

Summary

An increasing share of the pupils in Swedish schools is born abroad. While it is known that pupils with foreign background tend to perform worse in primary school than natives we still know little about the nature of the achievement gap. One question of special importance is which factors that can explain the gap. The aim of this report is to use new data to shed light on these relevant and urgent issues.

In the first part of the report, we investigate how the achievement gap has developed over time. For this analysis we use data that cover all pupils who completed primary school (i.e. grade 9) during the period 1988–2014. The results show that there are significant differences in the performance between immigrant and native pupils. While just over 90 percent of all pupils born in Sweden qualify to apply for upper secondary school, the corresponding figure for foreign-born pupils is approximately 65 percent. Pupils who immigrated after the age of seven (i.e. the typical school starting age) as well as pupils from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds perform especially poorly in school. The results also show that pupils born in Africa and unaccompanied minors run a significantly higher risk of failing school. For these groups, the average age at immigration is substantially higher than for other groups of immigrant pupils, which means that these pupils have less time to complete school. We also show that the difference in achievement between native and foreign born pupils increased relatively sharply in 2008, which can be explained by a shift in the demographic composition of foreign born pupils in terms of region of birth and age at arrival.

In the second part of the report we examine how the achievement gap evolves over grades. For this purpose we study pupils who finished primary school in 1998 and 2008 are were

included in the so-called UGU survey. For these pupils we are able to measure the size of the achievement gap already in grade 6 as the pupils' results on standardized knowledge tests. We also measure the size of the gap in grade 9 as the pupils' results on national tests. This way we are able to see if the gap is constant or if it changes between grades 6 and 9. The results show that there is a significant achievement gap already in grade 6. However, the gap decreases significantly until grade 9.

Finally, we investigate possible causes for the achievement gap. The results show that factors such as class size or teachers' formal qualifications are not important for the size of the gap. We do however find that the increased sorting of pupils between schools, which has taken place in Sweden since the 1990's, has some significance. In particular, the analysis shows that the gap decreases when we compare the achievements of immigrant and native students who attend the same school. Still, the reduction in gap appears to be relatively small. A key finding of the report is that the socio-economic status of the parents is strongly associated with the size of the gap. The same applies to the importance of the neighbourhood of residence. In fact, almost the entire gap would disappear if foreign born and native pupils had the same socio-economic background and lived in the same neighbourhoods. If this reflects a causal link, it means that broad societal efforts to improve the socio-economic status among immigrants could be a way to improve the school achievements of their children.