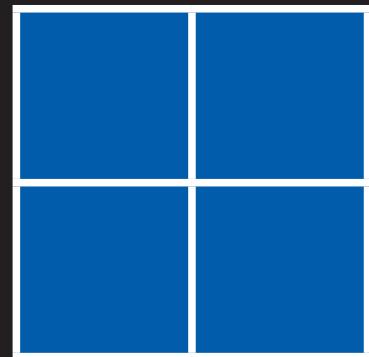


Swedish Free Schools: Do they work?

Susanne Wiborg

LLAKES Research Paper 18



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LLAKES is an ESRC-funded Research Centre - grant reference RES-594-28-0001.

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ISSN 2042-5929

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Susanne Wiborg

Abstract

This paper is a contribution to the debate in England about the new Coalition Government's plans to encourage interested parties to set up so-called Free Schools. In developing this policy, the new Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, has said he was influenced by the introduction of Charter Schools in the USA and Free Schools in Sweden. This paper argues that, in order to understand how free schools in Sweden operate, it is paramount to see them in the context of the Swedish school system of which they are an integral part. The paper presents findings from research on the performance of Swedish free schools and discusses the evolution of Swedish educational policy leading up to their establishment.

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Introduction

The Scandinavian observer of English education finds it rather intriguing when the Conservative Party shows an interest in the Swedish model of education. Sweden has a historical tradition of policies on educational equality that culminated in the 1960s in one of the most radical comprehensive school systems in Europe. It was not the Swedish school model as such that fascinated the Conservative Party, however, but the free schools which operate on the periphery of the school model. The free schools in Sweden, as well as in Denmark, where they have been established since 1855, have not received major public attention there, perhaps because they are non-selective and well integrated in the local school system. However, it is equally peculiar why Sweden embarked on free schools, especially from the early 1990s, as a way of improving the school system, given the fact that, according to the PISA studies¹, it achieved both high level of academic excellence and a high level of educational equality.

The purpose of this report is to analyse the development of the free schools in the context of the Swedish education system. The question which will be explored is to what extent the free schools have had an impact on the existing school system and, hence, the value this has added to Swedish society. It is obvious that the schools have created more choice in the system, but the question remains whether the schools also have added value beyond this; for example, do the students learn more? The analysis will be based on statistical data and reviews of empirical research, which will be contextualised by the comparative, historical study on Scandinavian education politics from 1870 to 2008 (Wiborg, 2009). In the English debate about the Swedish free schools, there has been a tendency to discuss them in isolation from the rest of the Swedish school system. In order to understand the free schools and their possible impact for English education, it is paramount to see them in the context of the Swedish school system of which they are an integral part.

The first part of the report is a brief account of the Swedish school system. It will be seen from a welfare state perspective since the provision of education and social welfare was a deeply intertwined process when post-war governments sought to achieve a more equal and fairer society. This is followed by a more detailed outline of the changes of politics from social democracy to neo-liberalism in the early 1990s, which allowed the expansion of the

¹ The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is administered by the OECD every three years and tests 15 year olds in schools in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy. It began in 2000. In 2009, 60 countries participated.

free schools. Now, some seventeen years after the introduction of the free schools, sufficient research has been conducted to give a relatively clear picture of the effects these have had on the school system in terms of pupil achievement, segregation and cost. In addition, the paper comments on teachers and parents. The conclusion discusses the possible implications of the Swedish style free schools for English education.

The Swedish welfare state and universal education

The re-organisation of the Swedish education system from 1945 to 1975 was part of the construction of the modern welfare state, as equal education opportunities were regarded as crucial in creating a fair and equal society. The Swedish welfare state was therefore not just designed to protect its citizens from income loss due to ill health, old age and other misfortunes, but to create a new society, that was firmly based on values of social equity and universal rights. Leading Social Democratic reformers saw the public sector as a way of pursuing egalitarianism by producing services itself and thereby ensuring that citizens were free from reliance on the market. The social sector consists of a universal social security system of flat-rate and income-related benefits, which are generous by international standards, and a wide range of tax-funded, publicly provided social services. Apart from health care, care services for children and elderly, the social service sector also provides universal and free education for all (Blomqvist 2004; Tilton 1991; Esping-Anderson 1985).

