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# 'That's not what I am': teacher reflections on purpose, practice and professionalism in the Swedish free school system

ALISON MILNER

ABSTRACT In this article, four teachers reflect on what it means to work in a for-profit free school in Sweden. These narratives corroborate concerns about educational inequity and academic standards within the free school system. Equally, they reveal how teachers struggle to negotiate a professional identity within a competitive school market where social ideals and institutional practices often conflict.

## Introduction

Free schools (*friskolor* or *fristående skolor*) have played a significant role in the Swedish education system for over twenty years. Since the initial free school reforms of 1992, these publicly funded, privately managed institutions have experienced impressive growth; in the 2013/14 academic year there were 817 upper-secondary and 463 primary and lower-secondary free schools in Sweden, of which 69% were for-profit enterprises (Skolverket, 2014a, b). Nevertheless, despite claims that parental choice in a competitive market of public and private providers would improve educational standards for all (Wiborg, 2010), concerns have been raised over discriminatory admissions practices (Uppdrag Granskning, 2013) and the quality of student learning experience in free schools (Vlachos, 2011). More critically, following the collapse of JB Education, one of Sweden's largest free school businesses, and allegations of financial mismanagement at Praktiska gymnasiet, a vocational education company, private companies have been accused of putting profit before pedagogy (Ekman, 2014).

Approximately 15% of Swedish educational workers are employed in free schools (Skolverket, 2014c, d), yet, their voices are notably absent from these public education debates. For a country which places so great an emphasis on the promotion of democratic values through education, I find this quite extraordinary. Moreover, having worked in a number of Swedish free schools, both for-profit and non-profit, I know that the majority of my colleagues had a good deal to say not only about free schools, but also about broader issues within the Swedish education system. Perhaps contrary to perception, those employed in free schools do not embrace the market ideology wholeheartedly and, whilst not entirely dismissive of their employers, many teachers are still able to view their own individual context and the wider free school system with a critical eye.

Based on a series of interviews conducted in the summer of 2014, this article gives four teachers (three Swedish and one international) the space to share their individual stories of working within the Swedish free school system. The Swedish teachers all have teacher certification (*lärarlegitimation*) and between 5 and 36 years' teaching experience. They have worked in both municipal and free schools; however, their most recent teaching experience is in a for-profit free school and it is to this context they refer predominantly. The international teacher is qualified in her country of origin, but not in Sweden, and has only worked in a Swedish for-profit free school. Although each teacher and their school have been given a pseudonym, I have attempted to keep their identities intact by presenting their narratives as fully as possible. Each teacher's story is unique, but together they present persuasive commentary on the educational culture of for-profit free schools. Further, they reveal the challenges of trying to negotiate a professional identity within a privatised system where corporate values can undermine those of public service.

## Beatrice's Story

When I speak to Beatrice, it is the start of the Swedish school vacation and she has just completed her thirty-sixth year as a teacher. In her long and varied career, she has taught across the primary, secondary and adult education phases and worked in municipal and free schools, in both for-profit and non-profit companies.

> You know, I've been in the school system for so long, so I remember very well when the Swedish school became municipal schools. Because it was state schools before 89. In the fall, I think, we, the teachers, went on strike because we didn't want to leave the State. So, I was there in the very beginning of the new municipal leadership. And it was like a fight that we the teachers, together with our principal, we fought for not becoming municipal employees. But we lost. And that was a loss that was very deeply felt.

Though Beatrice was not enthralled by the initial process of decentralisation or the prospect of becoming a municipal employee, she did go on to work in a number of municipal schools. Later, the free school reforms afforded her the opportunity to set up her own Steiner Waldorf school with a group of like-minded parents. This school exists today, but Beatrice's early enthusiasm towards the free school system does not. Interestingly, she became more negative about free schools when the for-profit providers entered the market.

> I think, over the years, what has happened is that a lot of new companies have started schools with a short-term goal of, I think, profit. And, actually, well, they haven't been serious enough, like John Bauer, or, you know, companies that have gone bankrupt, because what has been most interesting is the profit. And they don't have any responsibility, more than one year at a time. Because there have been students who, suddenly, the school has, well, it has collapsed during summer. So when they are supposed to come back, their school isn't there any more.

