

Reflection on: “Evaluation, Framing and Power” Anette Gröjer

Anette Gröjer
anette.grojer@gmail.com

I have been working in evaluation throughout my entire professional life, both theoretically and in practice. My PhD in Political Science had a specific focus on evaluation. I have worked in a range of evaluation roles including project manager, assessor and head of evaluation departments at authorities such as the Swedish National Agency for Education, the Swedish Higher Education Authority, the Swedish Research Council and the Swedish Agency for Development Evaluation. I have also been part of the European Commission's working groups for planning evaluations and been president and board member of the Swedish Evaluation Society. In this reflection, I mainly focus on the case of PISA, but I also provide an example from the area of higher education.

The article focuses on several interesting problems, both pertaining to evaluation as such and to PISA testing. By choosing PISA as an example, which is a programme for testing the skills and the knowledge of 15-year-old students every three years in OECD countries as well as some associates, the author shows, among other things, how decisions on which knowledge to measure and how to proceed at an intergovernmental level can cause problems for implementers at lower levels.

The presentation of framing as a whole and of PISA draws attention to fundamental issues of objectivity, validity and reliability. One reflection concerns how objective and knowledgeable the designers of PISA evaluations are. Constructing an evaluation that makes sense for countries with different school systems is not an easy task. It is also essential that the evaluation results are used to strengthen and develop the school. PISA only evaluates a few subjects, and can consequently not be related to the entire school system.

Furthermore, the difference between knowledge requested from the intergovernmental level may, in a worst-case scenario, lead to lack of agreement between this level and objectives at EU, country, municipality, headmaster, teacher and student levels. This in turn can give rise to participants in the survey perceiving a lack of validity. The question is consequently whether PISA evaluation really measures what is important to all these different actors, and if it is possible to develop such a system.

Another problem with such top-down control is that the knowledge required of the PISA subjects tends to lead to uniformity of knowledge in certain subjects among OECD countries. Whether this is desirable or not can be discussed. Does standardised knowledge lead to progress and development? Admittedly, a minimum level is a good thing, but it is also important that students acquire knowledge that helps to develop a country's specific and unique assets. Solely using evaluation as a means of control may not be a successful approach, and a poor result in a certain subject area can give rise to a bitter discussion regarding “lack of knowledge” and school crises. However, it must be remembered that PISA is not just a tool that measures regular knowledge, but has the aim of measuring knowledge and skills that are judged to be related to lifelong learning and everyday life.

The results of PISA always receive a lot of media coverage, and leaflets like the “school crisis” one are not uncommon. Due to this, and since the

participating countries are ranked according to the result, PISA evaluations become very influential and important to national governments that want to display a good result. There is therefore a risk of attempted irregularities in order to achieve a better result. An example of this is Sweden's actions during the latest PISA study. As Sweden received large numbers of refugees in 2015 and the subsequent years, many newly arrived refugees from countries with a low level of schooling were removed and replaced with indigenous students. When this was discovered, it led to a heated discussion and the Swedish Minister of Education was questioned. However, this approach was subsequently approved by the OECD.

Another example of the impact PISA has had on Swedish education is the delegation that the government intended to appoint after PISA in 2000. The Swedish result, which was slightly worse than the previous surveys, was highlighted in the mass media as alarming and the ensuing discussion concerned the reasons for this, one of which was considered to be teacher training. This led to improvements being instigated at universities (see Lundahl, 2020; National Agency for Higher Education, 2005) and shows the power of such an intergovernmental evaluation. International and intergovernmental evaluations carried out for comparative purposes can be used to improve schools and, and at best, increase economic growth and international competitiveness. However, designing evaluations so that they are objective, valid and reliable is a major challenge. Overall, this article caused me to reflect on a number of issues related to evaluation and the discussion of framing as a whole. Depending on what is to be evaluated and by whom, different elements of the framing may be more significant than others, but all variables in the framing concept are always applicable.

References

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