
Learning Lessons from the Swedish Model

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ABSTRACT This article is a contribution to the debate in England about the Coalition Government's policy to encourage interested parties to set up Swedish inspired Free Schools. The article argues, that in order to understand how Free Schools in Sweden operate, it is important to see them in the context of the Swedish school system. The article presents findings from research on performance, segregation and cost.

The UK Government is planning to introduce Swedish-style free schools in England and I wish in this article to give a brief overview of how free schools have fared in Sweden. This experience may be valuable in assessing the impact this may have for education reforms in England. In order to understand the free schools in Sweden, it is important to see them in the context of the Swedish education system of which they are an integral part.

Sweden has a long tradition of policies on educational equality that began as early as the late nineteenth century. The first decisive steps toward breaking down the class-biased parallel education system were taken by the Liberal Party, and in the post-war period powerful Social Democratic governments continued this process. In 1962 their efforts culminated in the introduction of a comprehensive education system that gave equal access to all children despite social class background. In 1970 all vocational and academic programmes at upper-secondary level were integrated and provided by one institution. This education system, which has been maintained until today, does not operate a transfer from elementary to lower secondary education as in England; it is an all-through, unselective school system with mixed ability classes covering the compulsory education years. Strong state governing and control were regarded as essential tools for combating social segregation and enhancing social equality and hence, schools were regulated and controlled through national curricula as well as by a variety of specially designed state subsidies and a vast array of regulations concerning resources, organization, staff and daily work. Private

schools, though growing over the last couple of decades, have historically been very few and have not served as an elitist bastion catering to a privileged class.[1]

It cannot be a surprise that Sweden did very well in the PISA studies (2000, 2007) in terms of both academic standards and educational equality. Swedish fifteen-year-olds performed significantly better than did the average on general literacy tests as well as on tests of mathematical and scientific literacy. In their final year of upper-secondary school, the Swedish students also performed quite well in international comparisons. The striking fact is that Sweden also differs from most other countries in differences in achievement across schools. Except for Iceland, Sweden has the lowest variation between schools in all of the OECD countries.[2]

The UK government appears not to have shown much interest in this remarkable result of achieving both high academic standards and a low level of educational inequality; rather they have looked at the periphery of the Swedish education system where the independent schools operate.

It is, perhaps, surprising, that Sweden in the 1990s made a clear break with previous traditions of centralization of education within the social democratic welfare society in order to pave the way for neo-liberal policies on education. During the deep recession that hit the country in the early 1990s, government politics focused on the reduction of an enormous state budget deficit rather than implementing proactive welfare and education policies. The non-social-democratic government from 1991 to 1994 introduced sweeping, market-oriented reforms in public education that delegated authority for public schools from central government to the local municipalities and introduced school choice and a voucher system, which led to the expansion of independent schools – schools that are publicly funded but privately run. Hopes that these neo-liberal initiatives would have positive outcomes have led to the conditions under which independent organizers in the field of education operate.[3]

The independent schools take various forms, from small parental cooperatives which may have been initiated by closure of a municipality school, to schools with a particular education approach or subject specialism and schools which are run by large for-profit education companies. Sweden is one of the few countries in the world that allows companies to make profits within the state education system. It is estimated that last year companies made a profit of about half a billion pounds and many of them made a profit between 8-50 per cent of the annual turnover. Not surprisingly this has earned firm criticism by politicians, teachers and parents for allowing private companies to make huge profits at public expense.[4]

In the 1990s the largest group of private schools were those with a special educational philosophy, but today the largest group is schools with a generalist approach. Creating a school with an alternative educational philosophy is no longer as popular as having a more general focus. The tendency is that the independent schools are becoming increasingly like state schools.[5]

Independent schools exist in about half of Swedish municipalities and tend to be concentrated in urban areas.

Continuing concern over the fiscal crisis may explain why the minority Social Democratic government did not dismantle any of the center-right's reforms when they regained power in 1994.[6] However, the Social Democrats saw the independent schools as a part of the school system and egalitarian values still featured prominently in Swedish education policy. During 1998 to 2002, the Social Democrats enacted a number of policies in order to reduce the negative social effects which had become evident in the wake of the neo-liberal reforms. The independent schools therefore remained under firm central and local government control and through instruments of equal financial resources, non-selective admission policies, absence of school fees, a national curriculum, and a central inspection authority, they sought to establish equivalence between municipal schools and independent schools.[7]

The Outcome

The outcome of neo-liberal school policy in Sweden in terms of student achievement, segregation and cost has not yet been subject to much research, but a few studies have been conducted that shed some light on the issue. As in other countries, the effect of private school attendance and school competition on student achievement is also a contentious subject. The international research community has not reached a consensus as to the effects of this, which is largely due to national differences in school systems. The particular organization of a country's school system, for example the extent of residential mobility, discrimination in the housing market, and the extent of non-selective education – are likely to determine the extent of any differences in outcomes produced by public and independent schools. In the case of Sweden, the issue must therefore be evaluated in the context of the long-standing egalitarian goals of education.

