‘choice and voice’ channels (Englund 2011). Sweden is said to have a strong anti-juridical tradition lacking in individual legal rights (Trädgårdh and Svedberg 2013), but with new modes of multi-actor governance, marketisation, decentralisation and performance management having developed over the last 30 years the ideal of the active citizen has taken shape.
The introduction of school choice (Blomqvist 2004; Lundahl 2002) and of various ‘voice’ options for improving parental participation in school governance (Dahlstedt 2009b; Holmgren et al. 2012; Jarl 2005; Kristoffersson 2008) has contributed to a shift from macro to micro democracy (Möller 1996). The focus on parental agency in education policy across Europe reflects what researchers have called a “will to empower” (Cruikshank 1999), “politics of activation” (Dahlstedt 2009a), and “government technologies of agency” (Dean 2010), emphasising the liberal view of parental right to educational authority (Englund 2010).

Evaluation systems (Leeuw and Furubo 2008), such as monitoring systems, inspection and oversight, benchmarking systems, and performance data, are increasingly used across Europe and the western world (Dahler-Larsen 2012c; Grek and Lindgren 2014; Lingard and Sellar 2013). These streams of knowledge and information are assumed to be necessary so that citizens and others can hold national and local government accountable for how schools are performing. There is also a presupposition that citizens are rational and active choosers using these data to make informed school choices (Musset 2012). The social practice of evaluation is constitutive of the social world, reflecting and constructing what is deemed “important to maintain, important to believe, important to change, and important to avoid” (Dahler-Larsen 2012c, 17). Evaluations construct and reconstruct social roles, identities and relations and, as such, shape and are shaped by our understanding of the world and our place in it. In this paper, I consider how evaluations shape parental roles by studying how evaluation-related information is represented by local governors and schools on their websites. Websites are prime locations for schools and local school actors to communicate with the public and are among the most important information sources available to parents to help them act and influence their children’s school and education. Local school governors and schools are increasingly encouraging parents to use websites for communication. Representations of evaluation on websites are thus useful for exploring certain functions of evaluations. The research questions explored are: What evaluation information is and is not provided? How is this information represented, i.e. what is the intended parental use of this information? Which constitutive effects does evaluation have?

It could be problematic to use website material when analysing how evaluation shapes parental roles. School websites can be seen as ‘windows’ of the school, mainly for potential new students and parents, representing a certain parental role while possibly marginalising others. Some municipalities and schools may not use websites extensively and local autonomy in school governance is still high in Sweden. Good school performance may be exploited in showcasing good results to attract new students, but evaluations can also be used to convey that a particular situation is being dealt with appropriately. When focusing on the local context, different conditions can result in different representations. As the local context
matters in a variety of ways, local actors can use evaluations in several ways (Hanberger, Lindgren and Lundström 2016).

The paper is structured as follows. First, I present an overview of Swedish education, after which I outline the theoretical framework drawing on Dahler-Larsen (2009, 2012c). Analysis of representations of evaluations on the websites of municipalities and thereafter on the websites of schools in these municipalities finds certain constitutive effects. I argue that these representations position parents mainly as customers, but that context structures the possible use and representation of evaluation in various ways.

**Swedish education: parental influence and evaluations**

In the late 1980s, several educational reforms promoting decentralisation and deregulation began by shifting responsibility for education from the state to municipalities. School governance changed from regulating input and resources to goal- and results-based management. Other reforms emphasised the rights of parents in various ways. One was the introduction of school choice in the early 1990s along with free-of-charge independent schools publicly funded through a voucher system in which school owners are allowed to profit (Lundahl 2002). Besides arguments for parents’ right to choose suitable education for their children emphasised in international conventions (Englund 2010) and research (Chubb and Moe 1990), other arguments claimed that school choice would increase education efficiency, effectiveness and quality. Schools with poor performance and reputations would either need to improve or close as students/parents would choose other schools (Blomqvist and Rothstein 2000). Initially few in number, independent schools have proliferated since the 2000s and today approximately 15% of Swedish students in compulsory school attend them (NAE 2015c). However, the expansion of independent schools differs between parts of the country (NAE 2012).

The 1994 curriculum further emphasised parents’ rights and influence over their children’s schooling. Although discussion of family–school cooperation and relations was not new in the 1990s, more formalised collaboration and partnerships were introduced through various forms of parental participation boards in a multi-actor model of governance. The School Act states that the legal guardians of all students in compulsory school shall have the opportunity to influence their children’s education and that they shall be consulted before decisions are made (SFS 2010:800). Most schools therefore have some kind of forum called the parent board, influence board, local school board or parent association where parents are represented together with the school management (e.g. the school principal as well as teacher and sometimes student health staff representatives). These forms of collaboration and partnership were advocated as intrinsically valuable as they give parents the ‘right’ to exert influence. But they were also advocated as instrumentally valuable, because parents were seen as
... an important but unutilised resource for schools. Their participation can contribute to developing the learning environment for pupils. Above all, however, parents can become a force that can influence schools and contribute to their development (SOU 1997:121, 113–114, author’s translation).

In the 1990s, there was even a trial period when schools had local school boards on which parents had the majority of seats and the right to make decisions on school matters (Kristoffersson 2008; NAE 2001). Today’s schools can have local school boards but legal guardians cannot be in the majority (SFS 2010:800).

