

Summary

Judging by the public debate in Sweden our school system is in a deep crisis. Sweden's relative performance in international achievement surveys like PISA and TIMSS has deteriorated. Sweden's scores are no longer at the top and performance could be described as second rate. This situation is in itself a strong reason for policy scrutiny and change. But in order to understand what has happened and to find working solutions it is necessary to see the Swedish compulsory school system in a historic and international perspective. The crisis is not new and by no means uniquely Swedish. For more than hundred years schooling has been considered in need of radical change. Ideas have never been lacking. Many have been promising. And yes, in some cases implementation of educational innovations has generated good results. But by and large and over time, large-scale reforms have not lived up to expectations. The history of school reforms is a history of enthusiasm and disappointment, of high promises that never were fulfilled.

In this report research on factors of importance for pupil achievement is reviewed. The main conclusion is that most of the issues dominating the public debate are of minor importance. Resources, independent schools, the right to choose school, municipalisation and a new curriculum could all be assumed to have had an impact on the performance of Swedish pupils in surveys like PISA. But according to the most extensive meta-studies on pupil performance one factor stands out as the most important: teaching. The big difference is not between countries or schools but between classrooms. It is teachers and their instruction strategies that have the most impact on the measurable achievement of pupils.

According to Hattie's (2009) synthesis of meta-studies instruction has the strongest impact on pupil achievement when

the teacher is active, when teaching is visible to the pupils and learning is visible to the teacher.

Marzano (1998) uses meta-analyses in a different way, but comes to similar conclusions. The simple act of setting up explicit goals has a strong impact on pupil performance. Like Hattie Marzano stresses the power of feedback.

The report from the international consulting firm McKinsey (2007) does not look into differences between teaching methods but tries to find common patterns in school systems that are among the top performers in PISA. The conclusion is that three things matter the most:

1. getting the right people to become teachers
2. developing them into effective instructors
3. ensuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child.

There is a strong rationale for a policy aiming at the quality of classroom instruction. But how can the goal of higher teaching quality be reached? And why have reformers so often failed in the past? Part of the problem is that the goals of schooling have utopian traits and that they are not fully compatible. It is not easy for teachers to weigh the different official goals and make the moment-by-moment tradeoffs. So they resort to their own rules of thumb, which are easier to use and give them better guidance in the kind of dilemmas they encounter in classrooms. To reformers change is the overriding aim. For teachers this is never the case. They have to live with the full complexity of classroom life and handle the inevitable clashes of goals. One of the most pressing demands is the necessity of maintaining instruction momentum. An unexpected question from a pupil could in theory give the teacher an opportunity to deepen the analysis and provide new insights to the studied topic. But in practice the teacher also runs the risk of losing momentum and obscuring the structure of the lesson.

The basic institutional conditions of schooling are the same all over the world. Some of the reforms implemented in Sweden during the last decades follow international trends. Many countries have decentralised administrative responsibilities and carried out a model of management by objectives. However, the Swedish blend of reforms is unique, and the implementation of reforms has been

quite radical. Sweden had a uniform and centralised school system that was transformed into a decentralised system with growing elements of free choice and competition between schools. The 1994 curriculum for the compulsory school system strengthened the trend. It was an explicit aim to move responsibility from the state level to the schools, and it became an indirect consequence that teachers took a step back to let pupils take more responsibility for their own learning.

Not all these changes have necessarily been negative. But the interplay between them has obscured the mission of teachers and has had the consequence that pupils too often have been left without needed guidance.

Individuals who do not know what is being expected of them and who have no clear image of the goal will not grow as their responsibilities increase. They get disoriented and passive. It cannot be proved that this is the destructive force behind the negative trend in Sweden's educational performance. But taken together, what we know about the importance of active teaching and what we know about the international top performing school systems give us reasons to regard the development of the Swedish school system as problematic. It was not hard to see the intention of the national government to give municipalities more administrative power and to let teachers use their own pedagogical discretion. But how would the void after the state be filled? Where were the new boundaries between municipalities, school leadership and teachers? The expansion of independent schools and the right to choose school strengthened competition. Schools engaged in marketing. They all tried to convince pupils and parents that they had something unique to offer. This need to stress the distinctive features of the individual school can be a uniting force within the local school unit. But it is not obvious how these local school innovations are consistent with the professional duties of teachers to realize the national educational goals. The task of the teacher has become even more complex and permeated with contradictions.

If the aim of the national school policy is to improve pupil achievement teachers must both feel the obligation to improve their own instruction and that they are being offered useful solutions to problems they face in their classroom. If teachers perceive the political demands as hostile to teachers they will probably choose defensive strategies that protect their own

interests. These strategies maybe ineffective or even counterproductive in achieving the goal of enhanced pupil learning. If the national policy focused solely on teacher autonomy, without a combination of pressure and support, there would be a great risk of stagnation for teachers and for the school system as a whole. An interesting example of an educational system where teachers are given extensive autonomy is Finland. Finnish teachers are well educated and possess a high degree of professional discretion. There are no national inspections. Still teachers are subject to a kind of pressure. The system is characterized by uniform standards and high expectations.

In recent years, research on teacher development has highlighted that the most effective programs are those that both engage external expertise and let teachers take part in some kind of community of practice (Timperley et.al., 2007). However, in the current Swedish context there are obvious obstacles to implementing a national policy to achieve this: The reforms of the 1990's decentralized decision making to the municipal level. The number of independent schools has grown fast. It is no longer the role of the state to answer the question: How should teachers teach?

Just offering support to those who ask for it is hardly a solution. Myndigheten för skolutveckling was created as a national resource centre but never developed into a real change agent. The question is: What can national policymakers do to create a pressure that generates a demand for effective support for the professional development of teachers? And how can they avoid that such an intervention would be too heavy-handed and cause more problems than it would solve? Policy makers who choose this path must be aware of the delicacy of the task. But evidence from countries among the top performers in international surveys give us reasons to believe that a working balance of pressure and support can indeed be found.

How Sweden should find such a balance is a question without a simple answer. The task is so complex that the only way to find out is by trying, adjusting and trying again. However, a reasonable start would be to found a national school policy on some of the structural insights that research on teaching and teacher development give us. The central government should neither prescribe how teachers teach nor decide which teacher development programs they take part in. But there should be a

national framework. In accordance with research on effective teacher development programs the central government can require that schools have programs for professional development of teachers and that these programs involve engaging external expertise and letting teachers take part in some kind of community of practice. It could also be prescribed that teacher development should focus on goal setting and feedback as tools to make the tasks conceivable to pupils and the achievement of pupils visible to teachers.

Formally, municipalities and private school owners would be responsible for initiating programs and for their quality. In practice, school principals would be the crucial link between a national policy of teaching improvement and classroom practice. It may be difficult to isolate the role of school leadership from other factors with an impact on pupil performance. But it is beyond doubt that principals influence school atmosphere and the form and extent of cooperation and interaction among teachers. Principals can give teachers the conditions they need to develop communities of practice and provide external expertise.

There are no guarantees for success of the suggested policy path. It will take time to implement and it will probably be necessary to gradually adjust the balance between government pressure and local autonomy. But in contrast to issues now dominating the national debate a school policy focused on developing teaching and teacher professionalism addresses the key questions of schooling. It is in classrooms, in the daily interaction of teachers and pupils, that it will be determined if the Swedish school system will continue to lag behind or be a top performer.