It is not only the high expenditure level that makes Sweden unique; it is also the way in which it has institutionalised the values of universalism and social egalitarianism. These values are most prominent in the social services sector in that it provides services at highly subsidized costs to all citizens of society, but also in the school system, which is organised on the principle of comprehensive education. This sector was until recently organised as a virtual state monopoly of carefully planned and standardised services and, therefore, offering hardly any choice for its citizens. Instead, all citizens, regardless of income, social status or cultural disposition, were referred to public service providers whether a health centre or a school in the area of residence. Even by comparison with Norway, and particularly Denmark, Sweden has often stood out in the discouragement of, and even hostility to, private providers, especially within the health sector and the school system. Thus most of the pre-existing private providers were phased out from this sector, largely through lack of funding (Blomqvist 2004; Esping-Andersen 1996; Wiborg 2009).

A reason why private providers were actively discouraged in order for the social services to assume an almost exclusively public character during the construction of the modern Swedish welfare system must be sought in the legacy of the Swedish state. In the historiography of the Swedish state, it is argued that the early development of a strong and professionalised state bureaucracy, which preceded democratic political institutions by several hundred years, provided early social modernizers with an effective instrument for reform. Early welfare services institutions such as hospitals, poorhouses and schools, established in the late nineteenth century, were generally operated by the state rather than private charities or churches (Blomqvist, 2004, Mörner 1989; Knudsen & Rothstein 1994). This is in sharp contrast to the English experience where it was believed that the role of the state should not supersede the initiatives of private providers, but only ‘fill up the gaps’ (Green 1990; Fuller et al 2010).

In regards to education, the Swedish state played a powerful role, especially during the nineteenth century, in establishing a national school system. After wresting control from the Lutheran Church, the Swedish state became increasingly involved in education by ensuring that all parishes in the country were provided with schools. By the end of nineteenth century the Swedish school system had assumed a universal character as it came to encompass the entire population of children. The state was thus able through the promulgation of education laws to enhance the quality of public schools to such an extent that they were able to compete with private schools. As a result of this, private schools declined in importance (Wiborg 2009 and 2007; Sjöstrand 1965). The existence of a competent state bureaucracy in Sweden made the public provision of welfare services and education a more obvious political choice than private providers, especially seen in the light of the absence of a strong church.

Early comprehensive education

The establishment of a national school system allowed all children, regardless of social class background, to obtain education; however, the school system, as elsewhere in Europe, mirrored profound social divisions. Sweden was still a largely agrarian country of vast income differences and widespread poverty. The children of the farmers went to the elementary schools, established mainly in the nineteenth century, and the children from the upper classes went to the secondary schools, which ran in parallel to the elementary schools. This parallel system of education met increasing opposition as it failed to prepare talented children from the less privileged backgrounds for useful occupations.

In sharp contrast to the UK, Sweden, as well as Denmark and Norway, had, by the end of the nineteenth century, already embarked on breaking down the parallel system of education. Common to all Scandinavia was that this was done by the influential Liberal parties and in a particular, but simple way: the lower part of the secondary school was abolished in order to place a middle school in between the elementary school and what was now the upper secondary school. This created a ladder system of education, or a moderate comprehensive school system, in which children no longer had to be ‘captured’ in a school defined by social class, but could instead progress through according to their academic ability and aptitudes (Wiborg 2009; 2007).

