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Nationell utvärderingspolicy: Utformning och förändring på grundskoleområdet 1988-2014

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Abstract

Evaluation has grown in both volume and scope across levels and sectors in recent decades, particularly in the school sector. Despite this growth, there is insufficient knowledge about how and in what ways evaluations are formed, institutionalized and used in education governance and education reforms. This thesis addresses some of these issues by studying evaluation policy. The aim of the thesis is to explore and analyse the design and possible changes in national evaluation policy in compulsory education during two periods of extensive education reforms (1988-1994 and 2008-2014).

The theoretical framework builds on evaluation research and policy studies, particularly the literature on policy design. These two strands of literature are supplemented with additional analytical tools from historical institutionalism regarding policy change. Drawing on previous research, a definition of evaluation policy that incorporates the policy context and also enables studying an implicit policy is proposed. On the empirical level, the findings are based on official policy documents, material produced by national government agencies as well as evaluations and evaluation systems.

The thesis shows that during the first period (1988-1994), the evaluation policy was characterized as a means of helping to implement the extensive reforms. Evaluations were to be conducted on all levels of the school system to promote development on each executive level. The policy design reflected evaluation as a learning and capacity-building tool. Schools and municipalities were positioned as owners and co-creators of evaluation knowledge. During the second period (2008-2014), the evaluation policy was partially revised in order to come to terms with inadequate evaluations and declining school results. The policy included more sanctions and hortatory tools, and more emphasis was placed on comparisons and rankings. The evaluation policy was based on the assumption that local actors should and will act on evaluative knowledge created by the agencies and international actors, and that they could be motivated to do so by the threat of, for example sanctions or issues of ranking and comparisons.

The evaluation policy design was largely stable over time. However, three more incremental but significant changes were identified: i) the policy design element “agents and implementation structures” was altered, ii) the evaluation policy expanded and iii) became more directed towards national and external control. These changes also indicated more negative implications for democracy during the second period. In relation to evaluations’ democratic function the analysis showed that the evaluation policy mainly strengthened the legitimizing and controlling function, whereas the enlightenment function was not prominent. This implies a risk that issues that may be relevant from a broader democratic and societal perspective may be overlooked and not subjected to evaluation. The thesis also acknowledges and illustrates the importance of uncovering and reconstructing evaluation policies, policies that are partly veiled, since also implicit policies will have democratic implications.

Keywords

evaluation, governing, evaluation policy, compulsory education, Sweden, education reform, policy design, policy change, democratic implications

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