In the early 2000s, a new reform area started. School inspections were reinstated in 2003 and a new government agency, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (SSI), was established in 2008. Along with a new School Act, a new grading system, a new curriculum and the introduction of national tests in more subjects and at earlier ages, these reforms contributed to the re-regulation and recentralisation of a highly decentralised system. Evaluations of various kinds, inspections, quality audits and rankings were not only used for school improvement and development purposes but also to ensure accountability in the decentralised system. Parental rights and influence were maintained and other ways of holding schools and school providers accountable were strengthened. Sweden is said to have a strong anti-juridical tradition lacking in individual legal rights, making it difficult for citizens to litigate and claim their rights in court (Trädgårdh and Svedberg 2013). Nevertheless, there are ways for citizens to litigate (SFS 1986:223; SFS 1991:900; SOU 2002:121) and opportunities for parents to appeal decisions to administrative courts or the administrative agency, i.e. the Board of Appeals in Education, have increased (Prop. 1990/91:115, 46; SFS 2010:800; SOU 2002:121). Parents and students can also file formal complaints to the SSI regarding any school situation regulated in the School Act, ordinances, curriculum and regulations. A complaint concerning a teacher can also result in revocation of the teacher’s certificate. Formal complaints can also be filed with the Child and School Student Representative concerning issues of degrading treatment that could merit monetary compensation. These various avenues for complaints can be seen as empowering parents and improving individual rights through court-like procedures. In support of these avenues, evaluations can be used as a source of information by parents appealing decisions, for example.

**Evaluations as constitutive of the social world**

Evaluations are a social practice that produces and reproduces knowledge and meaning; as such, evaluations are political and have consequences for the social world. They produce ‘truths’, i.e. forms of knowledge and subject positions governing behaviour and conduct that both restrict and enable the ability and capacity of subjects to act (Foucault 1980; Howarth 2007; Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Evaluations interpellate various subjects and position them in certain roles. Dahler-Larsen (2009) states that an evaluation interpellates, among others, the evaluand and the
evaluator and structures and regulates the relationship between them. For example, a parent satisfaction survey issued by a school provides parents with the right to judge the value and worth of some aspect of the school. Over what and how parents are given the right to voice their opinions is decided by someone else, however. Although the survey articulates user influence and provides opportunities to speak, parents are positioned in a specific system of control and socialisation that structures their space for agency. These satisfaction surveys usually position parents as customers voicing their immediate experience of satisfaction with a delivered good. The parent is distanced from the process of education and the responsibility to provide satisfaction is placed solely on teachers and school leaders (Dahler-Larsen 2009).

Evaluation shapes relationships between parent and teacher, home and school. In that sense, evaluations such as monitoring, performance data, inspections and quality audits have “constitutive effects” because they “define the social realities of which they are a part” (Dahler-Larsen 2012b, 3). “Constitutive effects” do not refer to physical causes but to the rhetorical and discursive effects of evaluations and how they form social reality. The concept stresses how what is more and less desirable is affected by how evaluations are used (Dahler-Larsen 2012a). In the present paper, the concept is used to analyse how presentations and representations of evaluations appearing on school and municipal websites shape parental roles, with consequences for the school–parent relationship and the meaning of education. What and how evaluations are represented on websites shape parental behaviour and conduct in terms of whether and how parents can use this evaluation information to influence schools.

In a representative democratic ideal, parents can act, participate and influence schools through voting and choosing representatives in national and local government, leading to change or continuity throughout the education system. Action through memberships in political parties, unions and interest groups is also part of the representative ideal, as are demonstrations, protests and the forming of public opinion through traditional and social media (Bengtsson 2008; Möller 1996). This use of ‘voice’ constitutes a type of political action resting on the political mechanism of expressing one’s opinions to influence a specific situation. It is complex as “it can be graduated from faint grumbling to violent protest” (Hirschman 1970, 16). In recent decades, a participatory ideal of democracy stressing individuals’ influence over their everyday lives and encounters with welfare services has been emphasised together with the representative ideal (Möller 1996). Various ‘voice options’ within the organisation, i.e. so-called user influence, have therefore been emphasised, for example, in education by means of parents participating on parent boards or completing parent questionnaires and satisfaction surveys. Parents can also make their voices heard by raising issues directly and personally with teachers or school principals, by contacting providers and local authorities, making complaints, voicing
opinions, or filing complaints with central agencies. The shift to micro democracy has also entailed improving another option of influence, that of choice and exit. With the option of exit, a dissatisfied member of an organisation or customer of a welfare service – in this case, a student or parent dissatisfied with a school – can opt out and, it is hoped, improve the student’s situation by choosing another school. The existence of exit opportunities supports or advances competition. Exit options are therefore connected to the economic mechanisms of market competition whereby organisations or firms must improve in order to retain their members or customers or eventually close down (Hirschman 1970).

Moreover, Erikson (2011, 2012) has described how a more traditional family–school relationship with a division between school and home, teacher authority being emphasised, has been challenged through this shift to micro democracy in Sweden. The three principles structuring family and school relationships that are challenging the traditional principle are specifically those of ‘partnership’, ‘user influence’ and ‘choice’, all of which are changing the roles of both teachers and parents.

**Material and analysis**

To explore what parental roles are shaped by evaluations in local school governance, I analysed four municipalities’ websites and the websites of eight schools in these municipalities in autumn 2014. The cases are the same as those treated in the overall research project² and the other articles in this special issue. I was unable to examine the schools’ digital learning platforms³ as these restrict access to students and their parents.

The municipalities all have populations of 75,000–100,000 and were strategically selected to reflect different contextual factors. Variations in political majority are thought to reflect different ideological stances regarding representations of evaluation, especially on the use of evaluations to promote school choice. Differences in school performance could result in various representations of evaluation results: for example, good results can be used to attract new students, while a less positive evaluation can be used to signal that a situation is being dealt with appropriately. The average merit-value and eligibility for upper secondary education were used as the school performance criteria, with ‘low’ representing a performance below the national average and ‘high’ representing a performance above the national average (see Table 1 in Hanberger, Lindgren and Lundström 2016). Socio-economic composition in terms of parental education level and share of students not born in Sweden or with both parents not born in Sweden may also have implications for how evaluations are represented. Research has demonstrated that parents with a higher education and of Swedish ethnicity are more involved in their children’s schooling in terms of both school choice and parental participation (Dahlstedt 2007), which could hold implications for what and how evaluations are presented to...
satisfy perceived parental needs. The share of independent schools could also affect the use of evaluations to support informed school choice. The selected municipalities have been anonymised and are referred to as “North”, “South”, “East” and “West”. The eight schools, two from each municipality, were also strategically selected to achieve variation in factors such as provider (i.e. independent versus public), school performance and socio-economic composition.

