

STUDY TOUR TO SOLNA SWEDEN  
2-4 February 2010

Perspectives of a Special School Head

It was indeed a privilege to be part of the study tour and I would like to thank all in Kent County Council and their Swedish counterparts who ensured that the arrangements were well planned and therefore complimented the whole experience. The enthusiasm of the members and officers was very apparent and we were fortunate to receive such a very warm welcome.

Overall reflections of the Schools

All Schools visited were part of the Free School System but it would have been interesting to compare the Municipal schools in Solna.

In all schools the over-arching sense of care and pupil centred education was very evident from Pre-School through to the Vocational Centre. All schools stated the importance of personal responsibility and had a sense of calm, enhanced by candles and sofas, giving a homely feel. The small size of all the schools certainly contributed to the sense of family and nurturing aspect of the school ethos.

The lack of sporting facilities was marked in all except the Special School. The outdoor areas were well used for free play and breaks but students travelled to other parts of the community for sports and leisure.

All schools visited were in the middle of the community, although pupils did travel some distance to their preferred school. Families were able to switch schools at will which could 'mask' some pupils who were vulnerable.

Goal setting and pupils' evaluations/reflections at Vittra were interesting but would not suit the learning styles of all pupils. Pupils' goals were reviewed at six month review meeting with teachers, which would match out target setting meetings in the UK. Weekly review meetings occur with TAs, again this would be evident in many UK schools. Workforce development in the UK has seen an increase in cover supervisors to ensure curriculum delivery and continuity. However, we were told that some lessons were cancelled if teachers were absent. This would be unacceptable in the UK

It was very interesting to compare the Swedish system with England and I witnessed many similar aspects in the Swedish philosophy for young people: personal responsibilities, citizenship, life skills and vocational training but I believe that pupils in Kent have a wider curriculum with much more robust monitoring of their achievements. All schools visited seemed to lack objective data about pupil progress, achievement and attainment. This was also reflected in the Local Authority information at the plenary session; a stark contrast to the accountability of standards and achievement in the UK and Kent.

## Special Education

I believe that the free school movement could have very detrimental effects on pupils with SEN. My views are also informed in part by my previous experience and knowledge of education in Sweden in the 1990s as part of a six year EU project. The Special Schools I visited in the 90s were co-located special schools that were very inclusive and provided excellent social opportunities for all students and yet provide the specialist resources required for the learning. I did not get any indication of such practice on this short visit.

Svedenskolan, Hjortstingen used some standard strategies for ASD but there appeared to be a lack of focus on teaching and learning. The staff were largely the equivalent of TAs and the class visited had had the same tutor (a TA) for five years. The school did not use Speech and Language Therapists which is fundamental for a school for pupils with communication and interaction difficulties. I did not get a feel for any multi agencies work, a pre-requisite to ensure that a holistic approach is used to meet the needs of such pupils.

Many of the pupils we met at Svedenskolan, Hjortstingen would not meet the criteria for Kent Special Schools. I did not see any pupils with PMLD or SLD in any setting during the tour and it was not clear how or where these pupils would be educated.

My impression is that the educational system is far more expensive than the UK and certainly the figures for the Special School are four times as much as a Kent provision which provides for pupils with far more complex and diverse needs.

Pam Jones February 2010