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Balancing managerial and professional demands: school principals as evaluation brokers

Agneta Hult^{†}, Ulf Lundström^{**} & Charlotta Edström^{*}*

Abstract

The evaluation trend in the global education field implies new professional challenges for school principals. The purpose of this article is to describe and analyse Swedish school principals' experiences of prevailing evaluations and the implications for the profession. Specifically, we examine: a) how principals respond to evaluations and their consequences in their schools; and b) the implications of the evaluations for the profession in light of professional responsibility and accountability. The interviewed principals are ascribed huge evaluation responsibilities and are in this respect key actors but to some extent are also 'victims' of external pressures. All schools are embedded in a web of evaluation systems. They share the view that evaluations that are useful for improving teaching, student achievement and everyday school life are those conducted close to practice, and involve teachers. Most of them are also aware of the risks for the reduction of the broad goals of schooling and for work overload. The principals express a desire to protect the fundamental values of professional responsibility but the total demands of the local evaluation web have involved a shift in their professional role towards professional accountability.

Keywords: school leader, assessment, governance, professionalism

Introduction

School principals have increasingly become key actors in school systems. Their responsibilities have been extended, and they face growing complexity and demands for "effective school leadership" (OECD 2014; Pont, Nusche and Moorman 2008). Not least, they have become more accountable for performance outcomes. This places principals in the crossfire of expectations in the form of both external demands, for example, from government and school providers to improve school performance, and internal demands from teachers for good working conditions and appropriate support – a situation described in various ways in the research literature. Møller (2009, 42) states that Scandinavian school principals "seem to struggle with the tensions of managerial demands from the outside and their own standards for acting as professional educational leaders". However, Jarl, Fredriksson and Persson (2012) claim that educational management in Sweden has been strengthened by state policies

†Correspondence to: Agneta Hult, Department of Education, Umeå University, SE-90187 Umeå, Sweden. Email: agneta.hult@umu.se

*Umeå University, SE-90187 Umeå, Sweden. Email: agneta.hult@umu.se; charlotta.edstrom@umu.se.

**Department of Applied Educational Science, Umeå University, SE-90187 Umeå, Sweden. Email: ulf.p.lundstrom@umu.se

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underpinned by New Public Management (NPM) and inspired by a managerial turn, leading to the institutional separation between teachers and school principals. Other researchers describe this shift as resulting from the promotion of a culture of managerialism (Codd 2005; Green 2011).

Responsibility for evaluation is central to performance-based management, often expressed in Swedish official statements in discourses of school development and/or systematic quality work (Lundström 2015). In state documents, quality is largely defined as goal achievement and school development (NAE 2012). The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (SSI) claims that there are deficiencies in most principals' systematic quality work that signal a lack of pedagogical leadership. They note that "the deficiencies primarily concern knowledge assessment, analysis and priorities focused on improving student knowledge achievement" (Skolinspektionen 2012, 8, authors' translation). In addition, the SSI states that both municipal and independent school providers should emphasise national goals and improve the follow-up and analysis of results, using them for school development (Skolinspektionen 2015, 14ff.). This implies that the SSI is imposing intensified control and surveillance on principals and schools via school providers. The above situation raises critical questions about the changing and uncertain role of principals as key actors in the national and local evaluation systems.

The purpose of this article is to describe and analyse school principals' experiences of the prevailing evaluations and of the implications of these evaluations for the profession. Specifically, we examine: a) how principals respond to evaluations and their consequences in their schools; and b) the implications of these evaluations for the profession in light of principals' professional responsibility and accountability.

Many scholars have problematised how the external evaluation web might alter professions and professionalism (e.g. Day 2002; Evetts 2009, 2011; Green 2011; Møller 2009; Solbrekke and Englund 2011). Although these issues have been problematised, Mausethagen (2013, 23) found in a literature review that earlier studies were either theoretical or policy analyses, and concluded there is a need for more empirical research into, among others, school managements' responses in the current policy climate. Contributing to our knowledge and understanding of the role of principals in evaluation systems from their own perspective, this article is largely an empirical study of the work and profession of school principals. The article also adds to the discussion on professionalism in the era of NPM (Evetts 2009; Green 2011; Møller 2009; Solbrekke and Englund 2011) and to a better informed policy discussion of how the evaluation trend is affecting principals.

The current managerial demands, according to Sugrue (2015), stand in sharp contrast to professionally responsible leadership. He claims that professionally responsible leadership, unlike compliant accountability-based leadership, involves a certain degree of autonomy and agency as well as a willingness "to act in the interest of the profession and the common good" (2015, 204). This is in line with one of the

classical characteristics of professions, which implies a kind of “contract between professionals and the wider society – one in which professional groups provide expertise and standards and in return are trusted to do their job” (Gewirtz et al. 2009, 4). Sugrue (2015, 204) also points out that the language deployed and terms used indicate great differences: professional responsibility is indicated by terms such as “moral rational, negotiated standards framed by professionals”, while accountability-based leadership makes “use of terms such as standards, control, compliance, and external accountability”. Likewise, in her book *Education, Professionalism and the Quest for Accountability: Hitting the Target but Missing the Point*, Green (2011, 61) argues that professional responsibility is undermined when professionals are forced to “incorporate managerial *ends* and *values* into the repertoires of their practices”.

