Sweden: setting up the comprehensive school*

The Swedish school system at the end of the 1970s

Sweden has a nine-year compulsory school for students aged 7–16, known as the comprehensive school. It includes a lower-primary (junior) level (grades one to three), an upper-primary (middle) level (grades four to six) and a lower-secondary (senior) level (grades seven to nine). The comprehensive school has nearly one million students.

After this compulsory nine-year school, there is an 'integrated' upper secondary school for students aged 16–19. Nowadays nearly 90 per cent of students continue to the upper secondary school. Studies in this non-compulsory school are organized into twenty-two different 'study lines' (specialities or majors) as well as a large number of special courses of varying lengths providing direct vocational preparation. The great majority of upper secondary students are enrolled in the twenty-two study lines. These are grouped into three sectors: arts and social subjects, scientific and technical subjects, and economic and commercial subjects. These lines involve two, three or four years of study. Most of them are vocationally oriented. The post-compulsory upper-secondary school currently has about 250,000 students. This figure should be viewed in relation to the fact that Sweden has about 8.3 million inhabitants, with some 100,000 in each one-year age bracket.

The present article will focus on the nine-year compulsory comprehensive school. It should be noticed that the lower-secondary stage is nowadays a part of the compulsory system, and therefore organized within this system. The previous secondary school has thus been cut into two parts, a lower-secondary and an upper-secondary, which are wholly separated. The old classification of schools as pre-primary, primary and secondary has in this way been abolished and replaced by a system of pre-compulsory, compulsory and post-compulsory schools.

The comprehensivization of compulsory education

The creation in recent decades of the Swedish educational system as briefly described above

* This dossier completes the one published in the previous issue. All the articles except the one by Federico Carattoni were prepared for the seminar held at the International Institute for Educational Planning in November 1979 on the organization of educational reform at the local level. They are published here with the kind permission of the IIEP.

Sixten Marklund (Sweden). Formerly Head of Bureau, Swedish National Board of Education, now a Research Professor at the Institute of International Education, University of Stockholm.
should be viewed against the background of social development as a whole during the same period. In the mid-1940s Sweden had a school system that by European standards was fairly old-fashioned and not particularly extensive. The compulsory elementary school covered only six or seven years of schooling. After it came various types of lower-secondary schools, attended by fewer than one-fourth of all elementary school leavers. Only about 10 per cent of all elementary school students completed a secondary education. Technical and vocational training were correspondingly limited in scale. Fewer than 5 per cent of each annual cohort attended universities and professional colleges. This was the system from which the current structure has developed over the space of three decades.

The most important aspect of the reform was the introduction of the new nine-year compulsory comprehensive school. This reform started in 1950, following a decision by Parliament. It ran in two phases, an experimental phase during the period 1950–62 and an implementation phase 1962–72. During these two phases the old primary school and the various types of lower-secondary schools were replaced by the new system.

This reform provided the foundation for subsequent change in upper secondary education, vocational education, higher education and adult education.

Practically nothing remains today of the school system Sweden had before 1950. In terms of both school structure and content of education, the changes have been almost total. It is true that teaching-learning processes have changed less, but even in this respect the school of today is very different from the school of 1950. Some of the more important development trends since 1950 have been the extension of compulsory schooling to 16 years of age; the postponement of the organizational diversification of students in different fields of study; an increase in students in post-compulsory schooling; a move towards comprehensivization the integration of upper-secondary, tertiary (university) and adult education; and decentralization in decision-making and responsibility for the schools.

Other changes have occurred, but they will not be discussed here. It is also obvious today that many of the change trends mentioned seem to have come to an end, 'hit the ceiling'. New trends seem to be appearing, many of them indicating the emergence of a post-compulsory system of recurrent education.

Motives and driving forces behind the reforms

The reasons for the changes indicated in the preceding section were many. The school system was clearly dualistic: a minor proportion of students were selected at an early stage for higher studies, the majority attended only the ordinary primary school. It was this that began to be regarded, increasingly, as unmodern and undemocratic. The aim became to achieve better and longer education for all, not just for the few, and the creation of what was then termed a 'democratic' school system. The forces underlying these efforts were of different kinds, with anchorages in different pressure groups. To simplify the matter slightly, one can group these forces under two different heads: socio-political progressivism and pedagogic progressivism.

Socio-political progressivism

Socio-political progressivism was the stronger of the two. It existed above all in some of Sweden's traditional 'People's Movements'. The labour movement, both blue-collar and white-collar, which even at that time embraced the majority of workers and salaried staff in industry and the administration, had long urged in its programmes the need for better education for all.