The most significant analysis of whether the existence of independent schools in Sweden has increased attainment are studies by Björklund et al from 2005 and Böhlmark & Lindahl from 2007 and 2008. In the first study, the researchers analyse the relationship between growth in independent school share in a municipality and changes in test scores over a short period of time. They are not able to identify a consistently positive impact of independent schools' share on educational attainment. They find a small positive impact on Swedish and English attainment, but, on the contrary, a negative impact in mathematics. The gains that were estimated for native-born students whose parents are relatively highly educated are fairly small. They conclude that there is no evidence suggesting that students are harmed by competition from independent schools, as public schools tend to improve their quality because of it, but competition from independent schools is no panacea either.[8]

The latter study is more comprehensive in that it estimates the impact of an increase in private enrolment on the short, medium and long-term educational outcomes of all pupils. Analysing variation in school outcomes in

different municipalities over time, and controlling for other pre-reform and concurrent municipality trends, they find that an increase in the private school share of municipality school students moderately improves short-term educational outcomes in grade 9 (15-16 years). However, they do not find any impact on medium or long term educational outcomes, such as upper secondary level, university attainment or years of schooling. Therefore, the short term effect is too small to yield any long-term positive effects for young people. In other words, the advantage that children schooled in areas with free schools have by the age of 16 is not translated into greater achievements later in life as they score no better in the final exams in upper secondary education at the age of 18/19. They are also no more likely to participate in higher education than those who were schooled in areas without independent schools. The children from highly educated families gain mostly from education in independent schools, but the impact on families and immigrants who had received a low level of education is close to zero.[9]

Regarding the question of segregation, several studies reveal that school choice in the Swedish school system has augmented social and ethnic segregation, particularly in relation to schools in deprived areas.[10] It has been suggested by Demeuse et al that this has been exacerbated by the extreme tendency to individualize teaching in schools by transferring the responsibility for learning from teachers to pupils.[11] This so-called strategy of equity of learning based on child driven curriculum, free choice, and educational flexibility is likely to increase the differences in pupils' academic achievements between different groups instead of reducing them. If the neo-liberal reforms increased inequality of achievement as well as social segregation in Sweden, a country with a universal welfare state and a relatively high level of social equality, then other countries could risk an even greater increase in inequality from implementing similar kind of independent schools.

In respect to cost, a key argument for introducing school choice is that competition between schools should produce the same amount of learning at lower cost. A few studies deliver a blow to this argument when they concluded that the effect of choice in education show that independent schools have given rise to additional costs for the municipalities. The Swedish National Agency for Education state in a report from 2006, that in municipalities with a high proportion of independent schools have had financial effects in the form of overcapacity and significant increases in costs. They conclude that increased competition in education does not automatically lead to lower costs and that a shifting pupil base makes planning more difficult which increases the municipalities costs in the short and long term.[12]

Now, 17 years after the neo-liberal reforms were first enacted, it appears that they have not managed to bring about decisive changes, neither positive nor negative, into the Swedish education system. Despite almost 1000 new independent schools and 150,000 students attending them, researchers tend to be in agreement when they claim that the outcome in terms of achievement

induced only slightly higher pupil attainment, but also higher costs and greater segregation.

Conclusions

- Policy-makers and the press have made much of the parallels between the 'free-school' type reforms here and the Swedish experiment. In fact they are far from identical and operate in a different context.
- The Swedish experiment (using for-profit private providers) has proved expensive and has not led to significant learning gains overall.
- At the same time the Swedish reforms, albeit on a small scale, appear to have increased inequality, even in the context of this very egalitarian system.
- In the context of its more divided system, similar reforms in England may have more damaging effects on inequality and school segregation.

On the basis of the Swedish experience, the following questions need therefore to be addressed:

- Are parents really interested in running schools? Sweden has a tradition of this, but England does not, so why would we expect the result in England to be lots of locally run schools when this is not even the typical outcome in Sweden. It seems more likely that private education providers will run the schools on a non-for-profit basis, but Sweden is not a model for this since their experiment has involved for-profit schools.
- Should Swedish companies be allowed to run schools in England when they are not able to produce outstanding results?
- Is more choice desirable, if free schools do not reconcile high academic standards and social integration?
- And finally, how can the existing comprehensive schools compete on equal terms with the free schools if they are not subject to the same regulation and receive less state funding? Is this fair?

Notes

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- [4] Holm, A-S. & Arreman, I. E. (forthcoming) Upper-secondary Education as a Market: the expansion of independent schools in Sweden, *Journal of Educational Policy*.

- [5] Skolverket (2007) *Friskolor I siffror* [Free Schools in figures]. Stockholm: Fritzes.
- [6] The Social Democratic Party did not have a majority in government and had to rely on support from the centre-right party that had introduced several of the neo-liberal reforms a few years earlier.
- [7] *Schools Like Any Other? Independent Schools as Part of the System 1991-2004*. Skolverket: Swedish National Agency for Education.
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