In Sweden, school principals have left behind their traditional role as “first among equals”, instead becoming civil servants (Ekholm et al. 2000) and, in the last two decades, private-sector-style managers, as a result of decentralisation, management by objectives and results, and marketisation (Jarl et al. 2012). This shift could be said to have stemmed from the adoption of NPM, which happened in the early 1990s in Sweden, about a decade later than in the UK and the USA (Moos, Krejsler and Kofod 2008). According to a Swedish state investigation, these reforms meant that principals’ “power and responsibility increased significantly and, consequently, greater demands were made on their leadership” (SOU 2014:5, 207, authors’ translation). The principals’ position was simultaneously undermined by external demands and work overload. Principals are also pressured by the far-reaching marketisation of the Swedish school system, as school funding is directly linked to success in attracting and retaining students. Principals have become actors on a competitive school market, whether they like it or not (Holm and Lundström 2011; Pont et al. 2008).

The National Agency of Education (NAE) (2015) reports that the turnover of Swedish principals is high, with 51 per cent of principals having worked for 3 years or less at their present schools. Regarding time use, 51 per cent of principals’ time is used for administrative tasks, while only 18.5 per cent of their time is used for pedagogical tasks. The NAE emphasises the importance of reprioritising this time distribution.

The state has noted that the NPM education reforms did not live up to expectations, so re-centralisation, underpinned by a quality discourse, was initiated. Decentralised management by objectives was gradually replaced by “centralised performance-based management” (SOU 2014:5, 30). The 2008 establishment of the Schools Inspectorate (SSI) and increased pressure from it was part of this development. The principals’ extended responsibility and potential governance role is revealed by a quantitative comparison of the old Education Act (SFS 1985:1100) with the new one (SFS 2010:800); from being mentioned in fewer than 20 paragraphs, “principal” is now mentioned in about 100 articles (Nihlfors and Johansson 2013).

Sweden is not alone in extending its control over schools and principals. In a comparative study of the Nordic countries, Moos (2013, 215ff.) demonstrates that the Nordic states, formerly espousing a coherent ideologically based belief in education emphasising democratic participation and leader–teacher relations based on trust and professional expertise, now “have all taken steps to reinforce hierarchical relations” (2013, 219) and possess national educational standards that tend to be less ideologically coherent than before. How local actors perform their tasks is “evaluated through a variety of procedures, including screening, contract design, reporting requirements and monitoring” (2013, 219). In the last few decades, education policy and standards have also become more or less ‘Europeanised’ and globalised (Codd 2005; Lawn and Grek 2012; Lingard 2013). The evaluation trend is global but the Swedish case may be of interest due to the far-reaching realisation of New Public Management in a school system with long Social Democratic traditions (Jarl *et al.* 2012).

In a review of research into school leadership in Sweden over the 2000–2010 period, the Swedish Research Council (2011, 96) notes that it cannot identify any specific trends, but that “the research focus has shifted to external governance and control of schools rather than internal school cultures”. Our article intends to illuminate school governance and the principal’s role in relation to the current evaluation trend. Principals’ experience of being governed and of governing teachers will be highlighted as well as their work as evaluation brokers in terms of pedagogical and/or managerial leadership.

Analytical framework

Deregulation and new forms of governance have ostensibly moved decision making from central government to local levels – that is, school providers and school principals. However, this deregulation has been accompanied by the demand that professionals be transparent, accountable and adhere to goals and standards defined by politicians and policymakers. To be accountable, both school principals and teachers must now perform *external* evaluations initiated from the international, national and school provider levels, in addition to *internal evaluations* initiated by the principals or teachers themselves. We use the concept of evaluation in accordance with Dahler-Larsen (2012a, 12) who views evaluation as an “umbrella category covering a range of activities with varying forms”, for example, assessments, inspections, statistics, quality assurance, and benchmarking.

