

SCHOOL CHOICE AND ITS EFFECTS
IN SWEDEN
OFFPRINT OF REPORT 230
- A SUMMARY

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– a summary¹

¹) In this summary references are only given for quotations. For full references, please refer to the main report.

Preface

This report is the third of its kind from the National Agency for Education where the topic under evaluation is school choice. The report "Val av Skola" (Choice of School) was published in 1993 and was followed in 1996 by "Att välja skola" (Choosing a School). The three reports exhibit both similarities and differences. Some issues, for example information on choosing a school and parents' attitudes to the choice of school, occur in all of them. At the same time, each one of the three reports has its own distinctive character and in consequence the focus varies. The different reports are obviously also characterised by policy developments in the schools field.

The aim of this report is to cast light in different ways on one of the most complicated and politicised issues in the schools field. The government's view on matters of school choice over time is analysed as is what distinguishes the country's various local authorities in terms of policy on school choice issues. Parents' attitudes to school choice are also surveyed at the same time as people working in schools and local government officials are given room to express themselves on the assessment of different contributions to and the effects of school choice. Collection of data took place mainly during 2000/2001.

The target group for this study is primarily parliament and the government. Decision makers need knowledge and information in order to be able to formulate, review and ultimately make decisions in the field. Hopefully, decision makers and public officials at local level will also find the report useful. The report may also be of benefit outside the decision-making arena in discussions among parents and teachers and in the media. Some of the approaches to the problem as well as the study's results may also act as a starting point for further discussions in the world of research.

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Chapter 1

Aims and methods

The overall aim of this study is to shed light on the effects of school choice (valfrihet) from an equivalence (likvärdighet) point of view. The survey deals with the significance of the central concept of school choice but also with how this choice is exploited and handled at both local authority and individual level. It covers the perceptions, attitudes and policies of parents and local authorities on school choice issues. As regards the effects of school choice, we concentrate on the development of schools, influence and segregation. The study is restricted to the nine-year school.

Three different investigative techniques have been used: an analysis of documentation, postal questionnaires and interviews. The documentation has been used to analyse a large quantity of literature and government bills dealing with school choice issues at government level.

Two surveys were carried out in order to establish the perceptions and attitudes of parents and the policies of local authorities on school choice issues.

The first was directed toward a representative sample of parents (4700), with pupils in the second, fifth or ninth year of a nine-year school in spring 2001.

The second was directed toward every local authority in the country and, in some cases, to rural and urban districts within the local authority area. In total, the survey of local authorities covers 262 authorities out of 289 and 92 rural and urban districts out of 103.

Finally, interviews were used to obtain a deeper understanding of how school choice is perceived and practised at individual, school and local authority level. Five local authorities were investigated in detail and a total of 28 schools and 195 individuals were included in the interview survey.

A discussion on school choice and equivalence and the relationship between them may take a number of different initial assumptions within the limits of the existing system as in fact determined this study.

In the first place, the assumptions may be based on political and educational theory as regards the analysis of the meaning of various central concepts and how they may be related to one another. We have in part adopted this standpoint when we have either presented various research results or carried on a problematising discussion on the possible initial implications of school choice, the development of schools, influence and segregation. School choice is reasonably regarded as a part of the concept of freedom in which it is equivalent to 'freedom to choose what I want';

influence can readily be related to different concepts of democracy and the term segregation is identified using the distinction between homogeneous and heterogeneous.

Second, the starting point may be an analysis of education policy based concepts. School choice, school development and influence have been analysed from various party political and ideological viewpoints. Views of school choice have changed but continue to be characterised by ideological differences between Social Democrats and Moderates. These have, however, diminished over time. The need for school development has been emphasised by all political parties but with different motivations. Influence has partly been perceived in different ways by Social Democrats on the one hand and Moderates on the other. The middle class side of the argument has mainly viewed school choice as a natural precondition for influence while the Social Democrats have to a greater extent emphasised the importance of developing different types of user bodies within schools.

