



Malmö stad

Student Experiences of the Compulsory School in Malmö: in the words of students in the IV- Programme¹ (Summary)

Meta Cederberg and Ingegerd Ericsson

¹ The *Individuella Programmet* (Individual Programme (IV)) has been designed for students who do not qualify for the national upper secondary school programmes because they have failed to reach the required level in at least one of the following: Swedish/Swedish as a Second Language, mathematics, English. The individual programmes followed by the students are of one year's duration and, on their successful completion of the course(s), students are then admitted to the national programmes.

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Summary and student suggestions

A study was commissioned by the Board of Education in Malmö to investigate the experiences students on the IV Programme had of their compulsory school. The need for the study arises from the high number of students who, at the completion of compulsory school, are not qualified to apply for the national programmes at the upper secondary school. The study will establish the basis on which actions can be planned to reduce the number of unqualified students in Malmö. The overarching research question to be addressed by the study seeks to identify the reasons for the low levels of qualification among students.

The students who participated in the study were not qualified to apply for the national programmes in upper secondary schools in spring 2008. They failed to fulfil the attainment criteria in one or more of the following required subjects: Swedish/Swedish as a Second Language, mathematics and English. From an overall research group of 389 students, a sample of 296 (76%) students (147 male and 146 female) participated in a web inquiry. Forty of these (21 male and 19 female) were also interviewed. In addition 10 parents and 14 school personnel, who were in daily contact with the students on the IV-Programme, were interviewed. Empirical data were collected with the help of both the inquiry and semi-structured interviews offering the possibility for both precision and complexity in analysing the collected materials.

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

What are the reasons for students' non-qualification?

Is it possible to identify significant variables such as sex, socio-economic background and length of stay in Sweden in the sample? What levels of heterogeneity are apparent in the group?

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How has the school addressed the needs of the students? Do students with a Swedish background describe the way in which their needs have been

addressed and support provided differently from those students with a foreign background? Are there gender differences in the student reporting?

What support do students report having been given in the compulsory school and how have they experienced this support? Have the students had needs which have not been noticed by the school?

What suggestions for improvements in the compulsory school do the students make?

Factors contributing to students' under-qualification

Students' school careers have developed in a complex interplay, involving their living conditions, the school situation, and individual circumstances.

Description of the sample group

The study of the background of the group of under-qualified students shows that the students experience poor socio-economic circumstances and that most of the students' parents were not born in Sweden. When taken as a group, the students are seen to be growing up in areas with a high proportion of poor families. Many live in overcrowded conditions.

A substantial majority of the parents do take an interest in the students' school performance. About a fifth of the parents have a negative attitude to the school personnel, while about a quarter of the parents have difficulties in helping their children with their homework. Parents of students born abroad have a greater interest in students' school work than other parents.

In the subjects necessary to qualify for the upper secondary school, 78% of the unqualified students failed to reach the required level in mathematics, the subject which presents problems to most students. More than half the students failed to achieve the necessary standard in the other qualifying subjects.

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Most of the students were born in Sweden and approximately 70% have spent their whole schooling in a Swedish compulsory school. Significantly more girls than boys were born abroad and the girls born abroad have spent, on average, a shorter time in Sweden than the boys who were born abroad.

Some of the girls had never attended school before they arrived in Sweden because of circumstances in their home countries. Students of school age who arrive in Sweden are placed in the compulsory school class appropriate to their age. This may mean that they have to skip years and that they will not study each subject as much as other students. Boys have received significantly more support in Swedish/Swedish as a Second Language and English than girls.

It is not possible to identify any specific student circumstances or school conditions which offer an explanation of the school career of the students. From inquiries and interviews there appears to be a complex interplay involving different background conditions and circumstances at school and also the school resources, which has determined the school career of the students.

One can point to conditions which work together to produce negative school processes: weak language knowledge in Swedish, low motivation, truancy, dyslexia and other neurological function deficits, bullying, illness and social problems.

The ways in which these problems are addressed by the school influence the students' school development. Studies and interviews demonstrate the importance of timetable organisation and of the support measures put in place. The student-teacher relationship and the students' reaction to the teacher's teaching style are also of importance.

This complexity is illustrated in the following sections. In order to serve as a basis for decision-making the report is presented in a way which facilitates the visualisation of the conditions and complexity of the problems identified in the research.