As a first step in the website analysis, I studied the site as a whole and considered the impression given regarding parental roles. In this first step, I crudely interpreted whether the site promotes either a parental role in which choice or voice is the main option for influence, whether the options seem to be given similar weights, or whether it seems as though parents are not supposed to influence education. The next step was to determine what evaluation information is or is not provided on the website. Nearly any type of evaluation could be posted on the websites of the schools and municipalities. All types of evaluation information and links to other sites where evaluation information is posted are interpreted as valuable to parents. Hence, what is posted is regarded as valuable and what is not posted is regarded as not valuable to parents. The third step was to ask how the evaluation information provided is represented, focusing on the words used and how the evaluation information is presented, for example, whether in relation to information on choosing a school, on parent boards or on other possibilities for parents to influence education. In this step of the analysis, I focused on the purpose for which parents are intended to use this evaluation information. The fourth step treats the constitutive effects of the observed representations of evaluation.

### Evaluation for customers and partners

Since the introduction of school choice and the expansion of independent schools, it has been said that the school market and the logic of competition will not work properly without access to good information on which to base informed and rational choices. Nationally, efforts have therefore been made to provide ranking lists, comparisons and performance measurements (SOU 2007:101; SOU 2013:56). This type of indicator-based evaluation providing data on inputs and performance

---

**Table 1. Selection of the cases**

| Municipality | School  | Provider  | School Performance |
|--------------|---------|-----------|--------------------|
| North        | Basil   | Municipal | High               |
| North        | Carnation | Independent | High               |
| East         | Salvia  | Municipal | High               |
| East         | Coriander | Independent | High               |
| South        | Garlic  | Municipal | Low                |
| South        | Lavender | Municipal | Low                |
| West         | Nettle  | Municipal | Low                |
| West         | Parsley | Independent | Low                |
is also the main evaluation information provided on the municipal and school websites. This evaluation information is clearly intended to be used to support informed school choice and therefore encourages parents to act as customers and use the exit option if dissatisfied with the current situation. However, as the analysis will demonstrate, there are some divergences from this dominant use of evaluations and dominant representation of parents.

In the next section, I analyse the websites of the North, South, East and West municipalities. These websites provide information on all schools in the municipalities, both public schools governed by the municipality and independent schools. They also provide information on school choice and education policy more generally. The analysis is structured by the various types of posted evaluation information. I then turn to analysing the websites of the eight schools located in these municipalities, with this analysis also being structured by the various types of evaluations. Compared with the municipal websites, the school websites provide more information about the individual schools.

**The municipal websites**

Three of the four municipalities provide links to various websites providing explicit comparisons and rankings. These links are posted in relation to information on how to choose or change schools. South links to the National Agency for Education’s (NAE) “Choose a school” website. East links to the NAE’s other website, “Education info”. West links to both these websites as well as to the “Compulsory school quality” website managed by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, and the Swedish Association of Independent Schools. These sites allow the user to make easy comparisons based on several indicators, mostly performance data derived from the national SIRIS database (Table 2). Although not all indicators could be said to be evaluative, they are all intended to help parents evaluate schools to support informed school choice and are therefore listed in the table.

East, with a right-wing political majority in local government and a large share of independent schools, is the only municipality offering its own website for comparing local schools (Table 2), both its own public schools and independent schools. The data are mostly derived from SIRIS but also include results of the municipality’s own customer satisfaction surveys administered to students and parents. The indicators on the website are said “to be important to customers and citizens” and allow comparisons to be made for the last three years. East extensively promotes its system of customer choice, making statements such as “legal guardians and students will have a better opportunity to visit open houses, compare schools through the site, and make better customer choices” (East website, 21 October 2014). The East website articulates the vision of “the greatest school in the world – for everyone – every day”,

334
followed by information on the many alternatives available when making a school choice: “Take advantage of your freedom of choice!”. Parents are clearly represented as customers exerting an influence through their use of choice and exit opportunities. Comparisons, rankings and benchmarking constitute the logic thought to drive school development. South also lists its own schools’ average results. Information is given on national test results in Swedish and English in grades 3 and

Table 2. Indicators on comparative sites provided or linked to by the municipalities

| Data                                                      | South and West links to NAE’s Choose a school | East and West links to NAE’s Education info | West links to Compulsory school quality | East provides its own site for comparisons |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Distance to school                                       | x                                             | x                                           |                                        |                                           |
| Municipal or independent provider                        | x                                             |                                             | x                                      |                                           |
| School profile                                           | x                                             |                                             |                                        |                                           |
| Grades taught at the school                              | x                                             | x                                           |                                        |                                           |
| Number of students                                      | x                                             | x                                           |                                        |                                           |
| Number of students per teacher                           | x                                             | x                                           |                                        | x                                         |
| Share of teachers with teacher education (teacher certificates) | x                                             |                                             |                                        |                                           |
| Share of students achieving at least an E in all subjects in grade 9 | x                                             | x                                           |                                        | x                                         |
| Expected SALSA value of the share of students achieving at least an E in all subjects in grade 9 |                                             |                                             |                                        | x                                         |
| Average student merit value in grade 9 (an average value of a student’s grades) | x                                             | x                                           |                                        | x                                         |
| Expected SALSA value of average student merit value in grade 9 |                                             |                                             |                                        | x                                         |
| Share of students eligible for upper secondary school programmes | x                                             | x                                           |                                        | x                                         |
| Grades in English, Maths and Swedish in grades 6 and 9    | x                                             |                                             |                                        |                                           |
| Results on national tests in Swedish and Maths in grade 3 | x                                             |                                             |                                        |                                           |
| Results on national tests in Swedish and Maths in grade 6 | x                                             |                                             |                                        | x                                         |
| Results on national tests in Swedish, Maths and English in grade 9 | x                                             |                                             |                                        | x                                         |
| Student satisfaction surveys (concerning teaching, environment and safety, and student influence) |                                             |                                             |                                        | x                                         |
| Customer satisfaction surveys of students                 |                                              |                                             |                                        | x                                         |
| Customer satisfaction surveys of parents                  |                                              |                                             |                                        | x                                         |
6 relative to the national averages, the share of students eligible for upper secondary education, and cost effectiveness, with improved results being indicated by a ‘thumbs up’ sign.