Third, the starting point may be different concepts among parent and/or student groups on the matter of how the term is understood per se and how school choice affects different aspects of equivalence. In the present study, this starting point has been used in part when we have proceeded from how parents view the opportunity for choice within the schools field.

Fourth, the starting point may be empirical and investigative. In the survey there is data that is founded on perceptions by parents together with assessments by local authority officials and data from case studies of individual local authorities.

The organisation of this summary broadly follows that of the main report. Because school choice is one of the prime topics of the report, the study addressed this at the outset for analysis in greater detail, in particular taking as its starting point how the expression is used in the Swedish education policy debate (Chapter 2). For the greater part, this examination of the concept of school choice forms the basis for the remainder of the study. In this part there appear a number of arguments for and one argument against school choice. These arguments reappear later as possible effects of school choice. We then report (Chapter 3) the results of the comprehensive parent questionnaire, which provides, among other things, answers to the questions of who exploits school choice and what different perceptions of school choice there are within different groups of parents. There then follows the first of three parts that deal with the other effects of school choice. School development (Chapter 4) is dealt with first followed by influence (Chapter 5) and segregation (Chapter 6). School choice is then fed back into another central value of Swedish school policies - equivalence (Chapter 7). The concept of equivalence is introduced and we provide a brief discussion of the extent to which it is possible to combine the two values. By way of conclusion, there is a short summary in bullet form.

Chapter 2

The concept of school choice

Since this study proceeds from the premise that school choice (valfrihet) has been a central element of the Swedish debate on education policy and a number of central reforms of education policy in recent times have been founded on school choice, we begin this study with an analysis of the concept.

The analysis is restricted to the debate on Swedish schools policy and is initially compared with the arguments on school choice between the moderates and the social democrats over the last 20 years. Has the view of school choice change with time?

The expression school choice has been used with different meanings at different times. However, much points to school choice in the schools field having come to stay. Both the social democrats and the moderates view school choice favourably although views diverge when it comes to interpretation and application. The moderates consider it desirable that all schools be transformed to 'independent' and 'free' schools while the social democrats, on the other hand, maintain that there must be a balance between local authority and independent schools if one is to be able to talk about school choice at all.

This prominent view of school choice that primarily characterises the moderates' outlook but also has quite a high degree of relevance to the social democratic standpoints has, however, been preceded by a long struggle over the meaning of the concept.

For the social democrats' part, ideas on school choice have been incorporated in schools policy from the end of the 1980s onwards. From the outset school choice meant choice within the school, but from the beginning of the 1990s, this perception was expanded. Parents/pupils were, in addition, to be given the opportunity to choose schools within the local authority school system in the area where they lived.

When the party returned to power in 1994, the moderates' definition of school choice was, generally speaking, accepted with some exceptions. To give a couple of examples, the level of school capitation allowances was reduced and later the capitation allowance system itself was abolished. Developments in the schools field at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 21st century created a situation in which the social democrats came to argue in a manner similar to that in which the moderates had previously

done. The social democrats are now arguing for 'real' school choice and thereby opposing the development proposed by the moderates - that all schools should be transformed into independent and free schools. As far back as the beginning of the 1980s the moderates were using the expression school choice in a wide sense; choice within the school, choice between local authority and independent schools and choice within the local authority school system.

The moderates' strategy as an opposition party, i.e. before 1991, amounted to striving for the conditions necessary for school choice - legislative and financial equivalence between local authority and independent schools.

In power, the moderates introduced a school capitation allowance system that, in principle, puts the two types of school on an equal footing. At the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century, the party recommended a completely free choice of school combined with a national school capitation allowance without any neighbourhood principle.

With this idea the moderates are approaching the outer bounds of the concept of school choice while, for their part, the social democrats are striving for a balance between the two types of school while retaining the neighbourhood principle.

The arguments for and against school choice are many.