An explanation of this Scandinavian peculiarity must be seen in the particular nature of political liberalism in these countries. However, this explanation seems rather contradictory as political liberalism, in fact, did not make a powerful showing in Scandinavia and particularly not in Sweden, where liberalism was even weaker than in Norway and Denmark. But the power of political liberalism does not depend mainly on the strength of liberalism as an electoral force, but rather on the nature of its class base and on the character of its particular ideology, both of which differed significantly from liberalism outside Scandinavia. The Liberal parties were not defined by the urban middle class as they tended to be in Europe, but almost entirely by the farmers. In respect to education, the farmers argued against the elitist system of the bourgeoisie in order to create a common school for all which would enhance ‘social mixing’ in society. Their brand of social liberalism thus differed fundamentally from the laissez-faire liberalism of the Liberal Party in mid-Victorian Britain, and was ideologically more conducive to integrationist education reform than was the British variety (Green 1990). As soon as the Liberal parties gained governmental power around the turn of the twentieth century, they all introduced a ladder system of education. In Sweden, it was the notable Liberal education minister, Fridtjuv Berg, who created this system in 1905 (Wiborg, 2009; 2007).

Sweden, with Denmark and Norway, were the only countries in Europe that managed to bring about a relatively egalitarian system of education so early in the day, and the efforts continued in the inter-war period. Social Democratic Party political mobilization was highly successful in Sweden during the inter-war period even though the society was still predominantly agricultural well into the 1950s. The party assumed governing power in 1932 and continued to govern the country without interruption until 1976. An important reason for the success of the Social Democratic Party, according to Esping-Andersen (1985), was its

ability to weld alliances with the rural liberal parties, which allowed the party to gain political foothold. It was possible because the farmers, whose political mobilization had come early, were steeped in social-liberal values, and since the Social Democrats rejected radical socialism in favour of pursuing pragmatically political aims within the framework of democracy. In terms of education, the fundamental political beliefs of the parties were not so far apart as to render cooperation impossible. Consensus-seeking politics led to coalitions as broadly based across left and right as possible.

A Social Democratic and Liberal Coalition formed in 1917, but had difficulties in creating a tighter connection between the elementary school and the upper secondary school as the Liberals were no longer the driving force behind comprehensive education. The Social Democratic education minister, Värner Rydén, put forward a seven-year comprehensive school plan (*bottanskola*), but the Liberals would not agree to it. Finally, in 1927, a compromise between the Social Democrats and the now two Liberal parties, the so-called *Frisinnade* and the *Bondeförbundare*, was reached and it entailed the so-called ‘double attachment’. The school system should, on the one side, consist of a six-year comprehensive school and be followed by a four-year middle school (mostly in small towns) and, on the other side, a four-year comprehensive school and be followed by a five-year middle school (mostly in the cities). This compromise upheld the parallel system to some extent; however, it was gradually broken down, especially as a result of the abolition of state subsidies to the private preparatory schools that fed into the middle schools.

The Social Democratic Party went into the post-war period as a powerful party; however, some stagnation occurred during the 1950s that hindered the party in forming a majority government. In order to maintain power, therefore, it had to establish an alliance with the Liberal Party (*Bondeförbundet*). The Liberal parties, except for the *Bondeförbundet*, were rather critical of the Social Democratic policy regarding education which forced the Social Democratic party to some extent to tone down their ideology in order to collaborate with the Liberals on education legislation. A compromise between the Social Democrats and the Liberals was reached in 1950 when an act was introduced that experimented with a nine-year comprehensive school. In the following years, the Liberals could no longer be a serious hindrance to social democratic policy since the number of mandates was gradually reduced.

In 1957 the Social Democrats formed a majority government and a few years after, in 1962, they consolidated the nine-year comprehensive school system. Furthermore, it was decided in

1968 that streaming according to subjects (9 tracks) in the top classes of the comprehensive school should be integrated. 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. Schools were regulated and controlled through a national curriculum by a variety of specially destined state subsidies and a vast array of regulations concerning resources, organisation, staff and daily work. As the comprehensive nine-year education system was introduced, the remaining parallel schools of private education for the upper classes were abolished by severely restricting state support for these. By 1980, the share of pupils in non-public schools in Sweden had fallen to 0.2% (Wiborg 2009; 2007; Herrström 1966; Isling 1984; Richardson 1999; Marklund 1980).