Both East and West provide links to SALAR’s open comparisons (see Table 3). As open comparisons provide rankings based on a number of indicators, but only for municipalities and not for individual schools, their intended use is not primarily to promote school choice and the option of holding schools accountable by using the exit option. Instead, these comparisons can be used by parents to hold politicians accountable for local school quality and performance. However, in highly populated areas, such as East, exit from a municipality can be an option to a greater extent than in more sparsely populated areas as the distance to another municipality is minimal.

East uses a quality instrument including self-evaluations, observations and customer satisfaction surveys. The emphasis on ‘show and tell’ and customer satisfaction surveys positions parents as customers. The information gathered is published on the website and intended to be used in benchmarking and comparisons to support informed choice. To support informed choice, the municipality presents a quality analysis of all schools in the municipality, both public and independent, as well as summary overviews of easily accessible information. West also provides links to systematic quality reports, albeit only covering its own schools, in connection with information on school choice explicitly intended for comparisons. This represents parents as customers as it is supposed to be used to support informed choice.

North and South also publish their own systematic quality reports as well as reports on each of their public schools (see Table 3). However, in these cases, none of these reports is commented on in any special way or presented as information to support informed choice. Although these reports are posted and can be used to support choice, they are more inaccessible than the quality reports in East, as it takes considerable time and knowledge to read, search and analyse them. This makes these reports more useful for in-depth analysis than to support informed choice, and the evaluations they contain might therefore be useful to hold politicians accountable in upcoming elections, serving more symbolic and legitimising than practical choice functions. Linking to reports and statistics and making evaluative

Table 3. Evaluation information posted or linked to on the municipal websites

| Data                                | North | East | South | West |
|-------------------------------------|-------|------|-------|------|
| Comparative school sites            | x     | x    | x     |      |
| Open comparisons                    | x     |      |       | x    |
| Teacher union ranking               | x     |      |       |      |
| SSI inspection and quality audit reports | x      |       |       |      |
| Systematic quality reports          | x     | x    | x     | x    |
| Citizen survey by Statistics Sweden |       | x    | x     |      |
| Youth questionnaire                 |       |      |       | x    |
reports public can be seen as indicating that the local school governors are in control, on top of things, doing things by the book, and engaging in constant evaluation and improvement. The same can be said of the links to the citizen survey issued by Statistics Sweden posted by both South and West.

West also posts evaluations of youth satisfaction in the municipality although, as the questionnaire results are presented only for the whole municipality, they cannot be used for school choice purposes. Hanberger, Lindgren and Lundström (2016) demonstrate that customer satisfaction surveys of students, parents and school staff are thought of as “superficial” in South.

We do find an exception to the dominance of parent influence exerted through the choice and exit options and evaluation for accountability (see Table 3). North, with a left-wing political majority, can be described as the opposite of East. For example, the North website does not link to any external websites providing rankings and comparisons nor does it provide its own rankings as does East. Although the website does provide information on choice, it emphasises that choosing another school than the one provided might jeopardise student rights to public school transportation. Instead, North provides information on parental influence related to democracy, dialogue, participation and opportunities to influence local school governance. Working democratically is said to mean that “all children, students, parents and staff in school have an influence, are invited to an ongoing dialogue on what is being done and why, feel included, and have the opportunity to shape education and schooling” (North website, 15 October 2014). Parents are said always to be welcome at school, “where good collaboration and joint responsibility will create the best opportunities for your child’s education” (North website, 15 October 2014). Public schools in the municipality are each said to have a consultative and advisory school board where parent representatives together with staff, students and the school principal can discuss school matters. Voice rather than choice is promoted as a way for parents to exert influence and the relationship between schools and parents is one of community and partnership within multi-actor governance.

**The school websites**

Looking at the schools’ websites indicates that the dominant evaluation information provided is performance data, including results in terms of grades, and eligibility for upper secondary education (see Table 4). Both the independent and public schools that have good results are more inclined to provide this information, comparing their results with those of other schools in their municipalities as well as nationally via links to SIRIS. On the independent school Coriander’s (East) website, student performance is posted along with the statement “the best school in the municipality” (Coriander website, 21 October 2014). Despite the different emphasis on North’s website, the two schools in North provide performance data that promote the
customer role of the parents. On the independent school Carnation’s website, student performance is presented as “100% eligibility for upper secondary education” and the “highest merit value in the municipality” (Carnation website, 15 October 2014). On the public school Basil’s website, student results in both the school and the municipality as a whole are presented as making the municipality “a national model” with “the best school system in Sweden” and “at the top of open comparisons”; it is claimed that “all students reach their goals in all subjects”, that North is “the third best municipality in the Teacher Union’s ranking”, and that “NAE statistics on grades and national tests indicate high quality” (Basil website, 15 October 2014). Schools ranked lower in terms of these performance measures, such as the public school Garlic in South, have statements on their websites saying that “goal attainment has improved for several years” (Garlic website, 10 October 2014) instead of providing actual numbers, comparisons with other schools and links to statistics. However, these schools still promote the choice option of parent influence. Although no school posts national test results, this information can be accessed in the SIRIS database, to which the schools in North link. Yet these links are not specifically said to lead to national test results but are represented as containing general statistics and quality information on schools. For the schools in East, national test results can also be attained through the municipality’s comparative site for an informed school choice.

