

# Recent Literacy Research in Sweden - Some Examples

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# Some trends in large scale surveys

## PISA 2006

- Results in reading comprehension show no significant differences compared to previous results (2000, 2003), neither on average or among the best readers
- The poorest readers had significantly lower results in 2006 than previously (although this group is still comparatively small)
- There is a larger gap between the high and low performing groups in 2006 than before
- Boys have lower results than girls, differences are constant
- Differences between schools are generally small but increased in PISA 2006
- Pupils with a non-Swedish background have significantly lower results than 'native' Swedish pupils

# Some trends .....

## PIRLS

- Reading performance declined significantly between 2001 and 2006
- The group of best readers was significantly smaller in 2006 than in 2001
- However, differences between the best and the poorest readers remained relatively low
- Significant difference between the performance of boys and girls
- Significant difference between the performance of 'native' and 'non'-native pupils (particularly those not born in Sweden)

# National evaluations of progress

- The same trends as those from PISA and PIRLS can be found in the national evaluations. Some significant results have been subject to in-depth studies, both statistical analyses and targeted studies of certain aspects.

# Overview of factors that influence results in the Swedish schools

- Changes in society
  - a widening social gap
  - more broken homes
  - more segregated communities (people with low income and low educational background, and recent immigrants live in areas separate from other groups)
  - deconstruction of the well-fare system
  - a clear ideological change towards a market economy
  - and, yet, a generally higher level of education

- Some school reforms
  - decentralisation (from a state-run to a municipality-run school, leading to larger differences between schools, as allocation of resources is decided on local level)
  - increased freedom of choice (parents can choose any school in the municipality or town, which leads to more segregation)
  - more possibilities to start independent schools

# Changes observed in schools

- Groups of pupils are more homogeneous, on class as well as school level
- Differences between groups of pupils and between schools have increased
- Highly motivated pupils choose schools with a clientele of children whose parents have high education and income, and where there are few immigrant pupils
- Other *contextual* effects are ‘the fellow pupil’ effect, i.e. pupils in the same class influence each other, and *teacher’s expectations* on pupils (teachers expect more from ‘Swedish’ pupils with educated parents)
- Parents’ expectations also make a difference

# More observed changes

- Lower teacher-pupil ratio
- Fewer teachers with appropriate education (esp in independent schools)
- More differentiation between pupils, 'streaming' or grouping according to performance level has become more common
- More individualised teaching - in the sense that pupils do more work on their own with very little assistance from the teacher
- More homework for which parents are expected to take responsibility

# Some specific studies

## 'Reading for life'

- In the light of research results pointing out children in low-income, 'non-Swedish' areas as low-achievers in reading, Damber (2010) studied 'unexpectedly' high-performing classes and pupils, in a mixed methods study. Typical for these classes was a *positive classroom climate*, much *voluntary reading*, use of *authentic literature*, an *experienced teacher*. Teachers used a *future oriented pedagogy*, *aesthetic activities*, *dynamic assessment*, *strong framing*, much *reading of fiction* and *creative writing*. In retrospective interviews former pupils in one of these schools mentioned some success factors: the importance of being *acknowledged in school*, good *knowledge of oral and written Swedish*, and the development of *reading competency*. They had positive memories of their schooldays.

## ‘The twin study’

- A longitudinal study involving more than 700 pairs of twins (monozygotic or dizygotic, same sex)
- Comparative study in four countries, Australia, Norway, Sweden and the US (Samuelsson, Byrnes, Olson et al., reported in several articles)
- Continuous testing of the children’s linguistic and literacy development from pre-school through primary school (research still ongoing)

The influence of genetics and environment on some linguistic skills at the age of 5 years

<b>Linguistic abilities</b>	<b>Genetic Influence (%)</b>	<b>Environmental influence (%)</b>
Phonological awareness	<b>61</b>	<b>30</b>
Rapid naming	<b>64</b>	<b>11</b>
Verbal memory	<b>57</b>	29
Vocabulary	<b>32</b>	<b>60</b>
Early literacy competence	<b>23</b>	<b>68</b>

# 'Children conquer literacy' - An early literacy study

- The 18 monolingual children (10 boys, 8 girls) in this ethnographic study were between 1 1/2 and 3 years old (Björklund, 2008). They were videotaped one day a week for 20 months, with a focus on literacy activities. Children's drawings, play-writings etc were collected as well as teachers' documentation of the children's development. Some overall conclusions were:
  - Narrative, reading and writing exist without any particular order
  - Narrative knowledge is captured in the activities
  - Children prefer books with complex content
  - Children organise literacy events in certain places
  - Children constitute themselves as narrators, readers and writers
  - Children create a manifesto of literacy

# Parents and teachers make a difference

- In a re-analysis of data from PIRLS 2001 Frank (2009) studied the possible impact of school and classroom climate as well as home- school relationships on 9-10 year old pupils' reading development. She found that parental participation was positively associated with achievement on group level and that this had more to do with *teacher competence* than home background, even if the pupils' home background accounts for a substantial amount of the variance in pupils' reading skills. It seems that teacher competence includes not only skilled instruction but also the ability to create a safe social climate in class and a positive relationship with pupils' parents.

## Computer supported, self-regulated learning

Folkesson and Swalander (in progress) observed two second-grade classes who used computers as learning tools. The teachers were knowledgeable and experienced ICT users, which seems to be an important factor for pupils' successful learning in this way. The learning environment was characterized by pupils' high degree of self-regulation. Areas particularly focused were metacognition, motivation and behaviour.

# The following features were observed among the pupils

- Metacognition
  - Awareness of the learning process
  - Awareness of the working process
  - Awareness of relation between different aspects

- Motivation

- Enjoyment factor
- Stimuli for new tasks
- Eagerness to work

- Behaviour

- Helpfulness
- Involvement
- Responsibility

## Literacy cultures in grades 4 - 6

- Ewald (2007) made an ethnographic study of the teaching of Swedish in four different school settings.
- The typical 'middle-grade' teacher does not emerge. However, the observed teachers were keen on creating a safe atmosphere in class and have conflict-free relations with their pupils. Although the views of teachers and pupils on reading, literature and schooling were heterogeneous, classroom practice for the most part was rather traditional, much focused on reading skills and spelling. Ewald indicates that historical reproduction as well as contemporary demands have a great impact on literacy cultures in school, giving little room for more cognitively demanding activities and critical thinking.

# Final remarks

- These are just a few examples of the wide array of research in the field of literacy that has been carried out in Sweden in the last 10 years or so. For this presentation I had about 50 studies to choose from.
- Large-scale surveys can be used to show some general trends in pupils' performance, particularly on group level. These are often used in political debates.
- That is good, if the politicians do not misinterpret the results and draw conclusions that seem to be in line with their political ideology.

# Who is to blame?

- So, if the reading and writing abilities of Swedish pupils has declined, and there are significantly more pupils now than 20 years ago who cannot reach the curricular goals for literacy set out for their age level, who or what is to blame?
- Structural changes in the society?
- Recent school reforms?
- The parents?
- The teachers and their teaching methods?
- Lack of resources or the wrong priorities?

# Conclusion

- Probably a combination of all these and more.
- Children read other things today than 20 years ago and they are engaged in a variety of activities.
- Maybe school does not meet the children on the right level? Maybe the decline among the best readers is a sign that school is boring and that they do not get enough challenges?
- Swedish teachers need to improve their competence, both in knowledge of literature and in didactic aspects.
- And school authorities have to provide the means for it - so it's all down to politics.

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