It was this alliance with the farmers, renewed after the post-war period, which, more than anything else, gave Swedish social democracy a degree of power unmatched elsewhere. Moreover, when the worker-farmer alliance had begun to wane, as a result of a decline in the population of farmers, the Social Democrats maintained their power because they were successful in forging a new alliance with the emerging white-collar middle class. The Swedish Party was more successful than its Scandinavian counterparts, for whom alliances with the Liberals continued to play a more central role. The Social Democratic party in Sweden was thus much more independent of Liberal parties and this accrued power thus permitted the development of a welfare regime in which social reforms flourished as well as major education reforms that eventually resulted in the radical comprehensive school system we know today.

Neo-Liberal politics come to Sweden

During the early 1970s, the Swedish economy went into economic decline due to the loss of exports markets, particularly in mining and ship building. This economic decline, together with the continuation of expansive fiscal policies, caused rapidly growing budget deficits. By the early 1980s, the Conservative Party and the Swedish Employers Confederation (the SAF -Svenska arbetsgivareföreningen), had become increasingly critical of the public welfare service sector and the education system, and demanded a thorough reformation of these. Drawing on neo-liberal ideology that was influential in the USA and the UK at the time, the welfare sector was viewed as wasteful, heavily bureaucratic, and, above all, depriving the

Swedish people of their right to choose what services they preferred. In regards to education, which they placed highly on their political agenda, they requested more school alternatives, individual choice and competition between schools. By the mid-1980s, the two centre parties, the People's Party and the Centre Party, had joined the Conservatives in their neo-liberal campaign, thus creating, for the first time in Swedish post-war history, a collective opposition against the Social Democratic universal welfare policies.

More importantly, after the mid-1980s, a change of attitude toward the role of the public sector occurred also within the Social Democratic Party itself. Their concern, which largely can be attributed to the Minister of Finance, Kjell-Olof Feldt, was not the lack of choice within the public sector, but the size and productivity of the sector. Hence, they advocated the introduction of a 'quasi-market' in the public sector. In the late 1980s, a quasi-market as a means to renew the welfare service sector was openly endorsed by the Social Democratic government (Blomqvist 2004).

Even though both the left and right embraced neo-liberal policies concerning social service and education, it took a while before they were actively pursued. The non-social democratic governments in 1976 – 1982 did not enact neo-liberal policy to any large extent. Central state governance remained powerful and the decentralisation process that was implemented during the 1980s was therefore modest. However, from 1991 to 1994, when a Conservative-led coalition government took over from the Social Democrats, neo-liberal policy was more forcefully and successfully promoted than in the previous period of non-social democratic rule. This was also propelled by the recession that hit Sweden in the early 1990s.

The neo-liberal agenda in Swedish politics had an immense impact on education legislation. The state monopoly was broken in 1988 when the education system was decentralised and made more open to diversity and local initiative. Regulatory powers were now transferred from the central state to the municipalities and the schools themselves. To underpin this process, a voucher system was introduced in 1992. This system, which resembles the Danish so-called 'taximeter' system, established an arrangement whereby privately operated schools could compete for students with public schools on an equal financial basis. It entitled all private schools approved by the Swedish National Agency of Education to full public funding to be calculated on the basis of the number of students. It also provided all Swedish parents with the legal right to choose the school their children would attend (Rangvid 2008; Lundahl 2004a; 2004b). From 1993, the government paid the subsidies as lump sums to the

municipalities, which implied that the state had renounced virtually all its prior economic steering tools in favour of the municipalities.

When the Social Democrats returned to power in 1994, they did little to alter this development, rather they endorsed it and continued in the same vein as the previous government. The decentralisation process, according to Blomqvist (2004:148), ‘transformed the Swedish school system from a virtually all-public, bureaucratic operated system with very little room for parental choice, to one of the world’s most liberal public education systems’.