Despite this sentiment towards for-profit companies, Beatrice is currently employed full-time as a Swedish as a foreign language teacher in a for-profit free school. Her feelings towards her employer are admittedly mixed. Although Beatrice appreciates the support she receives when dealing with more challenging students, she does not feel that her experience is valued as highly as the energy and ideas of her younger colleagues. Further, her role can be constrained by the school's student profile. For example, when she first approached the school about the possibility of employment, the principal told her that he would not require a Swedish as a foreign language teacher because the school would not be admitting 'that kind of student'. Evidently, the situation changed, but even now, Beatrice questions this school's admissions policy, which limits her opportunity to be the teacher she wants to be:

> There is a big risk for segregation. And I can see, for instance, if I compare to municipal schools, ... there are a lot more, a lot more students that need Swedish as a foreign language in those schools than our school because … I can't say exactly why. But, you know, you have to stand in line [Swedes refer to the school admissions process as a queue system] to be able to start at Almskola and, if you are a newcomer, you don't know that you need to stand in line. So, that makes it harder for some families to enter Almskola. So, I discussed if it's not possible to have some spots especially for students from other country backgrounds, some spots that we have in each year maybe. Well, I don't know, but as, as far as I know, because I've discussed this with the principal recently, and he said that, according to the company lawyer, it's not possible.

In this instance, Beatrice was able to assert her professional values, albeit unsuccessfully. Unfortunately, she does not always feel able to express her

opinions quite so openly. 'I need to be loyal to the company', she remarks. 'If I want it to be in another way, then I must find another place to work.' With retirement just a few years away, this is not really an option, so Beatrice focuses on the more positive aspects of her work: developing her pedagogical skills and working with students.

### Charlotte's Story

Charlotte works as a teacher of modern languages in a for-profit free school. During her 11-year career, she has taught in both municipal and free schools, but this current post represents her longest, yet paradoxically, most unstable period of employment. In just four years at Björkskola, Charlotte has had four different principals, three in the previous year alone, and seen many teachers come and go. Understandably, this high staff turnover has created an insecure work environment and, seeing how easily colleagues are replaced, affected staff morale. More worryingly, it has had a negative impact on the school's public image, placing increased pressure to perform on those who remain.

> There is a stressful part. Knowing that we have to keep that student, we have to get more students, we have to make publicity, good publicity for our school. We have to attract. Pupils are money.

In an unstable school market, made more precarious by a declining birth rate, every student counts and Charlotte has experienced first-hand the effect of a lower student intake. In the past year, student numbers in modern languages have fallen. Consequently, teaching groups of different academic levels have had to be merged and Charlotte's contract has been reduced from 75% to 60%. The reduced schedule has clearly had financial implications for Charlotte and her family, but what concerns this teacher most is the impact it is has had on students' interest and progress in her subject. In this regard, she is quite adamant about where the blame lies.

> It feels like they are prioritising the economy. But, but, in the long run, we are, you are going to lose. Thinking about the money now, not prioritising the fact that they have the conditions they need to achieve their goals to learn, or to be learning.

Although Charlotte officially works part-time, she feels she is doing more hours than she should in order to be an effective classroom practitioner. Other colleagues, she notes, are working overtime to make teaching resources when 'they've been told there is no money for books' and to keep on top of marking National Tests. She blames many of the staff retention issues, including those of leadership, on the intense workload. She also feels there is a lack of support from head office. This was illustrated quite starkly when the teachers at Björkskola attempted to voice concerns about their hours during the company's annual general meeting.

> There was a woman from headquarters, and she started to talk about that ... We said we had far too many hours of teaching, compared to other schools. And then she kind of ignored it. She said that it's a question of structuring; we have to organise things better. I mean, but, it is a fact, seeing that we have more hours to teach than in other schools. So, we felt a little bit run over. And just after that, the owner gave an iPad to all the employees in the schools. It was like they put a bun in our mouths to shut up. I mean it was so strange, the situation was so strange. I mean, we could have had the opportunity to discuss the working conditions, to discuss what could be better, and how we could make it better, because we were all gathered together. But she was there commenting on the results of the survey, not asking, not taking advantage of discussing together. That was strange, I would say, really strange, and then, having the iPad, it was like being a child: 'Here you are, you have a gift and shut up'.

Despite feeling silenced by senior management, Charlotte remains committed to her teaching role. She has positive working relationships with her colleagues and feels that student achievement is a priority for everyone in the school. Even so, the need to convey a strong academic profile can put staff under increased pressure when it comes to grade setting. Charlotte claims that 'almost all the teachers are really professional' and only give students the grades they truly deserve; however, all staff feel compelled to do everything and anything possible to ensure that their students pass. This focus on academic goals not only increases the teachers' workload and stress levels, but limits Charlotte's capacity to be the teacher she wants to be, namely, one who supports students' social and emotional well-being.