Solbrekke and Englund (2011) in their article “Bringing professional responsibility back in” elaborate on two types of logics, one based on professional responsibility and the other on accountability, in considering the implications for professional work. Accountability implies the duty to account for one’s actions to someone else, while responsibility entails a moral commitment assumed by oneself although for the good of another (e.g. a student). Responsibility is related to trust, while accountability is

oriented towards control: “good services’ are guaranteed by means of measuring and ‘accounting’ instruments, rather than relying on professional discretion” (2011, 855). Further, they argue that professional responsibility involves professional deliberation and judgement, which sometimes means negotiating standards and *not* acting in accordance with predefined standards. Solbrekke and Englund (2011) summarise the two logics in the following Table 1:

Table 1. The types of logic and implications of professional responsibility and accountability

<i>Professional responsibility</i>	<i>Professional accountability</i>
based on professional mandate	defined by current governance
situated judgement	standardised by contract
trust	control
moral rational	economic/legal rational
internal evaluation	external auditing
negotiated standards	predetermined indicators
implicit language	transparent language
framed by professions	framed by political goals
relative autonomy and personally inescapable	compliance with employers’/politicians’
proactive	decision reactive

Solbrekke and Englund’s (2011) two logics relate to the two ideal types of professionalism – (old) occupational and (new) organisational professionalism – that Evetts (2009, 2011) argues have developed in knowledge-based, service-sector work.

Although Solbrekke and Englund (2011) presuppose that accountability in the current governance of professionals has gradually come to override professional responsibility, they still maintain “there is a need for public accountability as a means for ensuring good-quality public services” (2011, 850). However, it is also important to be aware of the risks and consequences. They further state that, while the two logics can be conceived as antithetical, they should not be understood as static and final definitions, but “rather as evolved and evolving, more fluid and fluctuating in different systems of logic that are reconfigured over time” (2011, 855).

This article investigates school principals’ experiences of evaluation in the field of tension discussed by the above scholars. How the evaluation trend is perceived and acted upon by the principals is in line with an enactment perspective (Ball, Maguire and Braun 2012), assumed to be more than simply an implementation of initiatives imposed by policymakers at various levels (e.g. municipal, national and international) (also see Ozga 2000). School principals are considered active in negotiating the meanings of evaluations as well as the extent to which these are legitimate parts of their responsibility. Their perceptions are linked to their professional actions and their narratives reveal not “the truth”, but “‘truths’ about the ways an individual interprets

the events and choices in their lives” (Watson 2006, 511). Because of their crucial role in realising education policies, we think principals’ narratives are important for understanding how evaluation policies are “done by and done to” (Ball et al. 2012, 3) them. Still, principals are key professional actors in a quasi-market where evaluations, in line with the current evaluation discourse, are considered central for improving results and this might influence their experienced consequences of evaluations.

In the conclusions, we also draw on Dahler-Larsen’s (2012b) concept of “constitutive effects” in discussing possible consequences and redefinitions of the meaning of education and educational practices arising from the emergence of the evaluation society. Constitutive effects refer to “the way tests, measurements, and indicators help define the social realities of which they are a part” (Dahler-Larsen 2012b, 173). The concept stresses the influence evaluations and tests can have on what education and school mean today and on what is desirable.

Method

The present study is part of a broad research project focusing on the consequences of evaluation for school practice¹. The present paper’s findings are based on interviews with eight school principals working in compulsory education (for children aged 13–15 years) in municipal schools in four municipalities (for the selection of municipalities, see article 1). The principals of eight case schools, two from each of the four municipalities, were selected (see Table 2). To protect the schools’ anonymity, they were renamed using plant names.

In 2013, individual interviews were carried out with the principals, generally at the schools with two interviewers present. In one interview, the school chief executive officer was also present. “Evaluation” was used as a generic term to cover a wide variety of activities ranging from less formal oral follow-ups to written evaluations, assessments and tests. The interview manual included open-ended

Table 2. The selected municipalities, schools and school providers

Municipality	School	Provider
East	Salvia	Municipal
East	Coriander	Independent
West	Nettle	Municipal
West	Parsley	Independent
North	Basil	Municipal
North	Carnation	Independent
South	Garlic	Municipal
South	Lavender	Municipal

questions concerning principals' experiences of and opinions about international, national, school provider, school and teacher evaluations. The interviews, which lasted 60–120 minutes, were recorded and fully transcribed.

In analysing the interview transcripts, the first step was to read through and process the principals' experiences of evaluations with no preconceived interpretive schema in mind. This first step generated several key themes that described different consequences of external and internal evaluations in school. In the second step, drawing on the above theoretical framework that emphasises the consequences of deregulation and of new forms of governance for principals' latitude to execute their professionally responsible leadership in school today, the key themes were analysed and interpreted. The analysis strove to identify, on one hand, expressions of the consequences of demands for accountability, for example, for the principals' and teachers' work situation. On the other hand, the analysis strove to identify aspects of the principals' professional responsibility. The key themes are presented as subheadings and, where relevant, are related to the two concepts of professional responsibility and professional accountability (Solbrekke and Englund 2011) or to other research results. This approach offers a way to communicate our interpretations of the empirical material. To illustrate the principals' reasoning, the results presented are supported by interview quotations. To ensure confidentiality, the schools have been renamed when presenting the findings and the principals' views are labelled using these school pseudonyms.