The government had now opened up the public school system to non-public actors and thereby offered citizens more choice. It was believed that private providers in setting up their own so-called free schools would contribute to the establishment of a wider range of schools and thus increase freedom of choice. The aim was that choice would create more specialisation, greater variety and increased flexibility in the school system and thus combat the perceived inefficient bureaucracy. It was also believed that private providers could enhance the overall quality of the school system. The many different providers and schools with different profiles competing with each other for pupils would ultimately revitalise the school system and lead to better forms of school governance and improvements of teaching practises. Pupils would, in other words, achieve more. Lastly, it was also argued that private providers would lead to a more cost-effective school system as the free schools would contribute toward a more effective use of resources in the school system as a whole (Lundahl 2005; Skolverket 2006).

The free schools

The introduction of educational vouchers drastically improved conditions for free schools in Sweden and resulted in a rapid expansion of the non-public school sector especially at upper secondary school level. However, they had to comply with the regulations that were included in chapter nine of the Education Act of 1994 and a particular Ordinance (1996:1206) regulating the free schools. Although free schools need not follow the national curriculum, the education they provide must essentially match the knowledge and skills and comply with the general objectives and values expressed in these national documents. Attending a free school must be free of charge and provide school health care and mother tongue tuition. Similar to the municipal schools, the free schools are controlled by national and regional school inspectorates. The peculiarity of Swedish school choice is thus that, on the one hand it

is deregulated with vouchers and competition between schools, and, on the other hand, it has firmly remained under central and local municipality responsibility through powerful instruments of control, financial resources, national curriculum, and inspection.

In 1991, there were a little over 60 non-public schools in the country and, by 2009/2010, their numbers had reached 709. As in the health-care sector, private providers tend to be over-represented in high-income areas. Free schools are represented in 64% of the municipalities and 14% of them are located in Stockholm. The number of pupils in free schools has increased from 20,247 pupils in 1995/96 to 95,948 pupils in 2009/10. In regards to free schools at upper secondary level, there were 38 municipalities with free schools in 1996/96 and in 2009/10 the number had increased to 114. Free schools at upper secondary level are present in 39 percent of the municipalities. About 15% of the free schools are located in Stockholm, and 27% of the schools are to be found in Stockholm, Malmö or Göteborg (Skolverket 2010).

The free schools take various forms, from small parental cooperatives whose establishment may have been caused by the closure of a municipal school, to schools with a particular educational approach or subject specialism and schools which are run by large for-profit education companies. The pupil make-up in free schools differs in some respects from that in municipal schools. Free schools contain a larger proportion of girls and a larger proportion of pupils with parents who have continued in education after upper secondary level. They also contain a larger proportion of pupils with a foreign background, but these have parents who are relatively well-educated in comparison with parents of pupils with a foreign background who attend municipal schools. The figures for upper secondary free schools in 2008 are 47% female, 53 percent male and 14 percent foreign background. These figures correspond largely with the figures from the municipal upper secondary schools (Skolverket 2006; Holm & Arreman 2010).

The non-social democratic governments anticipated a trend toward schools offering a particular specialism and more parental cooperatives; however in the late 1990s, the majority of schools had instead adopted a generalist approach, and the fastest growing type of private schools were not the parentally promoted schools, but the for-profit-based schools run by private companies.

In regards to specialism, at the beginning of the 1990s, most free schools did in fact have a special educational approach or a religious outlook, but this changed by the end of the decade

as parents preferred schools with a generalist approach. For example, in 2008, the majority of upper secondary schools (330) had a general orientation while only a minority (17) had a specific pedagogic profile (Holm & Arreman 2010). According to a report by Skolverket (2006), a consequence of this was that the free schools had become increasingly similar to that of the municipal schools.

In regards to parental involvement in setting up free schools, this has remained rather modest; instead private providers have taken over where parental initiatives were absent. Since private providers were given the possibility to run schools on a for-profit basis, not surprisingly, they became heavily involved in setting up free schools. According to Holm and Arreman (2010), in 2007, five out of six free schools made a profit of more than a half billion SEK. Many of them made a profit of between 8 to 50 percent of the turnover.