> I think it's been frustrating sometimes to be having to teach and to transmit knowledge instead of taking care of the individual. ... Seeing, regarding, looking at what you're supposed to do as a teacher, it's enough teaching, it's enough transmitting knowledge, it's enough catching up with everything that all the different pupils are missing, having to do, concerning the knowledge that they should achieve so sometimes ... I can't say that I have the time I would like to have to work with that other part.

Charlotte believes that this would be the situation in any Swedish school context, public or private, for-profit and non-profit; it is endemic in the Swedish education system. That is not to say, however, that her professional values fit comfortably within a for-profit environment and she questions the Swedish experiment of allowing private companies to profit from public welfare.

> Of course, I'm working in a profit-run school, but that's not what I am. I'm actually against profit schools because I think that health care and schools shouldn't depend on how much money they earn. I

> think that all money should be invested in the pupils, in the school. Or in the health care, if it is about health care.

### Daniel's Story

Although he is fairly new to the teaching profession with only five years' classroom experience, Daniel has a very clear idea about what he thinks is the purpose of education.

> In my opinion, schools should, in general, strengthen people in a good sense, should make students feel enabled to go into society, and positive, happy to go into society, and also still maintain a thirst to learn.

Regrettably, Daniel has not always felt able to apply this educational philosophy within the free school system. His first teaching experience was in a for-profit free school where, he believes, the focus was on students' attainment of short-term targets rather than deeper, applied learning. Perhaps in response to this, the school encouraged an authoritarian teaching style, which frustrated Daniel for it contradicts his personal beliefs about effective teaching.

> We have these students in our care for three years. We're supposed to give them something valuable. Not herd them like sheep. ... The goal should be to help the student to learn, help the student to learn. Not learn everything in the curriculum. Help him to learn anything in the curriculum.

Daniel's free school aims to get as many students as possible into university. In the competitive Stockholm upper-secondary market, where the offer of a laptop is no longer such a unique selling point, schools need to make themselves stand out from the crowd. But whilst high academic aspirations for students are important for image promotion, it can foment a school culture in which teaching to the test is the norm. For Daniel, this 'shallow way of learning' has a negative effect on students' future academic performance and psychological well-being.

> It really forces the student to take on a mentality that is detrimental, destructive to learning, in my opinion. Because they only want to get good grades. They only care about the grades. They do not care if they learn or not. Which I dislike. Very, very much. I really like students who fight to understand, not students who fight to get good grades. It's not the same thing.

Despite his school's focus on students' academic outcomes, Daniel is somewhat cynical about the overall quality of learning experience in for-profit free schools.

> If you are even making 1% profit, that means that that 1% profit could have gone back into the school, and that's, in my view, bad.

> It's not guaranteeing quality, and it's not making the school system in Sweden better, it's actually making it worse. The argument that competition makes the system better can be used in the market in general but it can't be used when it comes to education or health care or care of our elders because what it actually creates is a blood loss. You're pulling blood out of the system. You're haemorrhaging the system.

As such a vehement critic of the free school system, it is hardly surprising that Daniel's long-term objective is to get a permanent contract in a municipal school, where he considers teachers to be better qualified and more experienced. Moreover, he would like 'to be at one specific school for a long time to be able to see generations of students pass'. This goal has particular meaning for Daniel, who has moved already 12 times in the past four years. In fact, when we speak, he has just been made redundant from a for-profit free school which has gone bankrupt. Although jaded by this experience, he is resigned to that fact that he will have to change schools regularly.

> I reasoned very early on that I'm a young teacher. I have now four or five years' experience but, the first years, you can't really expect to have such a contract because the market, being as it is, from those free schools, they take one-year contracts, one-year contracts, one-year contracts, until they are sure that 'this is a teacher'. It creates a less secure market for me, and it creates a more flexible situation for them.

Daniel believes that free schools are more willing to recruit inexperienced and unqualified teachers, but recognises that this is more about keeping teacher salary expenditure low than developing a new generation of teachers. Equally, short-term contracts enable schools to respond to fluctuations in pupil numbers on a year-by-year basis.

> Partially, they are more susceptible to competition, so they need to be quicker and more flexible, and they need to cut corners a bit more. They need to take risks in that sense, because they are more vulnerable economically.