The article has the following structure. First, a typical school evaluation web is presented. Principals' ambivalence concerning external evaluations and their experiences of being monitored are then presented and illustrated. This is followed by a section providing some examples of the principals' views of what is important when evaluation is used to develop education and school practice. Further consequences of evaluation in school are also illustrated. Ending the results section of the article is a subsection presenting the principals' concerns about the negative consequences of the stream of external evaluations of today's schools. The article ends with a concluding discussion.

Findings

A typical local evaluation web

Significantly, all the schools studied here are embedded in a web of evaluation systems that affect the work of principals and play a crucial role in the principals' professional work. At least partly, these systems position the principals in a sphere of professional accountability, though space is left for professional responsibility (Solbrekke and Englund 2011). These systems could be described as forming a local evaluation web, which represents a meso-level variant of the macro, national evaluation web

(described in Lindgren, Hanberger and Lundström 2016). Together, they constitute the evaluation context of a school. Some of these systems comprise external evaluations, such as international knowledge comparisons and national statistics, while others are internal, such as teachers' and students' course evaluations. The school providers' evaluations are often intertwined with either national evaluation systems or internal evaluations.

In our study, there are minor variations between the municipalities in the details of each local evaluation web; however, as these webs are quite similar and the text space is limited, we present a typical example of a school's evaluation web. It is largely a

Table 3. School evaluation web from the principal's perspective

International and national levels
National tests
Questionnaires from the NAE
Schools Inspectorate visits
National statistics (e.g. SALSA and SIRIS)
International knowledge comparisons (e.g. PISA and TIMMS)
Municipal level
Customer satisfaction questionnaire (parents and students)
Staff questionnaire
Drug and alcohol use questionnaire
Overall quality work, focusing on four areas
Swedish Quality Index
Municipal school exchange visits
Network meetings, all municipal teachers divided by subject areas
Lesson plans
Web-based school administrative system
School level
Student questionnaire: safety and comfort
Student questionnaire: teachers and teaching
Grades: grade dialogues
Check: students at risk of unsatisfactory goal achievement
Formative assessments communicated to parents
Tests
Formative assessments of all tests
Individual student development plans
Remedial action programme
Lesson plans
Examination of how national tests and grades correspond
Teacher work team evaluations
Informal teacher evaluations

description of one of our cases, but minor adjustments are made so that it can represent the other cases as well. The example illustrates the number of evaluations at a school and how a local evaluation web can be constituted (Table 3).

School principal ambivalence: enactors and critics

Most of the interviewed principals express mixed feelings towards evaluation in school, reporting both advantages and disadvantages of evaluations as they consider their various consequences. Ambivalence thus characterises most of the interviewees' perceptions of the benefits and consequences of evaluations in schools today. For example, the principal of Basil School says, "I am quite content with the evaluations we use"; at the same time, she talks about the risks of "measurement hysteria" and tries to reduce the evaluation pressures on teachers. She also dislikes the municipality's evaluation web tool, but still "tries to hold the banner high". The Lavender School principal talks enthusiastically about the evaluations carried out at her school, but she also exclaims:

But, my God, there are humans here right in the middle of it all. The pressure is like a steamroller. There is so much that is expected to be done in no time at all and everything should be executed simultaneously – so many evaluations. Every time I participate in meetings I get new tasks ... but I already have umpteen tasks! I cannot keep up!

Although the Salvia School principal generally has a positive attitude to evaluations, emphasising the value of identifying what needs to be improved, he also complains about the stream of external questionnaires from all kinds of stakeholders: "There is great fatigue. The staff don't want questionnaires – they wonder 'What's the point? It doesn't give us anything, it doesn't lead to any change?'".

As principals are key actors in the school evaluation web, evaluation now seems to be part of their professional role, although they vary in the effort and enthusiasm they devote to it. They are enactors of evaluation policies, that is, they interpret and translate official policies in interaction with other actors and their local context, but they also strive to comply with national evaluation policies. This compliance with official policies can at least partly be explained by their formal responsibility to realise national and school provider policies. As it is a core task to realise national school goals and to ensure that teachers also do so, it is difficult to oppose these goals. The national curriculum states:

... the head teacher has overall responsibility for ensuring that school activities as a whole are focused on the national goals. The head teacher is also responsible for following up and evaluating school results in relation to the national goals and the knowledge requirements (NAE 2011, 20).

According to the Education Act (SFS 2010), school principals are also responsible for carrying out ongoing systematic quality work, where evaluation is the core element. The principals' expressed ambivalence illustrated the tension between the two logics, professional responsibility and accountability (Solbrekke and Englund 2011).

“That’s central control – it should be determined by the principal”

Given Sweden's declining performances in the PISA test (NAE 2013) and the transnational influence on educational policy (Lawn and Grek 2012), Swedish school principals encounter heavy pressure to improve school performance. The local municipal school boards and independent school company boards are responsible for running schools and, when the SSI performs its regular supervision, it also inspects the school boards' and municipal officers' governance of local schools. In other words, the SSI checks the school monitoring undertaken by municipalities and school company boards.