While East provides the results of the parent and student satisfaction surveys on its website for comparison purposes, no schools present these results on their own websites even though they all seem to administer such questionnaires. Despite these instruments only being used to support informed choice in East, they can still be interpreted as representing parents as customers since they concentrate on satisfying customers, making sure that they do not exit and choose another school. Perhaps these questionnaires could be understood as voice options intended to prevent exit rather than promoting choice. As these questionnaires often contain questions on student safety, teaching and treatment, it is surprising that their results are not posted because research indicates that parents are primarily concerned with

| Evaluation Information | North | East | South | West |
|------------------------|-------|------|-------|------|
| Data                   | Basil | Carnation | Salvia | Coriander | Garlic | Lavender | Nettle | Parsley |
| Grades                 | x     | x     |       |       | x      |         |        |         |
| Link to SIRIS          | x     | x     |       |       |        |         |        |         |
| SSI inspection reports | x     | x     |       |       |        |         |        |         |
| Systematic quality report | x | x |       |       | x      |         |        |         |
| Teacher Union ranking  | x     |       |       |       |        |         |        |         |
| Teachers with teacher certificates |        |       | x |       |        |         |        |         |
| Open Comparisons       | x     |       |       |       |        |         |        |         |
“the atmosphere”, “pedagogical climate”, “safety” and “reputation of the school” (Ehren, Leeuw and Scheerens 2005, 71). Perhaps issues concerning personal integrity prevent schools from posting results from the student and parent questionnaires, indicating that the logic of competition and parents as customers is not hegemonic. However, if one looks more closely at the schools’ systematic quality reports, they often contain results from these customer satisfaction surveys.

The school websites also provide information on SSI inspections (see Table 4). While the public school Basil in North only links to the actual decision report, other schools refer to the inspection results in certain ways. The independent school Coriander’s (East) website announces “high credentials from the SSI” (Coriander website, 21 October 2014), while the independent school Carnation’s (North) website states that the “inspection [was] without remarks” (Carnation website, 15 October 2014). This evaluation information can be seen as intended both for potential students’ parents choosing a school and as assurance to parents with children at the school. The message is “you made the right choice, stay with us”, positioning parents as customers staying put when satisfied and exiting when dissatisfied. Although not all schools whose websites were analysed here have recently been inspected, SSI reports seem to be used in this way mainly when inspection results are good, indicating that the market logic of competition has consequences in terms of what evaluation information is posted and represented.

This seems to indicate a dominant representation of choice as the primary principle structuring the school–parent relationship, in which parents are customers influencing the schools through their choice and exit options, although voice options are also present to some extent. On their websites, the schools also provide information on parent boards. The public school websites provide links to their own as well as the overall school quality reports for all public schools in the municipality, albeit these are not represented in any specific way. More in-depth analysis by parents is needed indicating that it is not chiefly intended for easy accessible information for school choice but for internal partnership and school development purposes through voice options such as parent boards. The independent schools do not provide similar reports on their websites.

The voice option is often not as emphasised as the exit option. One exception is the public school Lavender, a school in South municipality, which does not provide performance data or any other evaluation information that could promote choice and parents as customers (see Table 4). Its website features statements made by parents and aimed specifically at parents. The school claims to have had a local school board for more than 10 years, holding meetings every month for conversations, advice and decisions. The school likely participated in the testing of local school boards in the late 1990s. The board is said to “give us parents a great opportunity to be part of our children’s school. The goal, among others, is to provide increased influence over our children’s education” (Lavender website, 9 October
2014). The school claims to have around 700 parents/legal guardians as its closest collaboration partners: “Now is the chance to join and shape your child’s school! We need you!” (Lavender website, 9 October 2014).

The public school Salvia in East is similar to the public school Lavender in South in that its website does not provide performance data, rankings and comparisons to support choice and exit, thereby not following the strong discourse of choice and comparison on the municipal website. Instead, Salvia provides information on the parent association, which used to be very active and has its own website. However, this parent association no longer exists, having been replaced by a parent board similar to those of other schools. This change is said to be because of the lack of parents willing to participate in exerting a collective influence in this way: “Henceforth, the goal is for parents and school management to work together to provide students with the best resources for education, a safe school environment, and ensure that communication between students, teachers and parents is good” (Salvia website, 21 October 2014). The board meetings are said to be open to everyone, which means that “you can continually make your voice heard and gain insight into what is going on at the school” (Salvia website, 21 October 2014).

Reinforcing parents as rights-holders

As the analysis has demonstrated, evaluation-related information is represented in various ways in local school governance. It signals a variety of school–parent relationships and positions parents in different ways. The dominant type of evaluation consists of performance data, rankings and comparisons that promote a market relationship in which parents are positioned as customers and evaluation serves to promote accountability. In their role as customers, parents are assumed to hold schools and school providers accountable by means of the option of making informed choices and exiting and choosing other schools, supported by easily accessible performance data.

