

Kent County Council Study Visit to Solna, Sweden

(Tuesday 2nd – Thursday 4th February 2010)

Reflection Report by Sue Nicholson – Headteacher, The Brent Primary School

Participants:

Paul Carter, Leader Kent County Council

Sarah Hohler, Cabinet Member, Children, Families and Education

Rosalind Turner, Managing Director, Children, Families and Education

Pamela Jones, Special School Headteacher

Alan Brookes, Secondary Headteacher

Sue Nicholson, Primary Headteacher

Focus of visit given in advance:

1. Good practice in terms of teaching and learning in independent and commercial schools working in the locality
2. Collaborative management of schools and local governance arrangements
3. Integrated service delivery through working with multi-agency partners
4. Examples of all through, cross phase schools (3-18 years)
5. Examples of independent schools in practice and how the system works

My Personal Reflections (my hopes and fears!):

A. The group

It was undoubtedly an enormous privilege to visit aspects of schooling in Sweden and also to participate in the trip with such influential company. The mix of KCC strategy leaders and on the ground practitioners was inspired. In Kent we need clear strategic leadership, but we also need effective operations which lead to improved outcomes for young people.

B. The focus

My application indicated a particular interest in 'integrated service delivery through working with multi-agency partners'. It was disappointing that objective 3, integrated service delivery with multi-agency partners, was not fully explored as consideration of an alternative model for this aspect of potential efficiency savings is a key aspect of the 'better services for less cost' focus for Kent. I work closely with Social and Health Services and I am therefore familiar with the strengths and areas where improvement can be made.

C. What is the purpose of services for young people?

We need education, social care and health to protect and promote the development of our young people so that they are equipped to lead and make confident contributions to the local and wider community. If schools are 'free' to respond to parental preference, my personal concern is that the underpinning principles of educating our pupils within the Every Child Matters framework could get diluted, or even lost. We should expect schools to provide high academic standards and a caring environment where pupils are taught to be responsible citizens. However, the former aspect is more readily measured and compared between schools. With 'free' schools we could have some schools specialising in academic achievement at the expense of all else: a potentially dangerous prospect for our young people and our society. I would suggest that the development of young people is too precious to be left in the hands of 'market forces' and unqualified personal preferences.

D. Practical school visits

As a headteacher it was fascinating to visit a variety of schools in different contexts. It was interesting to discuss and consider the curriculum as well as the wider opportunities available. At The Brent we are developing our own curriculum (SCABS - Skills Curriculum at Brent School!). I was hugely impressed with the emphasis on child-led learning and the linking of learning with real-life situations. I certainly feel that the need for continuity and progression in skills development and learning was missing in the 'free' schools we visited. The concept of a brighter pupil teaching others while the other pupils 'caught up' would not be acceptable practice in Kent. The culture in Sweden was far less restrictive in respect of risk assessments and parental permission to take children off site. This freedom would make life so much easier for teachers at home!

The schools visited had a philosophy similar to ours at The Brent in terms of 'learning to learn' and an emphasis on personal and social responsibility. Indeed, most local Kent schools have an emphasis on SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) to help address significant needs in our pupils' development. However, I was disappointed in the lack of 'whole school' collective belonging in the Swedish schools visited, with many not having a room where the whole school community could physically meet.

The visit to Svedenskolen, the school for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder, was interesting but I was disappointed as the expectations of these pupils were low compared to ours in Kent. It was delightful to meet the pupils and the friendly staff, but the main learning I gained from this visit was to reinforce how relatively well we manage the full spectrum of needs of pupils in Kent.

Even though the emphasis on testing has become too burdensome in our education system, there is a need to benchmark pupils carefully so that we can measure their progress against their potential and allow schools to evaluate the effectiveness of their own provision and intervention programmes. Data should also be analysed to spread good practice around schools, ensuring that high achieving schools do not become complacent and schools in socially deprived areas do not develop a, 'Well what do you expect?' attitude. Schools are accountable for raising standards and every child has always mattered. I believe we should strive to having a highly skilled teaching professional, capable of making, and being trusted to make, accurate judgements around pupil attainment and progress. However, we must be careful that, if the popularity and financial well being of a school is dependent on such data, that it is externally validated. It appeared that Sweden is relying more on teacher judgements.

I would have liked to have had access to the financial arrangements of the schools visited to consider the value for money aspect of the 'free' schools.

