

Report explains declining school performance in Sweden

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Housing segregation, making schooling a community matter, special teaching groups, individualisation and the right to freely choose which school to attend are factors explaining why Swedish school children perform worse than 20 years ago according to research at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

These are some of the conclusions reached by the Swedish National Agency for Education in its extensive report 'Vad påverkar resultaten i svensk grundskola?' (in English 'Which factors affect the results of Swedish comprehensive school?'). The background to the report is that both national and international studies indicate that the academic performance of Swedish school children is declining.

Comprehensive view

The report gives an overview of research on how various factors affect the performance of Swedish school children.

One chapter of the report concerns the importance of resources.

'One of many conclusions is that class size and student-teacher ratio affect student performance, especially among children in the lower grades and children who receive limited help with their school work at home. But the most important resource factor is teacher competence,' says Professor Jan-Eric Gustafsson from the Department of Education,

University of Gothenburg.

Limited compensation

The report reveals that schools only to a limited degree compensate for socioeconomic differences. Extra resources are very hard to come by, even in the most segregated communities. This is an interesting finding since one reason schooling became a community matter in the early 1990s was the belief that the communities know their schools and their needs best and therefore are best able to distribute the available resources. This assumption seems to have been incorrect.

Another finding is that the level of segregation in the school system has increased. Widespread housing [segregation](#) and the right to choose which school to attend have resulted in more homogenous student bodies, which affects learning negatively.

Differentiation in the classroom

There is also increased differentiation at the group level. One example is the use of special teaching groups for students with special needs.

The current national curriculum, introduced in the 1990s, provides limited guidance on exactly what children need to learn and what methods teachers should use. While the original intention of this was to give teachers freedom to base their teaching entirely on what each unique situation calls for, it turns out that it has led to more time on their own for [school children](#) and less teacher-led instruction. The report shows that this has negatively affected children's performance and has made support at home more critical to the children's development.

Less teacher-led instruction

The report is partly based on the international assessments PIRLS, TIMSS and PISA and focuses on performance in reading comprehension, mathematics and natural science. Especially the performance in mathematics and natural science has gone down, both over time and compared with other countries.

'The main explanation to the dwindling average performance in mathematics and natural science is the increased use of independent learning and decreased teacher-led instruction,' says Gustafsson.

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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