Three stand out as being particularly clear. The first is that school choice stimulates parents to increased involvement with the school at the same time as generating greater willingness among schools and local authorities to listen to the desires of pupils and parents.

The second argument is that school choice satisfies the need for diversity of educational paths, teaching methods and profiles at the same time as creating an incentive for cost effectiveness.

The first argument ultimately revolves around democracy in schools while the second falls within the area of school development.

These pro arguments, which are mainly advanced by the moderates, are met by a third (contra) argument often put forward by the social democrats, namely that increased school choice risks leading to increased ethnic and social segregation. Against this argument, the moderates in turn point out that school choice tends to have integrating effects in areas characterised in areas with significant housing segregation. It is common to all these pro and contra arguments that competition is singled out as the mechanism behind the effects.

The concept of school choice is, to a significant extent, related to another central concept in schools policy- equivalence. The social democrats' ambitions for the principle of equivalence are expressed in terms of equality at both individual and system level.

At individual level, every pupil is entitled to be covered by the principle of equal opportunity for education. When a pupil has a special need,

society must arrange support so as to guarantee equality at least on the resource level.

On the system level, all local authorities and schools are under a duty to offer equivalent education irrespective of where in the country it is arranged. This view of equivalence limits the room for school choice, i.e. the need for school choice diminishes if all schools offer equivalent education of high quality.

The moderates emphasise a quite different aspect of the concept of equivalence, 'equal access', which - in the moderate view of things - requires that local authority and independent schools be put on an equal footing in all respects.

So far as the moderates are concerned, they adhere to the tradition of thought that refuses to take account of results, which the social democrats do not do to the same extent. On this point there are continuing differences between the moderate and social democrat views on school choice in schools policy. Moderate quarters emphasise the value of 'the opportunity of optimal development for all', which even at the conceptual level presumes inequalities, variations and differences between pupils. Hence the principle of equivalence, in the moderate conception, is not at all at odds with school choice.

Both the social democratic and moderate arguments emphasise, albeit in different ways, that school choice can be tied to equivalence, which is in itself an interesting and important observation.

We shall return at the end of the summary to the relationship between school choice and equivalence.

Chapter 3

Attitudes to school choice

3.1. INTRODUCTION

The study aims to map out attitudes to school choice in the nine-year school. Obviously, one central group in this context is parents and a survey of them was thus carried out. This was based on a sample of 4700 parents of pupils in the second, fifth and ninth years of nine-year schools.

In addition to parents being questioned, in 2000 a local authority questionnaire was also sent to those responsible for administering nine-year schools in all local authorities.

The results of the questionnaire, which was directed to a representative sample of parents and representatives of all local authorities, are very extensive. These investigations were carried out in spring 2001 and autumn 2000 respectively. In this context, we have chosen to emphasise a number of what we consider to be central observations.

In reporting the results from the survey of parents, we differentiate between results from local authorities where there is relatively speaking great opportunity for choice and other authorities. The first group are called 'Choice Authorities' and comprise Botkyrka, Stockholm, Sodertälje, Uppsala, Helsingborg and Vasterås. These authorities were included in a study carried out by the National Agency for Education in 1996. The second group, known as 'Other Authorities' consists of authorities with large variations in terms of opportunity to choose schools. The Other Authorities group is generally speaking similar to the country as a whole in this respect.

3.2. WHICH PARENTS CHOOSE SCHOOLS?

As regards the question of how school choice is exercised, our results show that 67% of parents in Choice Authorities and 34 % in Other Authorities made an active choice when they chose the school their child went to.

To a large extent, parents who chose schools in Choice Authorities had higher education while in Other Authorities it is mainly parents with nine-year education who choose.

Choice and Other Authorities notwithstanding, it is mainly highly educated parents who state that they chose an independent school. The results also show that parents actively choose in favour of rather than

against a school. Just over 80% and 70% of respectively of parents who chose a school state that they chose in favour of a school (local authority or independent).