According to the interviewed school principals, there is intense pressure to perform multiple evaluations and report a range of statistics and information to municipal officers. They often perceive this reporting as ever-increasing surveillance and control that is not pedagogically motivated and consumes considerable time:

... the number of things to report is increasing and happens more often ... I think that's more a matter of control ... they [i.e., the local politicians] of course must have basic information for their decisions, I get that, but we should not be forced to devote all our time to this (Principal, Basil School).

I receive many demands for follow-ups that I'm supposed to respond to in an hour: 'How do you work with libraries? How do you work with the student council?' And answering such questions doesn't help me much (Principal, Lavender School).

The interviewed principals do not seem to be alone in these experiences. A recent state inquiry claims that “the greatest single problem for head teachers is lack of time” (SOU 2015:22, 186).

Several principals display obvious concern and irritation at the interference with their – and their teachers' – work and responsibility. They view this as a consequence of external actors “butting in” and micro-managing what should be principals' and teachers' work. This perceived increase in external control also signals a greater weight put on professional accountability with the risk of impoverishing the professional responsibility (Green 2011; Solbrekke and Englund 2011). Examples were recounted of municipal officers deciding how teachers should address special issues or should be surveyed. In one municipality that had started a maths project for all municipal

schools, the principal was very critical of the detailed way the teachers were instructed to work with maths in the classroom:

It's kind of *von oben* – this is what you must do. . . . My teachers could have figured that out for themselves, raising the maths performance in our municipality, if they only had been given that mandate (Principal, Basil School).

In other municipalities, the board decided how often teachers should follow up student performance or decided that all teachers, as part of the school board quality work, should be video-recorded when teaching. The latter was commented on by the Garlic School principal as follows:

That's central control² – it should be decided by the principal. So I think that they crossed the line for what a central administration should decide on. I even think it might be [legally] questionable: the law says that the principals are to decide how to lead and distribute the work, so the central organisation should not interfere there (Principal, Garlic School).

The principals' position necessitates the balancing of pressures from levels above the school, from teachers, and now also from parents (Moos 2009; Møller 2009). Pressures from above and below in a marketised education system are addressed, among other things, through evaluations conducted to inform parents, as some principals mention. The Basil School principal, for example, says that because of competition between schools "it has become important to present results to parents". She seems to regard this as problematic, saying that "pressures from parents have increased" and "we are questioned more". According to her, it is especially bothersome that some parents try to negotiate to raise their children's grades. Threats to change schools have become palpable, as an independent school has been established nearby. This trend is confirmed by a recent report by the Swedish Work Environment Authority (Arbetsmiljöverket 2015), which claims that an emerging risk area, especially for school leaders, is the large volume of correspondence from parents: it takes considerable time to handle this correspondence, which often expresses negative views and demands immediate answers, making it difficult for principals to proceed. In contrast, the principal of Parsley School has not met any parents who want to negotiate the grading of their children: here, "the teacher's word is law", and he thinks that this could be because the teachers are good at justifying the grading.

"My task is to deal with evaluation so it results in action!"

The principals state that their main concern when using evaluations is school development. For this purpose, the evaluations they appreciate the most, and promote the most eagerly, are those conducted at the schools in close connection

with the teachers' and students' everyday work – in contrast to externally imposed evaluations (the teachers involved in this study are of the same opinion, see Hult and Edström 2016). This is an example of policy enactment via principals, who interpret and translate the evaluation policies. The Garlic School principal, while hesitant concerning the value of external evaluations, works intensively with the evaluation systems developed at the school and promotes them enthusiastically. These evaluations focus on teaching, student achievement and the everyday life of the school. He emphasises continuous improvement as well as staff and school development:

My approach is that we should use these systems. What should I do to make things happen at this school where I work so that it really has an effect? So that something actually happens on the floor, based on the quality work. My task is to deal with it so it results in action!

The principals “make things happen” in various ways, mostly by stressing the teachers' own evaluations, as the Basil School principal emphasises: “So you use it [i.e. the evaluation] as an instrument to reflect your own teaching. That's the best way to improve teaching”.

The principals of some schools regularly let the teachers evaluate their own teaching using a very basic questionnaire. The Lavender School principal wants the teachers to be able to view their lessons from a distance, and she emphasises that “the goal of the follow-up and evaluations we carry out must be more focused on building shared competence and a common experience base”.

All the principals stress local “hands on” evaluations, as does the principal of Carnation School, a small independent school. Carnation School has developed its own evaluation systems on a small scale and is accountable neither to the municipality nor to a broad company policy or system:

We are close to the everyday work and can see with our own eyes, observe and evaluate how things work in practice. I think it is a much stronger tool than a questionnaire.

