

Swedish education system: Kent study tour

Sweden is very different in ethos and profile from the UK and Kent in particular so I do not think the Swedish system is transferable. Nevertheless there are lessons to be learned.

The system provides full child care/education for every child from 1 to about 20 with a voucher system following the child. Up to age 6 children are looked after at pre-schools which may be attached to mainstream schools. At age 6 there is a year of pre-school and compulsory school is from age 7 to 16. Upper secondary school is from age 16 (grade 9) but is dependent on basic national test passes in Maths, Swedish and English - there seem to be only 3 grades, very good, good and fair. Points are allocated on up to 17 subjects but passes are required in the three core subjects. There is a national league table of points but a lot seems to be dependent on teacher assessment and we did not see evidence of independent evaluation or inspection. Post 16 the upper secondary schools teach core subjects but students specialise in a field - the two most popular are natural sciences and social sciences. We visited a school run by a national construction company which taught construction alongside basic subjects.

The municipality runs schools but private providers may also open and run schools with permission from the DCFS equivalent. Some companies run several schools. The ones we visited were run on liberal lines with children not wearing uniform and seeming to be allowed to come and go during the school day. We did not visit a school run by EIS where tough love is the mantra and pupils must dress neatly and call their teachers Mr Larsen not Bjorn! I think these schools would be more like our academies.

I have not been able to separate out positives and negatives here. Competition between schools for pupils has some positives as schools will (and do fail) if they are unable to attract and retain pupils but this mitigates against co-operation between schools and can lead to incentives such as free computers to attract numbers. There is a wide choice of school (but there is in Kent too) but admissions criteria appear to be first come first served which is not very fair - children are put down for many schools well in advance and there is competition for the ones which are doing best when the child reaches the right age. It also means the child moves between schools. Schools which are failing close which is not brilliant for its pupils - several have done so. This also leads to empty premises which is perhaps not so important in Sweden where heat and power are provided centrally and buildings are not always as spacious and purpose built as in Kent. I do not think this model would work in Kent where communities are more dispersed - we do not have cities with high densities and growing populations. Nor do we have efficient urban transport systems which means that children have several schools in close proximity to their homes.

I am not qualified to comment on the specific provision of education in the schools we visited. However I was impressed with the emphasis on encouraging young people to develop their individuality, to learn to take responsibility and to make decisions. We observed some very young children at meal times. They appeared confident, relaxed, happy and considerate of each other. They were able to help themselves to (hot) food and ate at tables (teachers present but not interfering) with a knife and fork. They had a choice of meat/fish or vegetarian with salads (grated carrot and cabbage a good idea), and potatoes and vegetables but it was not over the top in terms of choice. There was also bread, or crispbread with cream cheese but no fruit or puddings. And there were no obese children! If we stopped serving puddings we would save a lot on food, plates, spoons and might improve children's health as well as setting them on a healthy eating course (I am going to take advice on this). There was a choice of milk or water to drink and little children were competent at filling their own glasses and not spilling things. They also cleared the plates at the end of the meal, putting any left-overs in compost containers and stacking their plates in dishwasher racks etc. When a plate was dropped and broken it was the children who picked it up and got a brush to sweep up and it was not turned into a health and safety issue by the adults.

No formal playing fields but gym facilities and quite an emphasis on playing outside. The little children were dressed in waterproof suits and crash helmets and were having a great time in the snow.

I think we were all impressed with the two confident 15 year olds we talked with at the Vittra school. A very informal and quite small school. Lots of space for individual learning and small classes. Each child (from the youngest) had a journal in which they had their timetables and also wrote down their goals for the day, the week, the term. It could be something simple like to ask a question in class or to be more ambitious and confident. The targets are agreed with the mentor and the child's parents and all entered in the journal along with a frank assessment of each class. Quite a discipline in what otherwise was a very relaxed school environment. However it did seem to work for most children (perhaps they would have thrived in any school) as they are made to be aware of themselves and the control they have over their achievements and progress. In this school the children were able to stay after school until 6pm if they wanted to and many choose to.

To conclude: a very worthwhile trip. I do not think the system transferable but I do like the way the pupils are taught from a very early age to be considerate and responsible and to take decisions. I suspect that bad behaviour is not an issue. However, I think children need more structure and there seemed to be contradictory ideas about tests, results and how important these were.

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