The three largest private providers in 2008 were John Bauer Organisation AB (27 schools, 9424 students), Anew Learning AB (19 schools, 5708 students), and AcadeMedia (24 schools, 3795 students). Kunnskapskolan, which has attracted attention by the British Conservative Party, is the sixth largest private provider of education. The John Bauer Organisation AB, the biggest provider, was established in the 1990s with an educational profile of computer-based learning. In 2005 and 2006 the John Bauer schools made a profit of about 120 million SEK and 40 million of this annual profit went to the owner of the company. In October 2008, 90% of the John Bauer concern was sold to the Danish investment company Axcel. The Axcel Company was a venture capital company and had no experience in education. Involved in the business of selling and buying businesses, they showed particular interest in home styling and dog food. In November 2008, the former two education companies AcadeMedia and Anew Learning merged in the AcadeMedia concern which now includes ten upper secondary school chains (Holm & Arreman 2010).

The expansion of free schools in Sweden has been met by profound criticism in the public debate. The private involvement in education has been primarily discussed in terms of money, shares and profits rather than in terms of innovative teaching methods or instilling democratic citizenship. A study by Bergström and Wahlströhm (2008) identified a shift in the discourse of secondary education from a comprehensive, inclusive preparation for civic citizenship to a more instrumental view of education as preparation for work. Some of the profit maximising school chains, such as Kunnskapskolan and John Bauer, have been criticised for running their schools with a franchising concept similar to that of MacDonald's.

Also, it has been maintained that the competition between schools is not on equal terms. Many upper secondary schools use various marketing strategies in their effort to recruit new students such as offering free computers, sport profiles, journeys, and/or ‘famous’ teachers. Most importantly, the common criticism is that private companies are allowed to make a profit at the expense of the Swedish tax payer.

Pupil achievement

Regardless of the critique of the free schools, they have become firmly established as part of the Swedish education system. The outcome of neo-liberal school policy in Sweden in terms of student achievement, segregation and cost has been subject to sufficient research to give a relatively clear picture of the issues. 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 free schools (Björklund et al. 2006). In the case of Sweden, the issue must therefore be evaluated in the context of the long-standing egalitarian goals of education.

The question is whether the free schools in Sweden have achieved a higher quality of learning in comparison to the municipal schools and hence through competition managed to improve these. Quality here is understood in terms of student attainment, which is, admittedly, limited, but still a significant way of measuring quality. The most significant analysis of whether the existence of free schools in Sweden has increased attainment are studies by Björklund et al(2005) and Böhlmark and Lindahl (2007 and 2008). In the first study, the researchers analysed the relationship between growth in free school share in a municipality and changes in test scores over a short period of time. They were not able to identify a consistently positive impact of free schools’ share on educational attainment. They found 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 free schools, as public

schools tend to improve their quality because of it, but competition from free schools is no panacea either.

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, Böhlmark and Lindahl (2008) 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 free schools. The children from highly educated families gain mostly from education in free schools, but the impact on families and immigrants who had received a low level of education is hardly visible.

Segregation

One particular characteristic of the Swedish school choice policy, which has been identified as the foremost cause of school segregation, is the attendance zone policy. Sweden has considerable housing segregation in the urban areas of Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö. With high levels of immigrants and recently arrived refugees in these urban areas, poverty and unemployment are more profound than in other municipalities. A consequence of this rigid attendance zone policy is that social problems in these deprived urban neighbourhoods are directly transferred into the local schools. There is a broad agreement among researchers that the housing segregation is the primary source of school segregation in Sweden (Bunar, 2001, Bunar 2009).