In Other Authorities, the majority of the 25% of parents who chose the nearest school had a nine-year education while the (smaller) proportion that chose an independent or another local authority school largely had higher education.

Parents who live in agricultural and sparsely populated authorities or small Other Authorities were less likely to choose a school. In these authorities too, parents who chose an independent school for their children have a higher level of education than average.

3.3. ARE PARENTS INFORMED?

Around 50 % of parents state that they have sufficient information to be able to choose the school for their child. Highly educated parents and parents who actively chose a school feel themselves relatively well informed.

The group who state that they did not receive information includes parents with no more than 'gymnasium' education (i.e. the last three years of secondary education between the ages of 16 and 19) and parents from agricultural areas are over represented.

In addition, parents who did not make a choice are more likely than those who did to state that they did not receive information. At the same time relatively many parents, especially in Other Authorities, state that they did not need information on the choice of school because there was no opportunity to choose.

A significant group of parents did not know about the existence of independent schools in their neighbourhood at all.

16 % of parents in Other Authorities and 25 % of parents in Choice Authorities do not know whether there are independent schools in the neighbourhood where they live.

3.4. WHAT DO PARENTS THINK ABOUT THE OPPORTUNITY FOR CHOOSING SCHOOLS?

An overwhelming majority of parents (more than 90 %) agree that parents and children should themselves get to choose what school children are to go to and just over a third consider that having more independent schools is a good thing.

More than half of parents in both Choice and Other Authorities agree with the statement that it is good for schools to compete with one another. The sub-groups that are most favourably inclined to competition between

schools are parents with higher education, parents from metropolitan areas and those who actively chose an independent school for their child. Within these groups, between 60 and 70 % concur with the statement, which is clearly more than other groups.

As regards the assessment of other parts and possible consequences of school choice reforms, the study shows that the undecided proportion has grown in comparison with the results from a similar measurement in 1993. This applies, for example, to the attitude to independent schools. The proportion of parents having no view on whether it is good for schools to compete and whether having independent schools is good has increased over time.

A positive attitude to certain parts of the school choice issue must be balanced against the fact that parents believe at the same time that differences in quality between different schools will increase, that schools will be forced to close and that this development will mean more elitist schools. A large proportion of parents consider that some schools will attract pupils by offering popular subjects or innovative teaching (over 70%) and that increased school choice will lead to increasing differences of quality between schools (about 60 - 70 %).

3.5. ARE THE PARENTS SATISFIED WITH THE SCHOOL?

Most parents are satisfied with the school their child goes to. Many parents also consider that the school their child goes to has lived up to their expectations. These favourable assessments apply in particular to those who chose independent schools. There is, however, a small proportion of parents who state that they are not satisfied with the schools. These are mainly those who did not choose a school.

3.6. WHAT DO PARENTS THINK IS IMPORTANT ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN'S SCHOOLS?

There are three important reasons for parents rejecting the school their child was expected to go to. First, the rejected school is perceived as being a problem school. Second, the teaching is judged to be poor and third it is stated that the school has a poor reputation.

What parents mainly consider important in the question of their child's schooling involves the internal environment - that the school is calm

and stable, that it takes good care of pupils with difficulties, has good teachers, good premises and good teaching equipment (more than 80 %).

Relatively many parents emphasise the importance of good communications/routes between school and home and that the school sets clear knowledge requirements (approx. 70% of parents).

Parents consider that it is as a whole less important that friends should go to the same school or that the school should be close to home, offer plenty of choice or be small. In previous surveys these factors have been estimated to be more significant in the choice of school.

3.7. WHAT DO THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES SAY?

The information that we have received from representatives of local authorities may be summarised is that there are opportunities for parents and pupils to choose a nine-year schools but that these are limited and the conditions varied between different parts of the country. For many people there is no more than one school to choose from within a reasonable distance. Just under half of authorities state that the choice of school is not a matter that has been discussed within the authority and a clear majority of local authority representatives considered that parents showed an interest in choosing schools only to a small extent or not at all although this had increased over the last few years.