Language problems

Students who were not born in Sweden and who were of school age when they arrived in Sweden did not have time to become sufficiently proficient in

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Swedish in order to employ the language in its abstract function. Conditions such as stress, tiredness and insecurity have also interacted with language problems to make schooling more difficult. Girls have experienced significantly more stress, tiredness and insecurity than boys. During

interviews, the girls who had lived for only a short time in Sweden stated that they had often suffered from tiredness and headaches. To understand and use a new language is difficult and demands concentration. Schools have offered extra support and support with homework during the afternoon and sometimes during after-school hours. Students stated in interviews that they wished to have more extra support and that they wanted to join the homework support group, but were too tired to do so.

Truancy

Fourteen per cent of the students stated that they truanted every day from school. This could mean that they were present in some lessons or none at all during the day. The reasons for truancy differed. It could be that it was more fun to play football and to be with friends; it was easier to avoid bullies and the difficulties presented by school. Truancy could lead to a negative spiral. When the students had been away and then had come back to school, it was difficult to catch up with work. This led to more truancy which made it more difficult to understand what their classmates were working with during the lessons. The school could also regard the absence from school as truancy, while the students claimed that they had been absent because they did not feel well and had been ill.

In comparison with students born in Sweden, the students who were born outside the country cared more about school work, spent more time on homework and many thought that the demand placed on them in year 9 to achieve grades was too low.

Low motivational levels

Almost half (40%) of the students responded that they always or almost always were tired of school, while 30% stated that they were often tired of school. Disaffection with school can result from pressure. Students born in Sweden gave up when the work at school became too difficult and felt more disaffected than students who were not born in Sweden. Student *motivational levels* were affected when school work was viewed as too

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difficult. It appears that schools cannot make their provision sufficiently interesting or provide enough support to make it meaningful. *Two teaching styles/ways of working* are implicit in student responses. Firstly, students described teachers who talked to them and tried to explain in many different ways until they understood; secondly, students described a style in which the teacher explained less, shouted at them and became impatient with them. Teaching styles seem to affect student motivational levels in different ways: the first reinforces student motivation, while the second tends to reduce motivational levels. Most students have enjoyed school and respond that they have had some or several teachers whom they assess to be good teachers, teachers who they felt have cared about them. In such cases, there is, to a greater extent, silence during the lesson. Approximately a third of the students have not enjoyed school and have a negative experience of the teachers. There are students who have no experience of having teachers with whom they have had a positive relationship. Six per cent of the students were sent out of the classroom every day and 19% at sometime during the week.

Bullying

According to the students who have been bullied, bullying impacts negatively upon school work. Thirteen per cent of the students said that they had been bullied or harassed by other students every day or at sometime during year 9. There are no significant differences between the responses of students born in Sweden or those born abroad to questions about bullying. Seven per cent said that they had been harassed by teachers. Students sought support from teachers to put an end to bullying. Students reported various experiences in interviews about whether teachers could help stop bullying or if they received support. According to students, bullying occurs when no adults are present. It was reported in interviews that, when the school did not interfere, students developed various strategies to avoid the bullies such as 'making themselves invisible', truanting or retaliating aggressively. The strategies were not successful from the school perspective or according to the individual student's statements. Those who 'made themselves invisible' avoided being seen in school and participating in the homework support sessions which were scheduled in the late afternoon, preferring rather to rush home. Some students reported that they literally hit back at those who were bullying them in order to build a reputation for being fighters.

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Dyslexia problems

For some students, dyslexia problems have been the cause of their non-qualification. After investigation, it was found that 15% of the students experienced reading and writing difficulties. Twenty-seven per cent stated that they thought they had these problems. Dyslexia is a disturbance of neurological functions and not a cognitive disability. The way in which the school addresses students with dyslexia problems appears to be very important in determining whether the dyslexia will be a learning problem or not.

Illness and Social Problems

Approximately one third of the students felt that they would have achieved higher grades if they had been healthier. Significantly more students born outside Sweden were more worried about what happened at home and at school than those born in Sweden. Students who were of school age when they arrived in Sweden claimed to suffer from headaches, tiredness and stress. Research has shown that migration leads to psychosomatic stress reactions, which can develop into illness. Students can also suffer post-traumatic stress symptoms, i.e. severe stress reactions, if they have experienced traumatic circumstances such as war or similar hostilities.