A constitutive effect of this dominant representation of evaluation is that parental influence is channelled mainly through the choice and exit options. The responsibility to ensure a good education is to be enforced by parents making informed school choices. This may result in parents being blamed for not taking advantage of their right to exit a school and choose another one when not satisfied. As Ball (1990) stated, the rhetoric of parental choice makes parental school choice an individual problem. My argument is not that this constitutive effect is realised only through how evaluation is represented on the studied websites. Instead, I claim that, within the larger social context, this representation reinforces the view of parents as customers and the almost unquestioned right of parents to choose education providers for their children. Further, the focus on performance and outcome constructs education as something passively received. It represents an understanding of education in which schools and teachers are simply supposed to deliver satisfactory
performance and outcomes, obscuring the fact that education is a complex
endeavour involving actively learning students. Responsibility is placed on teachers
and schools without taking the larger social context into account (cf. Dahler-Larsen
2009). Moreover, positioning parents as customers reduces social relations to
something passing and fleeting without context, relationships or community, with
exit being the preferred option for parental influence.

However, as demonstrated in the previous sections, representations of evalua-
tions position parents not only as customers but also as partners. Significant for the
positioning of parents as both customers and partners is the common positioning
of parents as rights-holders. Both draw on a rights discourse of empowering the
individual agency of parents to exercise their rights to choose and influence their
children’s school. Parents positioned as customers and partners are therefore
constructed as subjects endowed with rights. Although the exerting of user influence
through the voice option of formalised parent boards emphasises collective action
and participatory democracy in partnership with the school, this partnership risks
promoting the particular group and community interests of a specific school and its
students over other schools’ and students’ interests. Voice expressed through parent
boards could therefore create tensions between particular group and community
interests and more universal, collective and equality-based interests (Erikson 2011;
Jarl 2012; Möller 1996). The emphasis on user influence exerted through parent
boards could disrupt the unifying role of citizenship.

Yet collective action through the voice option of parent boards seems to be losing
ground, as the statement on the Salvia website indicates. Other individual voice
options seem to be preferred. An increased emphasis on parental rights and in-
dividual action can be seen in parental involvement through informal complaints
and comments to teachers. Hult, Lundström and Edström (2016) demonstrate that
teachers at several of the studied schools increasingly feel pressure from parents
questioning their role, authority, competence and experience. Teachers state they
have to deal with many demands from parents, especially those with higher
education, claiming a lack of information, demanding certain support measures,
or questioning assessments and grades. Due to this parental pressure, teachers
reportedly keep extensive documentation as ‘evidence’ in case of parental complaints
and appeals (NAE 2015a). Exercising the voice option by complaining to a higher
authority is something that has rapidly become more prevalent over the last decade
(SSI 2015). This further indicates that parents as rights-holders should claim their
rights by exercising the voice option of complaining or the exit option if not satisfied.
The existing evaluations promote this development and help legitimate the
positioning of parents as rights-holders.

My argument is not that parents’ trust in teachers has eroded due to the exten-
sive evaluations. Instead, I argue that how evaluations are used and represented
reinforces a view of parents as customers with a right and responsibility to use the
options of exit as well as of voice in terms of complaints to uphold their rights. The marketisation of education has resulted in customer-oriented schools positioning parents and students as having a right to question grades and negotiate special support measures, because ‘the customer is always right’. Voice in this sense seems to increase with the threat of exit (Hirschman 1970) and this is further strengthened by how evaluation is represented.

The studied schools face different conditions, as reflected in what and how evaluations are represented on their websites. Some school websites are little developed and not very updated, mainly those of public schools such as Nettle in West, which might indicate a more traditional parental role. But it could also indicate that schools have various communication policies and resources. Some might employ website designers and marketers while others have no resources for this or have other priorities. Further, public school websites are often linked to the municipality’s website, which features a characteristic positioning of parents. Interestingly, a public school’s website can also represent a parental positioning opposite to that of its municipality, as do the websites of the public schools Basil in North and Salvia in East. Partnership or traditional parental roles were more evident on the websites of schools with a poorer performance and lower socio-economic conditions, as in South. School and municipal uses and representations of evaluations might therefore reinforce segregation because of how parents are represented. An active core of protesting parents of a higher socio-economic status might have chosen to exit schools that are considered poor performing, undermining the possibility of succeeding with voice options or of using the threat of exit to improve a current situation (Hirschman 1970). Other schools risk being overburdened with demands under the threat of exit, strengthened by how evaluations position parents as customers with the right to educational authority.

Conclusions
Evaluation has expanded at all levels of school governance in Sweden and various actors are involved in a form of multi-actor governance. This paper focuses on one of these actors: parents. Parents have gained a greater influence in education due to policies of marketisation and activation. The school choice reforms have considerably increased parents’ influence in local school governance, but parental influence has also been strengthened through parent boards and the provision of various ways for parents to complain and appeal. Parent boards and other collective forms of action in which parents participate are ways to influence education through multi-actor governance. How municipalities and schools govern their education and schooling through different forms of evaluation shapes conceptions of parental roles and of what constitutes the ideal parent. In this paper, I have analysed municipal
and school websites and the parental roles represented by evaluation-related information.

This analysis of websites demonstrates that a customer ideal is dominant, as evaluation information mainly consists of performance data intended for school comparison purposes. It further illustrates how municipalities respond differently to current state policies and accountability pressures in their selective provision of evaluation-related information, supposedly for use by parents (also see Hanberger, Lindgren and Lundström 2016). East, with a right-wing political majority, provides extensive benchmarking systems for informed school choice, making the customer position the dominant parental position. The opposite case is that of North, with a social-democratic political majority, whose website provides no performance data, indicators or links to sites for comparisons and rankings supporting parental school choice. A partnership role is represented, as is done on some school websites, through promoting parent boards and intentionally not providing parents with benchmarking data. This reduces the otherwise dominant representation of parents as customers but draws on a similar rights discourse and the concept of parents as rights-holders as the customer representation. Unsurprisingly, independent schools provide more performance data for marketing purposes than do public schools and ‘successful’ schools provide more evaluation-related information because their results are considered good.