They give daily evaluations high priority while “trying to avoid destroying things by too much measuring”. The Carnation School is the only school that does not have a school provider to which it is accountable and that decides “over their heads”. The other principals say that they either must complement external evaluations with their own in various ways to obtain an overview of the school or break down the big questionnaire into workable parts. The Parsley School, another independent school, is part of a big school company that standardises annual evaluations of all its schools. The principal of Parsley School explains: “So I am part of large annual cycles, but I also make small cycles of my own concerning various areas at this school and I decide about them myself”. The principal of Coriander School, operated by another big school company, emphasises taking command of the evaluation, even though it has been

developed by the company: “I think it’s important that the principal not be ‘owned’ by the questionnaire, but that you feel that it is a tool that you use”. Our interviews indicated less discontent with the evaluation routines imposed by providers in independent schools than in municipal schools. This may be explained by the position of schools in a municipal organisation, implying a broad variety of obligations and actors.

The necessary overview of the school can be obtained in yet other ways. The Lavender School principal practises a kind of leadership that involves being present in the classrooms and holding follow-up dialogues with teachers in which they discuss goals and ask questions about how teachers determine what each student has learned. The Garlic School principal says that, in his work, the main point of evaluation is to get the ‘big picture’ of the school:

All teacher teams send me evaluations and I take a week to compile them. It is a good way to get an overview and that is fine. Then I can work on what my school needs.

In short, the principals emphasised their internal evaluations or the parts of the external ones that were applicable to the local school, thereby illustrating important parts of a professional responsibility, for example, situated judgement, framed by professionals and trust (Solbrekke and Englund 2011). The most important benefits of evaluation from the principals’ perspective concern developing teacher work in the classroom and gaining an overview of their school and how the students and teachers are doing.

Double mission: governing and protecting teachers

Related to the principals’ aim that evaluations should improve teaching, we found another theme concerning both guiding teachers to perform useful evaluations and reducing the burden of certain external evaluations – highlighting how principals are positioned in a tension between professional responsibility and accountability. It seems clear from the interviews that the principals’ experiences of the consequences of evaluations entail both governing teachers and protecting them from increased external evaluation pressure. When discussing the support of teachers to develop their teaching, all studied principals implicitly drew attention to the guidance of teachers through evaluations.

The extent to which principals govern through evaluations varies between schools. The relatively new principal of Basil School, for example, explains that at this school she has initiated more systematic teacher-conducted teaching evaluations over the last year, whereas Coriander School has had a clear evaluation profile over the years. Although most of the principals’ reasoning about governing teachers concerns support and assistance and focuses on strengthening teaching, stronger terms are also used. The Nettle School was criticised by the SSI for its insufficient pedagogical leadership and one response of the principal was to implement formative assessment, although this met with resistance from teachers. The principal described the problem: “This is

about rethinking and I almost had to use violence to implement it, to force the teachers to learn to use the knowledge indicators". The conflict in this school, however, only ended when the municipal board transferred the principal to other duties.

At the same time as the principals try to guide 'their' teachers to perform helpful evaluations, they also said it was part of their job to protect teachers from the pressure of external evaluations. In doing so, their intention is to reduce the impact on teachers' workload and stress. On one hand, the principals are very aware that many evaluations, irrespective of whether they target themselves or their teachers, simply must be carried out. On the other hand, they simultaneously express the intention to shoulder the main burden of compulsory evaluations themselves as well as to screen out some of the less compulsory ones. Below are two quotations in which principals describe their stance on external evaluations:

So I try to keep them [i.e. external evaluations] at bay as much as possible, because I think we have a rather advanced internal process. With evaluations and such . . . there is not really time to help everyone who wants help (Principal, Coriander School).

And they [i.e. evaluations] can be a huge stress. And in this I act as an umbrella. If I let everyone who wanted to do so, carry out evaluations in this school, then they [i.e. the teachers] would be doing nothing else (Principal, Parsley School).

In addition to the principals' attempts to protect their teachers from work overload, some of them also mention the pressure and stress they feel themselves. This can be exemplified by a quotation from the Lavender School principal, which also illustrates the crucial professional task of balancing demands from above and below:

There is a continuous stream of demands. I have deadlines all the time, which means that I have to set deadlines for the teachers. I have to collect information from them to report at the next school-leader meeting . . . And I feel there are deadlines all the time, so I feel like 'my God, give me some room to breathe!'

Some of the principals point out that the amount of external control drastically reduces the teachers' creativity and opportunities to meet their own standards:

Earlier [teacher work] was more directed by enthusiasm, teachers dared more. . . . the teachers are losing faith in themselves. All the time they have to perform and be accountable for something they are not comfortable with creates uncertainty (Principal, Lavender School).

Concerns about reduced teacher creativity due to a heavy workload have also been mentioned in other studies (e.g. Day 2002; Hultqvist 2011; Mausethagen 2013; also see Hult and Edström 2016).