Students, who were not born in Sweden, indicated more often that they would like to have adults at school to talk with than did students born in Sweden. Absence through illness can be interpreted as truancy by the school if communication systems between the parents and school are not effective. In the case of illness, students need support so that they do not fall behind in their school work. During the interview one student describes the difficulties experienced in finding support at home when the student was ill over a longer period.

Students who are born in another country were more worried about what was happening at school and at home. They felt excluded more often and less safe during self-study-time and breaks and on their way to and from school. Students who were not born in Sweden wanted more contact between school and home.

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Support Measures

The group of unqualified students has received a little additional support from their schools. Forty-three per cent of the students received some form of extra support and 57% responded that they received none. Support was provided first in years 7-9, with slightly more being offered in year 9.

Only 5% of the students received extra support in years 1-3 and 10% during years 4-6. Girls received more support than boys in only one subject, mathematics. Boys received significantly more support in Swedish/Swedish as a Second Language and in English. The forms in which support was provided were group teaching in a special classroom (24%), help from a special needs teacher in the classroom (13%), and individual teaching by a special needs teacher in a special classroom (11%).

Most students, approximately 70% of those who had extra support, experience the support positively and want more support. One group of students, approximately 30%, attributed no importance to the support offered and were of the opinion that additional support would not have led to their achieving higher grades. Students born in another country felt more strongly that it was embarrassing to receive educational support at school.

According to what students stated in interviews, the way in which the support is provided is important. Students prefer support in smaller groups with a teacher who explains until they understand. How the support is presented is also important. Approximately 40% indicated that it had been embarrassing to receive support and a little more than 40% that the learning support made them feel failures in school, which may have a negative impact on their self image and motivational levels. Support in mother-tongue and support with homework seem to be scheduled late in the afternoon, which the students felt could affect how much they could profit from the provision or even if they were able to participate in it.

There are no measurable differences in the pass and failure rates in the qualifying subjects between the group which received support and the group which received none. One interpretation is that the efficiency of the support is dependent upon the way in which the school organises the support measures, the way in which it is delivered, the content of the support, and how the students experience the support.

Students suggestions for improvements at school

- Smaller class sizes to allow teachers sufficient time.
- Teachers should help all students.
- Teachers should explain in different ways until students understand.
- Teachers should not say that they cannot explain better and that students have to try more themselves. Students then give in.
- Teachers should ask why students are causing problems; it may be because they do not understand.
- Teachers should acknowledge students when they try to improve in school.
- Teachers should listen to the students.
- Teachers should treat boys and girls fairly.
- If students raise their hand, they should be asked for the answer, especially if they try to demonstrate that they now care about school.
- Teachers should not mix unruly students with students who need support in the same support group.
- Support teaching should be offered more frequently during the week and not late in the day.
- Homework support should be offered directly after the last lesson of the day finishes with only a short break in between.
- Teachers should check for truancy and phone the student's home at the first instance.
- It was not the teachers who were in the wrong, but rather it was me who did not understand that when I truant I fall too far behind in my work. Teachers should check for truancy more.
- You should mix enjoyable subjects with the boring.
- If you are playing football during the break it cannot be a short break because then you do not manage to be on time for the lesson.
- You should start with something enjoyable in the morning and then more students would be on time.
- Vary the lessons so that you mix the study of the more difficult things you need to know with study of topics which are less important.
- Intervene immediately in cases of truancy.
- Understand that truancy is infectious - it is difficult to resist when a student is going on and on about truanting together.

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- If you start truanting, you fall behind. It is not good. It is easy to truant, especially when you have many teachers, because you are spreading the truancy out so that it is less noticeable for each teacher. You are surprised when it is all added together so this should be done each week so that you understand how much it is.
- Teachers should see when students are not feeling well and not force them to be at school.
- Teachers must look out for bullying and tell the bullies to stop. You do not put an end to the bullying by talking yourself to a school counsellor.
- There should be adults out and about during breaks and self-study hours. You are bullied when there are no adults around.
- A teacher should speak and write good Swedish.
- A teacher should have a deep knowledge of his/her subject.