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This is the published version of a paper presented at *European Conference on Educational Research in Porto, 1-5 September 2014*.

Citation for the original published paper:

Hanberger, A., Lindgren, L., Lundström, U. (2014)

Performance fixation? Use, functions and constitutive effects of evaluation in local school governance.

In: *ECER 2014, The Past, the Present and the Future of Educational Research* (pp. 1-4).

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-93386>

EERA: Performance Fixation? Use, Functions and Constitutive Effects of Evaluation in Local School Governance

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Conference: ECER 2014, The Past, the Present and the Future of Educational Research

Network: 23. Policy Studies and Politics of Education

Format: Paper

Session Information

23 SES 02 A, Forms of Assessment in Global Settings

Paper Session

Time: 2014-09-02

15:15-16:45

Room: B331 Sala de Aulas

Chair: Anna Tsatsaroni

Contribution

Performance Fixation? Use, Functions and Constitutive Effects of Evaluation in Local School Governance

Evaluation has expanded radically in the public sector as part of the broad governance doctrine New Public Management (NPM) (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). Within this doctrine market mechanisms have been introduced to enhance transparency and accountability, and in school governance to support competition between schools, free school choice, enhance quality in education and effective schools (Lubienski 2009; Merki, 2011). Evaluation systems are indispensable to school governance characterized by results-based management and increased local autonomy (Elstad, 2009; Mintrop and Trujillo, 2007), and without measuring outputs and performance and checking students and teachers regularly today's school governance models will not work. Although evaluation is a cornerstone in local school governance it has not been studied much in this context.

The purpose of this paper is to explore use, functions and constitutive effects of evaluation in local school governance, and factors affecting evaluation use in local school governance.

The paper takes departure in governance and policy research, evaluation and knowledge exchange theory. While evaluation systems are central to school governance they need to be conceived and studied from a governance perspective with many actors at different levels involved (Bouckehart and Halligan, 2006; Ozga, 2009; Rose, 1999). The role of the municipality in a country's education system largely depends on the division of power between levels of government, and the mandate and discretion given to local governments and independent schools (Holmgren et al, 2012) which in turn embeds and steers evaluation (Hanberger, 2012).

The Swedish school system is described as one of the most decentralized and market-oriented systems in the world (Lundahl, et al 2013; Holmgren et al, 2012; Baggesen, 2007) and one supposedly allowing self-governance and extensive discretion to municipalities (Lidström, 2011). The discretion varies over time, depending on changes in national school governance and other factors such as being subjected to global and transnational education governance as a member of the EU and OECD (OECD, 2011). If, for example, PISA results impact on local school policy discourses and local school governance is an empirical question waiting to be answered.

Conceptual framework

The term evaluation system is used as an umbrella term for different systems for monitoring and evaluation and refers to 'the procedural, institutional and policy arrangements shaping the evaluation function and its relationship to its internal and external environment' (Liverani & Lundgren, 2007: 241).

An evaluation can be used by school actors in different ways and also have functions not directly related to actors' utilization of the evaluation, such as providing legitimacy for an organisation or governance model.

Constitutive effect refers to systemic effects of evaluations such as shaping what is considered collectively significant in a society and in the policy discourse (Dahler-Larsen, 2013), e.g. passing grades in high school or making informed free school-choice on a school market.

Local school governance refers to local actors (e.g. district school boards, independent local school boards and parents) influencing, steering and governing of schools.

While there is not much previous research to rely on, an explorative case study approach is used. We take as a presumption that how evaluation and evaluation systems are used and what functions and effects they have depends on many factors, including conditions in multi-level school governance and factors in the local context. Variations in school performance, socio-economic environment, local school policy, economic factors could explain differences in the way evaluation systems function in local school governance.

Contextual factors affecting evaluative knowledge use are explored and interpreted against knowledge exchange theory (Contandriopoulos et al., 2010) accounting for such as issue polarization and institutional arrangements.

Method

The study is part of an on-going Swedish research project; Consequences of evaluation for school praxis ? governance, accountability and organisational change, financed by the Swedish Research Council (2012-2015). The selection of municipalities is strategic. Four middle-sized municipalities with variations in political majority, school performance, and share of free schools are selected and three of these are analysed in this paper. The methods include analysis of policy documents, school web-sites and interviews regarding local school policy, evaluation policy and evaluation use. 15 local school decision-makers have been interviewed. The documents include district school board policy documents and minutes, evaluation plans and quality reports/ assessments, surveys etc. A critical policy analysis approach is used (Howarth and Griggs, 2012).

Expected Outcomes

Outcomes include descriptions of content of local evaluation systems, how evaluation systems are used and function in local school governance and if, how and why they function the way they appear. It also provides knowledge of how local-decision-makers conceive and respond to external evaluations including e.g. School inspection and PISA. Responses to external evaluations can depend on the content of critique, how valid an inspection is perceived, previous experience of being inspected, for example. The mentioned constitutive effects as well as measure and performance fixation can be expected in local school governance characterized by management by objectives. Differences in how the majority and opposition use evaluation are expected e.g. the majority can be expected to use (successful) benchmarks and ranking for justification and legitimization whereas the opposition may use the same accounts critically and pay attention to what has been overlooked, not measured, for example.

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