

## Reflection on: “Democratic Values in Evaluation Systems – A Circle That Can Be Squared?” Maria Bergström

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I am a senior analyst at the Swedish Research Council and have more than 20 years' experience in the field of evaluation from positions at different Swedish government agencies. I have also been a politician at municipal and regional level for 5 years. In my reflection on the article "Democratic values in evaluation systems – a circle that can be squared?", I will focus on the model for systematic quality work that is described in the article, the similarities with other concepts for implementing evaluation systems, and the challenges of limiting the scope of the evaluations to be defined within the system.

The concept of evaluation has many definitions, which vary between different fields in the public sector. In the article, systematic quality work (SQW) is treated as an evaluation system. It is a narrow mode of evaluation practice with a predefined format for data collection, and predefined processes for analysis of results and for including stakeholders in certain parts of the evaluation process. The predominant use is for reflecting on the findings and providing recommendations for improvement. Systematic quality work is also stipulated by law and national guidelines in other areas of the welfare sector, for example, health care provision and social services.

To some extent, the idea of SQW stems from the NPM philosophy, where everything is measurable and efficiency is the overarching goal. There is a belief that the NPM philosophy can be transferred to all forms of public service, and this notion has been influenced by performance measurement models and by putting a price on deliverables. However, systematic quality work is also influenced by the total quality management (TQM) philosophy, which was originally developed for the car industry in Japan. The TQM philosophy puts more emphasis on the improvement process, with a no blame culture for finding flaws in the processes, and learning as a means to increase efficiency in the delivery of services. The idea is that all people in the organisation are involved in the process and that responsibility for the process is placed on the management in the organisation. The TQM philosophy does not include the user in this process other than in terms of customer feedback through surveys and focus groups.

Another influence on the SQW model that springs to mind when reflecting on user involvement is how the evidence movement in social work has led to an evidence-based practice. Evidence-based practice integrates best available evidence for the methods used, the work experience of the social worker, and the user's knowledge concerning the problem at hand. It is paramount for evidence-based practice that the user is involved in developing the care. This also increases the democratic process in the delivery of social services, which is ultimately about empowering the users of this service, and the social workers that learn and develop their skills from this process.

The SQW model presented in the paper has developed towards a more holistic process for improving school performances, including and integrating the users' (students) views in the process. This inclusive process of identifying

and developing measures for improving the practice, benefits not only the end users but also the teachers and the school management in planning for increased school performances, so that, ideally, the right measures are taken to address the right problem. However, contextual factors such as where the school is situated can also affect school performance, and these might not be addressed by the SQW.

All evaluation systems have generic features, one of which includes a defined scope of the subject for the evaluation. The scope of the SQW model described in the paper includes goal attainment in order to ameliorate problems, and school performance. Some evaluation systems are directed more towards monitoring performance, with set criteria for assessing the performance in relation to a set goal, which means that questions or problems that arise outside this scope are not addressed. Furthermore, it might be difficult to address some problems within an evaluation system, because that would require a totally different approach for the evaluation, which is not possible in a predefined process.

The evaluation system in place through the SQW model seems to be able to address both issues of goal attainment and school performance, and also has the capacity to support the process of integrating democratic values, i.e. the users, in the planning process.

My personal reflection on implementing this deliberative evaluation process is that, if it is not sensitively integrated in the school planning process, it can be an overwhelming burden on teachers that are already under pressure to deliver on indicators that are more directed at measuring school performance.

To deal with problems outside the scope of the SQW model, ad hoc models of evaluation would be able to address problems affecting goal attainment and school performance in a wider perspective. However, ad hoc evaluations can never replace the SQW model, since the systematic approach of the SQW model, and the inclusive and deliberative process it entails, makes it possible to better capture incremental change over time. Furthermore, ad hoc evaluations are predominantly made by external evaluators, who might not have the same insight into the school situation and the evaluation process will consequently not be “owned” by the stakeholders and hence not used in the same way.

The conclusion for this reflection is that it takes both an ongoing evaluation system, as long as it is sensitively implemented in the overall school management, and ad hoc evaluations to be able to assure that deliberative mechanisms are in place and that they are addressing the right problem.