The vast majority of pupils go to the school to which they are allocated.

Under 20 % of local authorities have more than 5 % in another school and only a few have more than 10%.

As previously stated, the conditions for choice of school vary between local authorities. The opportunity to choose schools is to a large extent considered to be a metropolitan phenomenon or an opportunity for people who live and work in densely populated parts of the country.

Chapter 4

School choice and school development

One argument for school choice that has been brought out as appears from Chapter (2) is that it favours the development of schools. Hence such development may be viewed as an expected effect, something that is investigated in this study. For this purpose, development of schools means their profile/orientation (profilering) and educational renewal (diversity in terms of educational paths, content, organisation and teaching solutions) and effectiveness. The results are based on the local authority questionnaires mentioned previously i.e. senior administrators had to state their position on a number of issues concerning the connection between school choice and the development of schools

The results are also based on case studies carried out in five selected local authorities.

As far as school development is concerned, somewhat more than half the authorities consider that school choice favours educational development. Hence, the perceived competition should act as a spur. The opportunity to choose a school has thus led to increased competitive thinking and is perceived to be a driving force for change particularly in local authorities where comparatively many pupils choose a school. The experience of being in a competitive situation is in some cases perceived as being positive - a stimulating challenge - but in others as negative if the school's position is difficult for other reasons .

The differences between schools and local authorities are considerable.

Competition leads, among other things, to changes that may be summarised in terms borrowed from business - the school becomes customer oriented and market aware - which fits in well with the changes reported by the National Agency for Education in 1996 (Choosing a School, National Agency for Education's report no. 109). Marketing is given as a new area of activity for school staff. Information management is developing. It is necessary for heads and teachers to be clear in a different way from before and to be able to present and explain the school's goals and way of working.

In many local authorities, the opportunity to choose a school has led to an increased requirement for educational renewal in the form of developing profiles and diversity.

Choice of schools has also meant that the conditions for development work have deteriorated in schools that may be designated as failing schools because of such things as a lack of continuity in their operation. In parallel with some schools setting themselves up as educational renewers, there are schools that lay stress on traditional forms of teaching. The case studies also contain examples of local authorities that are attempting to find new forms such as 'local authority free schools' that provide the possibility of combining increased freedom for the schools with the structure of local authority autonomy and in which the local authority continues to be the responsible organisation. Increased school choice can also open the doors to educational renewal. The local authority's attitude to and support for schools are deeply significant if schools are to have equivalent conditions for developing and to make it possible to provide the conditions for this to happen at all. However, the opportunity to choose schools varies greatly between local authorities. Because school choice is not a reality in all authorities, 'opening up' is possible only in some. In many the stimulus for the development of schools that school choice can provide is thus lacking.

The financial consequences of school choice vary between different local authorities. There is little that points to school choice resulting in a more effective use of resources. In almost half of the local authorities, the view tends to be that school choice entails increased cost. Real school choice requires overprovision, which is not cost effective. Establishing independent schools in local authorities with a growing population can contribute to resolving the need for teaching capacity in the authority while doing so in authorities with a shrinking population can have unfavourable consequences for the authority's finances.

Chapter 5

School choice and influence

Another argument for school choice is that increased freedom is expected to favour influence. The term influence has a variety of meanings. In the main report we have chosen to relate influence to the democratic concept and operationalised it with the help of two sub-topics.

One is commitment on the part of parents, the other readiness by the school and local authority to listen. The results are based on the survey of parents, the survey of local authorities and the five case studies.

The majority of parents have a positive view of the importance of school choice for influence. School choice leads to more involvement on the part of parents and increased willingness by teachers and local authority officials to listen. This perception differs appreciably between different parents depending on the level of education they have, whether they themselves made a choice of school and/or where they live. Those with a high level of education living in cities who themselves made a choice of school judge the significance of school choice for commitment and willingness to listen in more positive terms than do other parents.