E. Spot the difference

SOLNA (Free schools)	KENT
DIFFERENCES	
Children start (fully) funded preschool age 1	Children start (partly) funded preschool age 3
Pre school open all year round, 7.30am-6pm, free regardless of income	Sessional pre school, term time only
Compulsory education age 7 - 19	Compulsory education age 5 - 16
Leisure/childcare provided by state age 1 - 12, free regardless of income	Extended services through schools and Children's Centres provide limited childcare
School Admission criteria is 'first come, first served'	Admission criteria is typically nearness to school or by academic ability

Limited pupil assessment, with results not analysed. No fine tuning of grades. No fail until age 16	Emphasis on pupil testing with implications drawn from data analysis. Fine tuning of grades from age 4
Inspection system based on subjective findings	Inspection system based on objective criteria and data driven
Recent moves to tighten up above	Recent moves to loosen up above
Breakfast and hot lunch provided free. No packed lunch culture. No pudding! Milk, juice and water freely available	Breakfast clubs available to some at a cost. Dinner needs to be purchased, unless family in receipt of benefits. Many choose to take a packed lunch
Limited ICT resources. Lack of emphasis on resources and minimal displays	Schools have abundant ICT available, are generally well resourced and lively display is expected
All schools are co educational	Single sex schools available, usually academically selective
School buildings are used to provide class based learning. Sport provided elsewhere	School buildings expected to provide everything - for pupils and increasingly also for local community
Market forces determine teacher pay rates. These are lower in comparison to UK	National pay scale for teachers
No co operation between free schools	Emphasis on partnership working
Social service referral resulted in case moving outside school (free school)	Multi agency meetings around family and child
Young people often in education until in their twenties. Effect on starting families and in years worked until retirement	Option to leave school at 16 and earn in employment
SIMILARITIES	
Emphasis on learning to learn skills and taking responsibility for own learning	
Child initiated and child led learning playing a significant role in early development	
Teaching of personal responsibility and citizenship. (Possibly responding to social issues present in both cultures?)	

F. Free schools and partnership working

Since returning I have struggled to blend the tension around partnership work, promoted across Kent, and the independence of a 'free' school. If we look at the closest we have at present, an academy is not obliged to participate as fully in local partnership work as other schools. This needs careful consideration in relation to the philosophy of our children's services as it seems that 'collaboration' and 'independence from the authority' do not necessarily mix. In a 'mixed economy' of schools they could both exist, but we need to be clear at the outset of the likely scenario. Collaboration would probably exist between authority schools while independent 'free' schools work in a way that is best for them individually to promote themselves in the market place. We visited two neighbouring schools in Solna who operated in isolation from one another. This can not surely be a situation we would want in Kent?

G. Free schools and grammar schools

In Kent we have a long and well established tradition of 'selective' education based on performance in verbal, non verbal reasoning and maths tests taken in Year 6. Most parents appear to support this system, despite only 25% pupils being granted admission to grammar schools. The effect of grammar schools and the relationship with socio economic class is well documented. My local circumstances are therefore interesting, and relevant when considering the introduction of 'free' schools. We have grammar schools and an established academy federating with one, and potentially a second, local secondary school facing significant challenges. This leaves my catchment area with no real choice of authority education for non selective pupils. Although popular with many parents, a few of my parents have already expressed concern at this situation. We also need to be

mindful of pupil mobility, especially the tracking of the more vulnerable pupils. If a 'free school' were able to remove pupils more readily, without the process and procedures an authority school requires, we could end up in a situation where the authority school is required to admit all the pupils 'rejected' by the 'free' schools.

H. The judgement of whether the education provided by a free school is 'good' or not

As I understand it, a 'free' school is subject to market forces. Parents decide whether it is a 'good school' by whether they send their child there or not. The theory being that a school attracting pupils, and therefore funding, must equate to being a 'good school'. National and local inspection procedures would ensure that the environment is legal, and that basic standards are met. As an educationalist keen to develop the whole child, it would concern me that a very narrow, formal curriculum could be delivered. From my experience, parents need support themselves in educational thinking and curriculum developments. Would a 'free' school recognise its responsibility to future society and be driven 'enough' by educational goals as well as commercial ones? Further, in England we now have a system where parents are well informed of a school's academic performance. Sweden does not. Adopting a 'free' school system would, therefore, have a different slant as many parents would expect to have this data at hand to aid their decision making. With a school's survival and success based on data, we would need to be mindful of the nature of that data and how it had been collected. For example, a mathematics level is relatively easy to determine, a pupil's level of well being is not.

I. Conclusion

Based on the limited evidence gathered, I would feel concerned if Kent pursued the concept of 'free' schools without working detailed models of the effect on pupil outcomes in the short and medium term and the equipping of young people for society in the long term. I have pondered whether an existing Kent primary school could become a 'free' school. This is of particular interest to me as the head of a large (410 pupils) successful primary school. I am drawn to the freedom the 'free' schools have to 'do their own thing'. This autonomy has considerable appeal! I have a strong educational philosophy and a determination to translate aims into positive outcomes for pupils. However, I also have a commitment to partnership working and meeting the needs of the wider community through a family of schools in collaboration with other agencies. The concept of 'free' schools threatens my vision of schools working together with the potential benefits of the economies of scale and multi agency support.

J. Personal Implications

The trip provided me with outstanding professional development, reflecting on my role as a headteacher and reinforcing my commitment to the development of young people to take their place in contributing to wider society. I have recognised the possibility of becoming a governor in a secondary school as a means of familiarising myself with the post age 11 agenda, whilst also contributing to our education system on a wider scale. Further, I need to get my business plan ready for my bank manager to assess whether I can run a private school funded by the government! I have the philosophy and drive! How much would it cost to buy The Brent I wonder . . . ?!

Sue Nicholson February 2010