A constitutive effect is that marketisation is reinforced by this main use of evaluations and that parents, by not using their option to hold schools accountable through the choice and exit options, have only themselves to blame for choosing schools with a poor performance. Another constitutive effect of evaluation is that local governance through user-influence channels, such as parent boards, seems to be decreasing. A horizontal accountability culture is strengthened by exit opportunities and by a customer-oriented use of evaluation in which parents exercise their individual rights to choose as well as to complain and launch appeals.

We might expect a school’s public website to be mainly directed to potential new students, while the school’s restricted-access digital learning platform would be directed to parents and students who have already chosen the school. Access to such digital learning platforms might therefore provide other types of evaluation-related information, interpellating parents differently and resulting in somewhat different conclusions, perhaps strengthening the position of parent as partner. However, the social context of school choice and parental rights to educational authority would likely be present even on these platforms.

Evaluations are political in that how they are used and how they are represented for parents’ supposed use indicate what is considered significant and desirable.
Evaluations are constitutive of what society is up to in this historical and geographic temporality (Dahler-Larsen 2012a). One constitutive effect of evaluation identified here is to strengthen the already unquestioned norm of parental right to educational authority. This might weaken the goal of pluralist public education with the autonomy of the child at the centre, as advocated by Englund (2010).
Notes

1 It is necessary to recognise that parental influence can be exerted without regular participation in governing schools and that formal participation does not necessarily result in an influence. Henceforth, I will use the term “influence” when referring to the ways parents can potentially affect education without judging whether they have successfully exerted this influence.

2 This article is part of the research project *Consequences of evaluation for school practice: steering, accountability, and school development* funded by the Swedish Research Council.

3 These platforms are usually said to convey information about what is happening at school and to present agendas and minutes from parent meetings and parent boards, individual assessments of students, grades, scores, class attendance records and contacts.

4 SIRIS is the NAE’s statistical database on school quality and performance (http://siris.skolverket.se/siris/?p=Siris:1:0); for further discussion of SIRIS, see Lindgren, Lundström and Hanberger (2016).

5 For a discussion of the characteristics and assumed functions of SALAR’s open comparisons (http://skl.se/tjanster/merfranskl/oppnajamforelser/grundskola.761.html), see Lindgren, Lundström and Hanberger (2016).

6 SALSA is the NAE’s statistical model of local analysis (http://salsa.artisan.se/). It provides value-added statistics on school performance accounting for factors such as parental educational level, proportion of boys and girls, proportion of students with one or both parents not born in Sweden, and proportion of students not born in Sweden. In 2013, the “foreign background” indicator was changed to the proportion of students newly arrived in Sweden, where ‘newly’ is defined as within the last four years (NAE, 2013b).

345
References

Ball, S.J. (1990). Politics and policy making in education. Explorations in policy sociology. London: Routledge.

Bengtsson, Å. (2008). Politiskt deltagande [Political participation]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Blomqvist, P. (2004). The choice revolution: privatization of Swedish welfare services in the 1990s. Social Policy & Administration, 38(2), 139–155. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2004.00382.x

Blomqvist, P. and Rothstein, B. (2000). Välfrödsstatens nya ansikte. Demokrati och marknadsreformer inom den offentliga sektorn [The new face of the welfare state. Democracy and market reforms in public administration]. Stockholm: Agora.

Chubb, J. and Moe, T. (1990). Politics, markets and America's schools. Washington: Brookings Institute.

Cruikshank, B. (1999). The will to empower. Democratic citizens and other subjects. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Dahler-Larsen, P. (2009). Kvalitetens beskaffenhed [The nature of quality]. Odense: Syddansk universitetsforlag.

Dahler-Larsen, P. (2012a). Constitutive effects as a social accomplishment: a qualitative study of the political in testing. Education Inquiry, 3(2), 171–186.

Dahler-Larsen, P. (2012b). Evaluation as a situational or universal good? Why evaluability assessment for evaluation systems is a good idea, what it might look in practice, and why it is fashionable. Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration, 16(3), 29–46.

Dahler-Larsen, P. (2012c). The evaluation society. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Dahlstedt, M. (2007). I val(o)frihetens spår. Segregation, differentiering och två decennier av skolreformer [In the (non)choice tracks. Segregation, differentiation and two decades of school reforms]. Pedagogisk forskning i Sverige, 12(1), 20–38.

Dahlstedt, M. (2009a). Aktiveringens politik. Demokrati och medborgarskap för ett nytt millennium [Politics of activation. Democracy and citizenship for a new millennium]. Malmö: Liber.

Dahlstedt, M. (2009b). Governing by partnerships: dilemmas in Swedish education policy at the turn of the millennium. Journal of Education Policy, 24(6), 787–801. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02680930903301548

Dean, M. (2010). Governmentality. Power and rule in modern society (Vol. 2). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Ehren, M.C.M., Leeuw, F.L. and Scheerens, J. (2005). On the impact of the Dutch Educational Supervision Act: analyzing assumptions concerning the inspection of primary education. American Journal of Evaluation, 26(1), 60–76. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1098214004273182

Englund, T. (2010). Questioning the parental right to educational authority – arguments for a pluralist public education. Education Inquiry, 1(3), 235–258.

Englund, T. (ed). (2011). Utbildning som medborgerlig rättighet. Föräldrarät, barns rätt eller ...? [Education as a citizenship right. Parental rights, children’s rights or ...?]. Göteborg: Daidalos.

Erikson, L. (2011). Vad betyder föräldrarätten i relation till olika principer för relationen mellan föräldrar och skola? [What do parental rights mean in relation to different principles for the relation between parents and the school?]. In Utbildning som medborgerlig rättighet. Föräldrarät, barns rätt eller ...? [Education as a citizenship right. Parental rights, children’s rights or ...?], T. Englund (ed.), 211–240. Göteborg: Daidalos.
Erikson, L. (2012). Den goda läraren på föräldraarenan [The good teacher on the parent arena]. In Föreställningar om den goda läraren [Constructions of the good teacher], T. Englund (ed.), 157–178. Göteborg: Daidalos.