Daniel is undoubtedly cynical towards these private providers. He is also scornful of their attempts to present themselves as charitable or philanthropic for 'it wasn't their core aim. It was almost a vanity exercise for them. It was part of their image. It wasn't something that they fought for'. Yet, despite his disdain towards the free school system, for financial and professional reasons, he continues to be dependent on free schools for future employment.

### Freja's Story

Freja is one of a large percentage of educational workers in Sweden who were trained overseas. Interestingly though, her current position in a for-profit free school is her first and only post-qualification experience. Freja appreciates the freedom of the Swedish curriculum, but thinks that the re-test culture, which enables students to take an assessment as many times as necessary in order to pass, is particularly detrimental to student progress. She is also surprised by her students' laid-back approach to deadlines.

> Like back home if you didn't hand an assignment in, you didn't get a grade for it. The teacher wouldn't look at it. We have to give them as many chances as they can to get their grade.

With an average class size of 32 students, this liberal attitude towards assessment creates additional work for Freja and limits the time she has to make 'the personal connection' with students. Yet, if her students do not pass, she fears she will be blamed for their failure, which makes her free school a highly stressful environment in which to teach.

> I think when I get most stressed, it's just the amount of students we have and what we're expected to do. They don't match up, a lot of the time.

Freja gets even more frustrated when she feels that her professional judgement is called into question and senses that some grade decisions have been overruled. Although she is unable to comment on specific administrative practices, she does have some concerns about grade inflation.

> Most students do pass at the end because ... we ... I don't really understand that process at the end of the year when some students are failing all year and then, suddenly, magically, they pass. Um ... yeah ... so I don't know why we're so stressed. ... It makes you wonder why you put all that work in. If that's like a student you've been working with, for so long. And that you've come a long way, but they're still not meeting the goals, but then they ended up passing anyways.

Despite this, Freja thinks she will probably stay on at her free school for a few years more. In the long term, however, she intends to move on for professional reasons.

> I don't know, like it doesn't seem like there is a lot of room for growth. Yeah. You kinda get the classes that you're given, and you have to make the most of it. And ... every year seems like it's, yeah, we focus on the same kinda 'desired results'. It's not very academic focused.

According to Freja, the staff profile has changed considerably during her period of employment at this free school. Within the space of three years, rapid school

expansion has doubled staff numbers and, perhaps somewhat predictably for a school which recruits internationally, many teachers have moved on. The departure of established members of staff can have a profound effect on the teaching community as close bonds are broken and although there are attempts to retain good teachers and ensure a degree of continuity, Freja thinks that some staff turnover is a strategic goal of the principal.

> I think that the teachers that we lost this year, like, we will miss them. Like they were a big part of our school. And I know the principal did try to convince them to stay. He did offer them things. But ... yeah ... I think he also likes that there's new teachers coming in. I think he likes that, I don't know, we get burnt out a little bit the longer we stay. And I think it's good, in his eyes, that we get new, fresh meat.

Even so, the arrival of new teachers can put existing staff under increased pressure to perform. These appointments are often young, single and recently qualified. They are also more willing and able to do excessive overtime and this does not go unnoticed by leadership. In Freja's opinion, these teachers receive an inordinate amount of praise for their 'work ethic' from senior management, which creates a culture of comparison and competition amongst staff. The sense that some teachers are valued more than others becomes particularly evident during performance evaluations when salaries are determined for the following year.

> If you are average, then you get what the municipality offered, like a 2% raise. That would be considered that you're an average teacher. If you're above average, maybe a 2.2 or 2.3%. If you are exceptional, then maybe you get 2.5 and up. It's not very transparent. We don't know the highest raise that you can get. ... But it makes a difference. Like he's putting a number value on you. And it does like, it really got some people upset.

It is the principal who makes the final decision on the numerical classification of teachers, although other senior leaders can contribute to this. Although harmful to staff morale, Freja considers this evaluation process central to her school's attempt to present an academic profile. If teachers are incentivised to perform better, students' results will improve, and the better the results, the more desirable the school is to prospective parents. But on another level, she feels, it is about control:

> Like if ... um ... the boss likes you, he will praise you and keep you going and if he doesn't like you and your teaching methods then ... um ... yeah ... he won't keep you around, basically.