The question is, therefore, whether the policy of school choice is exacerbating segregation. The Swedish National Agency for Education has shown in a number of studies (e.g. Skolverket 1996, 2003) that a selective use of school choice has augmented social and ethnic

segregation, in particular in relation to schools in deprived areas. The results of these government reports are more or less in line with independent university studies. An exception is Lindbom and Almgren (2007) who claim that school choice is only attributed to a tiny proportion of increased school integration and therefore housing segregation primarily accounts for school segregation. Contrary to this claim, Gustafson (2006, 2007) established that since the school segregation coefficient rose 30% more than the housing segregation coefficient between 1990 and 2004, it is most likely that the school choice policy carried out through the first half of the 1990s made this impact. The research of Daun (2003), Arnman et al (2004), Böhlmark and Lindahl (2007), and Bunar (2008) also supported his claim that school choice has promoted greater segregation.

In conclusion, the evidence from a number of studies is that school choice in the Swedish school system has augmented social and ethnic segregation, particularly in relation to schools in deprived areas. Some researchers suggest that this has been enhanced by the extreme tendency to individualize teaching in schools by transferring the responsibility for learning from teachers to pupils. This so-called strategy of equity of learning based on a 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.

Costs

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 delivered a blow to this argument when they concluded that free schools have given rise to additional costs for the municipalities. The Swedish National Agency for Education states in a report from 2006 that municipalities with a high proportion of free schools have had financial effects in the form of overcapacity and significant increases in costs. What is increasing the cost is that public schools are induced to maintain a certain level of education as they are obliged to accept every child living in a certain attendance zone. They have long-term contracts for expensive buildings, and the general agreement between teacher unions and the municipalities does not make it easy to make staff redundant. Also a shifting pupil base makes planning more difficult which in turn increases the municipalities' costs in the short and long term. In conclusion, the increased competition in education does not automatically lead to lower costs, and, moreover, in the case of Sweden, it has led to greater costs.

Effects on teachers, parents and cooperation between schools

According to a study by Frederikson (2008), on the marketization of education in Sweden, significant differences between teachers in municipal schools and teachers in free schools can be identified. Most importantly, it is stated that the free school teachers are less experienced. While municipal school teachers on average have worked for about 18 years, free school teachers have worked for six years. Moreover, the free school teachers have a lower level of education as a smaller share of free school teachers has obtained a teacher college or university degree. In addition, the profit-interest causing the existence of market norms in free schools has led to market-oriented behaviour among teachers.

It has also been noted that teachers' working conditions have worsened because of the increased competition at the local level. The relationship between teachers and the free schools resembles that between managers and employees in private companies. Teachers employed in for-profit free schools are less independent and protected in relation to their school management and may be expected to be loyal to their employer. This makes it difficult for them to raise criticisms or official complaints without fear of being made redundant. Also, there is evidence that teachers are being put under pressure to replace students who have dropped out with new students to fill up vacant places (Holm & Arreman 2009).

Regarding parents, the Swedish National Agency for Education (2006) has stated that among the positive outcomes of the free schools is that they tend to increase parental involvement in the daily work of the schools, especially in the case where the schools were actively chosen. It also appears that teachers show more openness toward and inclination to listen to parent's demands and criticism.

Lastly, it has been shown that the competition between schools has led to less cooperation between schools. The general motivation to cooperate and exchange information on educational issues has decreased between schools since they started to regard each other as competitors with whom one does not happily share successful working methods (Skolverket 2006).

Some recent changes in free school policy

The negative consequences of the economic crisis and the expansion of free schools led to demands in the late 1990s and early 2000s for stricter public control of free schools. The demands were supported by research findings which revealed that free schools did not raise

standards significantly whilst exacerbating social segregation and leading to further costs for the municipalities. In addition teachers' work conditions were seen as problematic and in need of support. In several Bills on free schools, various Social Democratic governments have emphasised the importance of consistency in the Swedish school system. For example, in the government Bill on free schools in 2001, it is stated that diversity must be reconcilable with a national and municipal responsibility for a consistent and equivalent school system in which quality can be guaranteed and transparency ensured (Skolverket 2006). The condition for diversity is that it must not threaten a consistent and equivalent school system and public control. Also, the Social Democrats have raised a concern that a further increase in the number of free schools would lead to an even further segregated school system. Therefore, schools were not permitted to act in a way that segregated on financial or social grounds by imposing special rules on admissions or by charging tuition fees. In 2002, it was decided that the parents' right to choose a school must not be restricted to an opportunity only to choose a free school. Instead a right must be ensured to choose a municipal school, too.