The local authority survey and case studies point in the same direction, albeit weakly and to a varying extent, i.e. that school choice is regarded as having a positive influence, especially on the matter of willingness to listen.

At party political level, there were in the first instance two different positions on influence. One social democratic line of argument would strengthen the influence of parents and pupils by various initiatives for enhanced consumer power while a bourgeois oriented argument that became explicit from the early 1990s onwards stressed a close and positive connection between school choice and influence.

One interpretation is that the favourable attitude of parents may be seen as one of the many different expressions of ideological change. If it is true that during the 1980s and 1990s the political debate took a new direction, sometimes described by terms like 'the resurgence of the right' and 'new liberalism' or a 'system shift in education policy', the responses of parents to our questionnaire do not appear at all sensational. In the 1970s, democracy was more often discussed in terms of participation in decision making processes and/or terms of power, but from the 1980s onwards

more as an 'exit process', which may be interpreted as indicative of a change of attitudes having taken place.

Another interpretation is that ideas may be based on one's own experience of school choice reforms; this may apply at least to those parents who live in cities and made an active choice of school. Parents who made a choice of school believe to a greater extent than do others that school choice favours their influence. Of the factors examined, the variable 'made choice of school oneself has the greatest significance for the assessment of the positive significance of school choice for influence. Other facts and three interpretations should also be set against these interpretations.

First, there is considerable room for interpretation of terms like 'involvement' and 'willingness to listen'. On the one hand 'willingness to listen' means practical efforts on the part of the individual schools, and on the other it revolves more closely around the extent to which the school administration within the local authority listens. Obviously this uncertainty makes a convincing assessment of how the relationship between school choice and willingness to listen is perceived as difficult. The expressions 'involvement' and 'willingness to listen' may have been subsumed by the concept of school choice; those who themselves made a choice of an independent school in particular are more inclined to describe the school in terms of willingness to listen. In this respect, the school choice reforms have had political consequences mainly in two directions: first, formation of opinions is affected and, second, individual parents/pupils have had to think through their choice, which shifts the idea of education from being a public affair toward being a private concern.

Second, influence is not ranked as high as 'good teachers', 'the school looks after pupils with difficulties' or 'close to the school' but at the same time many parents give lack of time as a decisive obstacle to prioritising influence. One cannot quite simply 'influence'. Expressing sympathy for the requirement for 'good teachers' does not demand any special input while a specific requirement for more influence in fact implies a commitment on one's own part. Influence in many ways means greater complexity in comparison with other values such as 'good teachers', which generally speaking complicates interpretation.

Third, the assessments made in the local authority survey and case studies do not entirely agree with parents' ideas.

It is doubtful whether, on the basis of the case studies, we dare draw the conclusion that school choice in itself affects parental participation and involvement. The form in which the activity is carried out is probably of great significance for involvement and hence influence. If school choice reforms lead to more schools being parents' cooperatives, the conditions for participation and involvement are improved. Overall institutional changes aimed at different forms of public initiative favour involvement in

schools. We cannot rule out the ability of schools and local authorities to listen as being dependent simply on school staff, administrators and politicians becoming better at recognising parents' wishes. The results point to local authorities in sparsely populated areas being described as willing to listen without any evident element of school choice. The education factor could also be an explanation, particularly where parental involvement is concerned. The view has also been expressed that school choice can also have negative effects on influence if influence is to mean more than the opportunity to 'opt into' or 'opt out of taking an active part in the school; one head was of the opinion that when parents use 'opting out' as a weapon, they become more categorical and less inclined to exercise their influence and work from within.