It is unsurprising that the school ethos embodies Freja's work and, as this is her first teaching post, she is aware of the impact this particular institution has had on her teacher identity. Although she came to Sweden with a particular

teaching style, she felt it was a matter of necessity to adopt the school's preferred model of teaching.

> I think that's why my first year here was so stressful because I did change my teaching strategies and I felt like I had to change my teaching style, definitely, because a lot of the teachers that are looked highly upon, they are very authoritative in their style, which was not my style at all. But I kind of adapted and had to be more that way, more authoritative, which I don't think, in my first year, that's the way I did teach. My teaching style then was very like calm and I was respectful, well not that I'm not respectful now, but like, I took more time to listen to students and stuff, and now, I definitely see a change after my first year to be more strict.

## Why *All* Teachers' Voices Should Be Heard

In a recent report commissioned by Friskolornasriksförbund, Sweden's Free School Association, it was claimed that free school teachers were more satisfied and less stressed than their municipal colleagues (Friskolornasriksförbund, 2014). Based on a larger survey of working conditions by Svenskt kvalitätsindex and Sveriges Företagshälsor, the report is flawed on several levels. Firstly, in many areas, the responses of the free school and municipal school teachers were actually too similar to be declared 'statistically significant' and were thus excluded from the report. Furthermore, as the report is part of a much wider study into workplace health and well-being, the number of teacher respondents is actually extremely low; the survey only represents the views of 175 of Sweden's 55,000 free school teachers (Sveriges Företagshälsor och Svenskt Kvalitetsindex, 2014). What, then, do the other 99.7% of free school teachers think? And, importantly, in which areas do free school and municipal school teachers share a common ground?

Not only is the report limited by the number of teacher voices it represents, it fails to highlight school contextual differences. Moreover, it leaves many questions unanswered, suggesting a degree of complacency within the free school system. For instance, although Friskolornasriksförbund believes it is important to highlight that 49% of free school teachers, compared to 40% of municipal school teachers, are satisfied with their workplace, it does not consider it significant to question why 51% of free school teachers are not satisfied with their workplace. That 30% of free school teachers, compared to 23% of municipal school teachers, think their workload is reasonable is to be lauded, but that 70% of free school teachers disagree is completely ignored (Sveriges Företagshälsor och Svenskt Kvalitetsindex, 2014). Friskolornasriksförbund is somewhat self-congratulatory in tone; free schools should be applauded for doing 'better' than municipal schools in 'statistically significant' areas. It does not feel it necessary to question the failings within its own system, nor how divisive such surveys are to the teaching profession as a whole.

In this article, I have attempted to show that there are other voices outside the marketing brochures, surveys and government reports. These are just four free school teachers' voices, but they are by no means the only ones to be heard within the Swedish education system. What is important is that all voices, public and private, are given the opportunity to be heard at school and national level. These voices were not chosen to present an extreme view of working in a free school, but to provide an alternative discourse to that of the private companies, free school associations and government officials who play on an image of parental choice and academic excellence. When free school teachers are heard, we get a much clearer picture of the system in which they are employed and it is a picture that is not without its inherent problems.

At an individual level, the voices in this article would appear to be similar to many in the wider teaching profession. These four teachers' professional values are founded on a belief in a socially inclusive education system which puts the student–teacher relationship at its core. Unfortunately, large class sizes, student profile and a heavy workload can limit their ability to communicate these values in their daily work. Equally, in a performance-driven but unstable school market, the sense of belonging to a wider professional community is challenged by high staff turnover, short-term contracts and reduced working hours, and a culture of comparison and competition within and between schools threatens the development of a coherent social identity.

Perhaps the greatest risk to these teachers' professional identity, and one which has wider implications for the teaching profession, is the challenge to their moral professionalism. Certain teachers have raised concerns about inequitable admissions policies and grade inflation within their institutions; some have challenged these practices unsuccessfully, whereas others have chosen to remain silent and to adopt a stance of 'pragmatic accommodation' (Sockett, 1993, p. 44). The latter, though hardly surprising, is most disturbing. Making moral judgements and reflecting critically on schools are crucial to the improvement of education for all and teachers should be encouraged to do so openly, without fear of being branded disloyal or unprofessional. For if the disagreeing, questioning and dissenting voices are silenced, not able to challenge immoral or inequitable practices within their own institution, the integrity of the teaching profession and the wider education system are compromised irremediably.

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**ALISON MILNER** is a postgraduate research student in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham. She has previously taught in England and Sweden. *Correspondence*: ttxam87@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk