

Impressions of Solna

As others will have already detailed the schedule of the trip, schools visited, etc, I am concentrating on my opinions of the systems seen, their advantages / disadvantages and the implications of their replication in the UK. I am assuming that these will be woven into a final summative report and am shaping them within that context.

Schools

Pre Schools (1 – 7)

Very impressed by the atmosphere and ethos of the school visited. The focus on social skills and the emphasis on “learning readiness” offered a solid foundation for future education. As with much of the education system there appeared to be a systemic patience regarding the achievement of academic targets and a faith that long term results would benefit from attention to prolonged preparatory work.

Compulsory Schools (7 – 16)

Although only visiting one independent school, Vittra, the impression of patience and the willingness to allow for individual development to take its course was again prevalent. A focus on personal development and the acquisition of interpersonal skills was again paramount, providing a setting within which academic progress could be made by those committed to such achievement. The lack of space / equipment / facilities was striking when measured against UK schools, again conveying the sense of a more “gentle” approach to education. I was concerned about the apparent lack of strategies for those students who did not choose to learn or to value academic progress.

Special Schools

The one visited confirmed an impression that student wellbeing and happiness took clear precedence over academic achievement. In this example the lack of challenge was to the detriment of the students who would, I believe, have benefited from a more rigorous academic programme, such as that to be found in UK schools.

Upper Secondary (16-19)

The construction school visited offered an interesting combination of practical instruction and continuing academic studies. Enjoyed by its students, with clear progression routes into the construction industry, the school was doing a good job in engaging numbers of young people whose previous experience of education had been less than successful. Once again, the length of the course (3 years) seemed a little excessive for what was being learnt.

Systems

Free schools

As all schools visited were free schools it is difficult to contrast with the municipal schools attended by 60% of students. Whilst providing choice for parents that was not there before and, according to city officials, stirring municipal schools from previous complacency, there are a number of reasons why introduction of a similar model into the UK should be approached with caution:

- Most schools were very small and could not deliver the national curriculum as it currently stands
- Schools appeared to be transient and the student population migratory (8 schools shut and 5 opened in last couple of years, many children moving from school to school on a “trial” basis)
- Variety which such schools were set up to introduce already available within UK in general and Kent in particular
- Competition within schools and desire for continuous improvement already present in vast majority of UK / Kent schools without the need for additional system
- System that enshrines patience through provision of free education for all from 1 – 23 is hugely expensive

Local Authority / Municipality

Both elected members and officers were extremely enthusiastic and passionate about their area, something paralleled by those working within Kent. There was a feeling that many of the education reforms of recent years had been embarked upon in a spirit of adventure, with no clear long term plan in place or methods for monitoring the effectiveness of the initiatives. Although a national inspection system and some rudimentary tracking and target setting procedures are now developing, there is nothing like the quality control / challenge roles in place that are currently delivered by Local Authorities in the UK.

Should Free Schools be introduced into the UK there would be an increase in the work of the local authority, ensuring standards, monitoring outcomes, tracking children as they move from one school to another, dealing with closure and opening of schools, etc. At a time when there will need to be reductions in spending it is difficult to see how this increased work will be undertaken successfully.

Conclusions

The visit was extremely interesting and provided valuable insights into ways in which child centred education may be delivered. It would be wrong to assume, however, that much of this is not taking place already within UK schools alongside the more target driven culture that is also prevalent. There are certainly examples of practice that can easily be adapted and adopted within our existing structures.

This having been said my personal belief is that the system is one that would need to be adopted as a whole or not at all; the grafting of individual sections onto the UK system is unlikely to prove successful for reasons identified above. Taking Kent as an example, there is already a rich diversity of schools managing to compete and co-operate in order to raise standards, bound together by a local authority

that provides an appropriate balance of challenge and support. Adding or removing sections of the system is likely to upset this balance and, whilst we are all striving to improve and are, I believe, continually self critical, the massive rise in public spending required to bring about an entire system change cannot be countenanced, even if seen to be desirable, and tinkering at the edges will damage the education of too many children. Taking the best of the Swedish practice and using it within existing systems makes good sense, much similar work already taking place, but I believe that the transplanting of freestanding institutional models does not.

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