In December 2008, the government submitted a proposition to create equivalent conditions for public and free schools. This implies that municipalities must consider the students' needs first and predict the effects of establishing new schools on neighbouring schools. A free school cannot be established if its activities would cause considerable negative consequences to the school system in the municipality where the school is planned. A negative consequence is closing down an existing school, which can lead to pupils having a longer journey to school, or municipalities incurring considerably increased costs. Hence, it may be increasingly difficult to introduce new free schools and, also, a stricter control of new schools has been agreed.

Since some schools are growing very fast at the expense of others, this development is expected to become even harder in the coming years. More schools are competing for fewer students as the small birth cohorts of the early 1990s are reaching upper secondary school age. At the same time, there is an increase in the number of applications for new schools, especially at the upper secondary level and in city areas. The boom of new schools is expected to result in a closing down of public as well as free schools due to shortage of students.

Conclusion

The creation of the Swedish welfare state, which entailed a universal social service and comprehensive education, has largely survived its crisis of the early 1990s and to a further extent still adheres to the values of social democratic values of social cohesion and distribution of equal life chances. However, as Blomqvist (2004) has stated, even though the welfare state seems intact today, profound changes have taken place in the manner in which services are provided. The previous system of public provision of universal services, allocated through bureaucratic planning, has been replaced with a system where the choices of service users play a much bigger role. As a consequence private providers have established themselves in the bigger cities in an increasingly market-like environment. Even though the share of private providers is still relatively low, ranging between 5 and 15%, this represents a significant break with previous policies in that their existence has given rise to more socially stratified service-consumption patterns.

Similar conclusions can be drawn for education. The comprehensive school system has survived until this day; the primary and lower secondary school is still an all-through system of education from grade one to nine with mixed ability classes. There is hardly any academic streaming within the system and most students continue to the comprehensive upper secondary schools. 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 the average on general literacy tests as well as on tests of mathematical and scientific literacy. In their final year of upper-secondary school, Swedish students also perform quite well in international comparisons. The percentage of pupils in private schools is still well below the OECD average and social segregation is low in an international perspective. 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 (Green, Preston and Janmaat 2006).

However, it is important to note that, although the school voucher reform from 1992 opened up the Swedish school system to private providers, the reform also had an immense impact on municipal schools. The competition for funds, in conjunction with parental choice, has led to a process of segregation within the public education sector in municipalities whereby popular schools have experienced a sharp increase in applications whilst less popular schools have lost pupils and therefore also funding. The most important cause behind the pattern of

educational segregation - where some schools become elitist and others develop a poor reputation - is ultimately the choices of parents. As the research confirmed, it is not only housing segregation that causes the increase of educational segregation, but parental school choice has exacerbated this trend. 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 kinds of free schools.

English 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:

1. The Swedish experiment (using for-profit private providers) has proved expensive and has not led to significant learning gains overall.
2. 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.
3. In the context of a 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 to be addressed:

1. Are parents in England really interested in running schools? Sweden has a limited tradition of this, but England does not, so why would we expect to see a large number of locally run schools in England when this is not even the typical outcome in Sweden? It seems more likely that private education providers will run the schools on a not-for-profit basis, but Sweden is not the best model for this since its experiment has involved for-profit schools.
2. Should Swedish companies be allowed to run schools in England when they are not able to produce outstanding results?
3. Is more choice desirable if free schools do not reconcile high academic standards and social integration?
4. And finally, how can the existing comprehensive schools in England 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?

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