Foucault, M. (1980). Power/knowledge. Selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977 (1st American ed.). New York: Pantheon.

Grek, S. and Lindgren, J. (eds.). (2014). Governing by inspection. London: Routledge.

Hanberger, A., Lindgren, L. and Lundström, U. (2016). Navigating the evaluation web: evaluation in Swedish local school governance. Education Inquiry, 7(3), 29913, doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/edui.v7.29913

Hirschman, A.O. (1970). Exit, voice and loyalty. Responses to decline in firms, organizations and states. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Holmgren, A., Lindgren, L. and Lundström, U. (2016). Navigating the evaluation web: evaluation in Swedish local school governance. Education Inquiry, 7(3), 29913, doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/edui.v7.29913

Jarl, M. (2005). Making user-boards a school in democracy? Studying Swedish local governments. Scandinavian Political Studies, 28(3), 277–294. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9477.2005.00133.x

Jarl, M. (2012). Skolan och det kommunala huvudmannaskapet [School and municipal responsibility]. Malmö: Gleerups.

Kristoffersson, M. (2008). Lokala styrelser med föräldramajoritet i grundskolan [Local school boards with a parent majority in compulsory school]. Doctoral dissertation, Umeå university, Umeå.

Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. (2001). Hegemony and socialist strategy. Towards a radical democratic politics. (2nd ed.). London: Verso.

Leeuw, F.L. and Furubo, J.-E. (2008). Evaluation systems: what are they and why study them? Evaluation, 14(2), 157–169. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1356389007087537

Lindgren, L., Lundström, U. and Hanberger, A. (2016). Evaluation and the Swedish education system. Education Inquiry, 7(3), 30202, doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/edui.v7.30200

Lingard, B. and Sellar, S. (2013). ‘Catalyst data’. Perverse systemic effects of audit and accountability in Australian schooling. Journal of Education Policy, 28(5), 634–656. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/026839.2013.758815

Lundahl, L. (2002). Sweden. Decentralization, deregulation, quasi-markets – and then what? Journal of Education Policy, 17(6), 687–697.

Musset, P. (2012). School choice and equity: current policies in OECD countries and a literature review. OECD Education Working Papers (66). doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k9f423507vc-en

Möller, T. (1996). Brukare och klienter i välfärdsstaten. Om missnöje och påverkanskemöjligheter inom barn- och äldreomsorg [Users and clients in the welfare state. On discontent and influence in child and elder care]. Stockholm: Publica (Norstedts Juridik).

National Agency for Education (NAE) (2001). Fem år av lokala styrelser med föräldramajoritet - En sammanfattning av förutsättningarna för och erfarenheterna av lokala styrelser och en summering av genomförda utvärderingar [Five years of local school boards with a parent
majority – Summary of the conditions for and experiences of local school boards and summary of performed evaluations. Stockholm: National Agency for Education.

National Agency for Education (NAE) (2012). *En bild av skolmarknaden. Syntes av Skolverkets skolmarknadsprojekt* [A picture of the school market. A synthesis of the National Agency for Education’s project on the school market]. Stockholm: National Agency for Education.

National Agency for Education (NAE) (2015a). *Grundskollärarens tidsanvändning. En fördjupad analys av ”Lärarnas yrkesvårdag”. Rapport 417* [Compulsory school teachers’ use of time. An in-depth study of “Teachers professional workday”]. Stockholm: National Agency for Education.

National Agency for Education (NAE) (2015b). SALSA. Retrieved from http://salsa.artisan.se/

National Agency for Education (NAE) (2015c). *Skolor och elever i grundskolan läsåret 2014/2015* [Schools and students in compulsory school 2014/2015]. Retrieved from http://www.skolverket.se/statistik-och-utvardering/statistik-i-tabeller/grundskola/skolor-och-elever

Pollitt, C. and Bouckaert, G. (2011). *Public management reform. A comparative analysis: new public management, governance and the neo-Weberian state*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Prop. (1990/91:115). *Om vissa skollagsfrågor* [On some School Act issues]. Stockholm: Sveriges riksdag.

SFS (1986:223). *Förvaltningslagen* [Public Administration Act]. Stockholm: Sveriges riksdag.

SFS (1991:900). *Kommunallag* [Municipality Act]. Stockholm: Sveriges riksdag.

SFS (2010:800). *Skollag* [School Act]. Stockholm: Sveriges riksdag.

SOU (1997:121). *Skolor och elever in a new society* [School issues – on school in a new time]. Stockholm: Fritzes offentliga publikationer.

SOU (2002:121). *Skollagen för kvalitet och likvärdighet: betänkande från 1999 års skollagskommitté* [School Act for quality and equity: report from the 1999 School Act Committee]. Stockholm: Fritzes offentliga publikationer.

SOU (2007:101). *Tydlig och öppen – förslag till en stärkt utbildningsinspektion* [Explicit and open – a proposal for strengthened school inspection]. Stockholm: Fritzes offentliga publikationer.

SOU (2013:56). *Friskolorna i samhället* [Independent schools in society]. Stockholm: Fritzes offentliga publikationer.

Swedish Schools Inspectorate (SSI) (2015). *Anmälnings och beslut 2014*. Retrieved from http://www.skolinspektionen.se/Statistik/Statistik-om-anmalningar/Anmalningar-och-beslut-2014/

Trädgårdh, L. and Svedberg, L. (2013). The iron law of rights: citizenship and individual empowerment in modern Sweden. In *Social Policy and Citizenship. The Changing Landscape*, A. Evers and A.-M. Guillemard (eds.), 222–256. Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199754045.9780199754001.9780199750001