In addition to shouldering most evaluation responsibility and clearing away certain evaluations, there are other examples of principals' response strategies

(e.g. Hanberger and Gisselberg 2008). In a municipality that will start video-recording teachers, the principal simply argues that he will not film all teachers while teaching, although it is a mandatory municipal policy: “On the contrary, I will let some [teachers] do it, some that I believe can cope with it”. In another instance, the same principal, instead of directly implementing new municipal lesson quality criteria, let the teachers develop their own criteria, thereby stressing the importance of negotiated standards as opposed to predetermined indicators (Solbrekke and Englund 2011):

There are municipal criteria for what this [i.e. lesson quality] should be. However, our starting point has been ‘we do not care’. We care, but we start in the other direction. . . . We need to set criteria for this, so then every work team has made various attempts and thought about setting criteria for good lessons, and they are roughly the same as the municipality’s. There is no major difference. But they have done it themselves. . . . Not to say ‘this is the way it is’, but somehow to process it ourselves. It is our belief that in the long run there will be better results (Principal, Garlic School).

“You are expected to be successful at the test instead of being successful in life”

From the principals’ perspective, the functions of several national evaluation systems, such as national statistics and national tests, have merged. Grades and test results are important statistical indicators that are expected to be linked. The principals’ perceptions of national tests concern how they execute both their professional responsibility and professional accountability. On one hand, they regard the test results as useful for calibrating national grade setting and for indicating problematic knowledge gaps to be addressed. On the other hand, most principals think that tests tend to steer teaching towards narrow goals that limit the curriculum, and that tests result in a work overload for teachers and the whole school organisation.

The results of the national tests are used as a basis for monitoring the reliability of teachers’ grading relative to national standards. The Parsley School principal checks the differences between the national test results and the final grades. He also emphasises the importance of using test results to direct teaching towards areas where students have difficulties: “We must talk about this . . . the results that are unsatisfactory, what do we do about them? Let us do these interventions now!”. A similar view is expressed by the Salvia School principal:

The national tests are really important. We note deviations in the tests – in what way, and why? Which students do not achieve the goals? Why do they not achieve the goals and what can we do to see to it that they do achieve them? Which resources can we allocate?

The Nettle School principal emphasises the negative consequences of tests but also confirms their value in controlling the grading level: “The only and most important use of the national tests is to compare our grading with the results of the national tests”. Tests are also regarded as problematic, however, as they steer

teachers towards teaching to the test (Popham 2001), which happens when teachers “do not follow the curriculum, but use the national tests as indicators” (Principal, Nettle School). The Lavender School principal says that the tests exert an influence: “You are expected to be successful at the test instead of being successful in life from a broad perspective. It becomes a bit limiting”. The Coriander School principal also cites the risks associated with the current eagerness to measure performance: “Of course, schools have a tendency to move towards measuring things that are easy to measure”. The principals’ concern here seems to be that evaluations and tests may influence the direction of teaching and the understanding of the actual meaning of teaching.

Increased workload is another consequence because testing takes time and energy away from the work of teachers, principals and students:

The national tests consume lots of time and effort, so I almost feel that I am about to vomit. It is a giant apparatus, administratively . . . There are no limits to the stream of national tests. This week, we have three and the next week we have three, and so on. It demands lots of resources all the time (Principal, Nettle School).

National statistics, such as the SIRIS and SALSA data, play a role in the municipal evaluation work; for example, the Nettle School principal uses these statistics in reporting results to the municipality. However, they are not generally a primary concern, instead they are used as background information, for example, for benchmarking or for analysing gender differences. SALSA takes account of socio-cultural factors, such as parents’ educational level, share of students of non-Swedish ethnicity, and gender distribution. SALSA data are valuable at Garlic School as they permit a view of the school’s results that considers the large proportion of students of non-Swedish ethnicity: “So that [i.e. SALSA] is good to have in areas like this. Then we don’t feel as bad as when we otherwise compare our average grades with others’, as we really are not highly ranked”. Others warn of excessive emphasis on certain indicators spurred by the mass media: “They have a very strong impact, grade statistics and such things. The mass media use them a lot, they publish ranking lists . . . It creates a trend in society” (Principal, Coriander School). This principal cites an example of another potential constitutive effect, i.e. the media’s highlighting of tests and ranking lists, which contributes to a gradual change in how schooling and education are conceived.

