Swedish education reform: High ambitions and troubling results

Lisbeth Lundahl
Decentralization, deregulation and marketization

1 Sweden underwent a radical shift in the early 1990s from strong central-state governing of education and very few private schools to a highly decentralized system promoting school choice and competition between public as well as private actors. Based on generous vouchers and liberal authorization rules, the private school sector has expanded at a high pace. Allowing profit-making without demands of reinvestment in schools, education has increasingly attracted large limited liability companies – something that makes the Swedish case outstanding in international comparisons (Alexiadou, Lundahl & Rönnberg, 2019). However, this Swedish “revolution” in the field of education met surprisingly little resistance. Previously often following in the footsteps of Sweden, the other Nordic countries have been far more cautious about adopting a similar transformation of education. However, elements of parental choice and New Public Management have been visible even here (Dovemark et al., 2018).

2 A social democratic government (1982–1991) initiated a first set of decentralization and deregulation reforms. The aim was both promoting the development of education and local democracy by giving municipalities and schools considerable freedom to allocate and use resources aligned to local conditions and needs. Consequently, large numbers of detailed regulations – mainly requirements for obtaining state subsidies for various purposes – were abolished. A consecutive set of school choice reforms, initiated by a non-socialist coalition government (1991–1994), was to ensure that parents and children had the “greatest possible freedom” to choose a school, thereby raising cost efficiency and improving public education by “stimulating competition” (Alexiadou et al., 2019). This, rather than (the long-dominant) state regulation or semi-autonomous school professionals, was now seen as the main driver behind educational development. The described development did not mean a retrenchment of the state but rather that
the state and politics took on new roles, not least as a key enabler of competition (Alexiadou et al., 2019).

A discouraging development

3 The education reforms of the early 1990s have been clearly successful in one respect: parental and student choice opportunities have increased considerably, at least in the urban regions where the number of competing schools has multiplied. In other respects, the emerging picture is disappointing. Firstly, evaluations and reports unanimously conclude that the local variations resulting from decentralization and deregulation are unacceptably large, given the longstanding political objective of educational equity. Secondly, starting from a high level, the average educational achievement of Swedish students has declined markedly from the 1990s and onwards, as measured by large international assessments (PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS) – both over time and compared to other countries, even if a certain recovery took place in the mid-2010s (OECD, 2016). Thirdly, Sweden, which previously belonged to the countries with low degrees of school segregation, has faced increased homogenization within and segregation between schools. Most researchers agree that the school choice system has contributed to this development (Brandén & Bygren, 2018). The reforms mentioned above are not the only reasons for the observed development. Increasing social differences more generally, large refugee immigration in the 1990s and 2000s, considerable teacher shortage, and the low attractiveness of the teaching profession are some of the other factors, but the decentralized and marketized education system amplifies rather than counteracts the negative processes of segregation and declining achievement (e.g. Östh, Andersson & Malmberg, 2013). Fourthly, and surprisingly, there is almost no research on the economic efficiency aspect of the Swedish decentralization and market reforms; here added knowledge would be desirable.

Policy lessons from the Swedish case

4 The initial decentralisation reforms presupposed local politicians, teachers and principals as prime change agents. The subsequent reforms, however, reduced the professional agency of teachers substantially. The voucher reforms of the 1990s transferred the emphasis to parental choice and school competition as drivers of educational development. In the 2000s, the state took a stronger role in regulating, standardizing and controlling educational development, for instance, through increased quality assessment and evaluation, more frequent testing and grading, and strengthening the role of principals as school managers. Possibilities to reduce local autonomy by reintroducing some of the previous state steering were investigated but without resulting in reform decisions. The same is true for a pending committee proposal to curtail extraction of profits.

5 The Swedish case raises a number of questions: What enabled this swift and radical policy shift in the first place? What mechanisms prevented major corrections when the development went in quite a different direction than that envisaged in the reform decisions of the early 1990s? What future policy steps would it be possible to take to increase the quality and equality of Swedish education, and how can political decision-
makers reduce school segregation? My ambition is to highlight at least the first two of these questions in my presentation. The final question still remains to be answered.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


ABSTRACTS

Sweden’s radical shift in the early 1990s to a highly decentralized and market-oriented education system aimed at raising the quality and efficiency of education in terms of outcomes and costs. The present situation is far from the aims of the reform-makers: on average, it shows decreasing academic results over time and in international comparison, and increasing school segregation. Knowledge on the economic aspects is lacking to a high extent. There have been efforts to mitigate this negative development by increased state control and evaluation, but the major features of the education system introduced in the 1990s are largely intact.

INDEX

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