Concluding discussion

In this article we have drawn widely on a governance perspective, meaning that we understand evaluation policy initiatives as influenced and enacted (Ball *et al.* 2012) by various actors, including principals. We also assume that the principals’ narratives convey their ‘truths’ about how they perceive and respond to evaluation policy, and that their views are important for our understanding of how evaluation policy is enacted in practice. The interviewed principals are undoubtedly ascribed huge evaluation responsibilities and may in this respect be considered key actors. Following

Solbrekke and Englund (2011), we agree that public accountability is to some degree justifiable as a means to control quality and maintain trust in public schools. The principals also emphasised the importance of gaining an overview of the state of the schools and of student performance. However, our findings also indicate that the principals are to some extent 'victims' of external pressures and evaluations. All schools are embedded in an evaluation web that hardly can be ignored and that affects the principals' work and professional role. In short, ambivalence largely characterised the interviewees' perceptions of the impact of the evaluation trend. This ambivalence can be understood as a tension between the two logics of professional responsibility and accountability (Solbrekke and Englund 2011) as well as Sugrue's (2015) and Green's (2011) argument that professional responsibility is threatened by the managerial mood of governing. One example of this is provided by the principals' descriptions of how they cope with external control and mistrust, and of how they try to fulfil their professional responsibility and reduce damage by protecting teacher discretion and avoid involving teachers in at least some of the evaluations.

The studied principals share similar views concerning what constitutes meaningful evaluations, namely, those conducted close to practice, that involve teachers, and are useful for improving teaching, student achievement and everyday school life. This shared understanding can be connected to shared professional values as part of the professional responsibility. The interviewees seem to embrace broader curriculum goals as an element of these professional values, emphasising other goals than the easily measurable ones promoted by the predetermined indicators that are part of the accountability logic. The principals are aware of and worry about the risk of reductionism, i.e. that evaluations will narrow curricula and steer education towards easily measurable goals, a worry that expresses their professional responsibility. Reductionism as an effect of increasing pressure to test and evaluate school achievement can also be treated as a constitutive effect (Dahler-Larsen 2012b) since it might contribute to a redefinition of school commitments and the meaning of education. Other unintended and undesired constitutive effects of the pressure and work overload associated with the evaluation society could be the loss of creativity and of enthusiasm for their professional work among teachers mentioned by one principal, as well as the high turnover of Swedish principals (NAE 2015).

The principals are conducting a huge number of evaluations, questionnaires and follow-ups, thereby delivering information and data to the school providers. Principals explicitly complain about the control and mistrust they experience when municipal officers interfere with their professional leadership. This means that principals, subordinated to hierarchical structures, are forced to carry out tasks they have not been involved in formulating and sometimes do not believe are useful. These externalised forms of regulation, target-setting and performance review are characteristics of the accountability logic. Although there is some space for discretion, principals' work is largely governed by external decisions as to what is

defined as quality, development and improvement. At the same time, as principals' position has formally been strengthened and they have a key role in promoting evaluation and systematic quality work, there is a paradoxical development in that their actual power to govern this process seems to have weakened due to external pressures. There is little leeway for these principals to negotiate or question the meanings and relevance of various external evaluations or the extent to which these are to be considered part of their responsibilities.

Growing local education department demand for results and information from principals is likely partly attributable to the SSI's criticism of school providers for their – according to the SSI – deficient school supervision (Skolinspektionen 2015, 14 pp.). The school providers have to show the SSI that they have their schools and principals under firm control by delivering all kinds of follow-ups and information. The principals, in turn, must reluctantly bother the teachers by asking them to take on at least some of these tasks. In this 'pecking order', or hierarchical structure, the authority flows from the government at the top to the school practitioners at the bottom, implying mistrust in the professionals working in schools. In light of these findings, it is notable that a recent state inquiry concludes that "many of the problems head teachers experience result from deficiencies in the school system's 'chain of command'" (SOU 2015:22, 17), the stated remedy being to strengthen the chain of command, including the principals' role as pedagogical leaders who promote "the national school assignment".

Solbrekke and Englund (2011) emphasise that the two categories exist for analytical purposes and should be understood as fluid and fluctuating. This is in accordance with our findings since the principals studied here do not embody pure forms of either professional responsibility or professional accountability. Although the principals' narratives largely evidenced increasing pressures for accountability, they still expressed a desire to negotiate such pressures to protect the fundamental values of professional responsibility. They want to protect teachers' (and their own) autonomy, motivation and creativity. They try to minimise work overload by prioritising evaluations regarded as meaningful for improvement and de-emphasising those that are less meaningful. Further, the principals safeguard the broad objectives of schooling by noting the risk of reductionism, in contrast to the pressures for measurable indicators, rankings and teaching to the test. To what extent they are succeeding in realising that intention is a question for further research.

Agneta Hult is Associate Professor at the Department of Education, Umeå University. Her research interests are mainly focused on the implications and consequences of evaluations and assessment in the field of education. Email: agneta.hult@umu.se

Ulf Lundström is Associate Professor at Umeå University, Department of Applied Educational Science. His main research interests lie within the areas of the teaching profession, education policy (e.g. focusing on marketisation and inclusion) and evaluation. Email: ulf.p.lundstrom@umu.se

Charlotta Edström holds a PhD in educational work. Her main research interests encompass the areas of evaluation policy and practice as well as gender equality issues. Email: charlotta.edstrom@umu.se

Notes

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- 2 “Central” in this quotation refers to the Education Department in the municipality in question.

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