A review of the published literature does not reveal any strong evidence of school choice reforms as having increased the influence of parents or pupils. There are a number of good reasons for school choice whilst a number of good reasons may also be advanced against it. Launching school choice reforms primarily as a reform of influence is not uncontroversial in so far as influence is not defined as school choice, in other words adopting a markedly new liberal stance on matters of influence. If school choice and influence are considered theoretically, the different underlying values of the terms are clearly apparent. School choice is to a large extent linked to ideas of the market in an economic tradition, whereas influence has its roots in different theories of democracy and power. It is not possible for scientific reasons to go much further than to say that the terms correspond to different underlying value systems and the question of whether we must have more school choice and/or more influence must ultimately be regarded as one of values. This is also precisely the case with the basic problem encapsulated in one of the many topics in the schools field, namely the question of who is to have control over the school. Part of the political argument for school choice has also incorporated grounds for increasing parental influence or power at the expense of institutional solutions based on the idea of representative democracy. Others have argued against school choice using approximately the same argument - that in the long term school choice reforms may undermine the influence of parents.

How great the differences are in terms of actual opportunities to make a choice of school is a matter of estimation. If we assume a fundamental requirement of political equality and understand education to be one of the most important conditions for political participation, the condition of equality should to a large extent govern what is regarded as a reasonable and just basis for a choice of education. The differences between groups and regions are great and this can be developed into a problem of democracy. The dilemma is that the majority of parents with certain socio-economic characteristics do not believe that school choice favours their opportu-

nities for influence while others with other socio-economic characteristics believe that school choice in practice favours their opportunities for influence. A new form of exclusion may in the worst case be accentuated with and by an increased element of school choice. These consequences must be carefully weighed against the advantages that school choice reforms give.

Chapter 6

School choice and segregation

The topic of segregation differs from that of school development and influence since segregation is often advanced as an argument against school choice and school choice reforms. In the school policy debate, the argument is however sometimes put forward that school choice can contribute to greater integration.

The results of various research projects into how school choice affects segregation give no unequivocal answers. The majority of studies do however point to school choice reforms reinforcing segregation while others - fewer in number - show that school choice reforms can reduce segregation.

A third position adduced is that we know too little overall to be able to draw safe conclusions partly because there are a large number of local, variable contexts within every school system. Besides the questionnaires and case studies mentioned earlier, a special case study aimed solely at school choice and segregation was carried out in two authorities, Vasterås and Sollentuna.

Segregation was defined and identified using the concepts of homogeneity and heterogeneity. Where it is possible to observe a correlation, i.e. homogenisation of, for example, the ethnic origins of pupils, the level of parental education and pupils' performance, we can speak of segregation. The starting point is to look at segregation at school level since school choice provides the opportunity to choose a school. If, for example, a school gets a higher proportion of pupils with immigrant backgrounds, it means that school choice leads to segregation.

The results of this study agree with those of others; school choice reforms are exploited by the highly educated, which affects homogeneity at school level. A significant proportion of senior administrators in the country's cities, suburban local authorities and large towns consider that school choice has had segregating effects, particularly in the matter of ethnic composition.

Both case studies confirm this assessment. School choice has reinforced segregation in all three respects.

First, much points to freedom being a project primarily for the well educated sector of society. This is in itself unsurprising bearing in mind that many investigations and much research have demonstrated similar tendencies. In this sense our investigation is also a confirmation, although the

tendency itself appears to be greater than has emerged from other studies. For example, between 60 and 70 % of parents who chose another local authority or independent school had a university education.

Second, school choice is a social project for those who live in cities, suburban local authorities and big towns. This is not astonishing bearing in mind that it is in precisely those places where the population base is large that real opportunities for choice exist. In other parts of the country, the school choice question does not appear to be a burning or dominant issue. The absence of real opportunities for choice because of such things as physical distance may be behind this modest interest in school choice. On the other hand, school choice is a 'hot potato' in cities, suburban local authorities and big towns. The awareness of competition that exists among people engaged in school issues in Sollentuna and Vasterås supports this assessment.

Third, many parents believe that school choice leads to effects such as differences of quality between schools, elite schools and segregation.

The answers of senior administrators to similar questions are also interesting.

The questions they were asked were not formulated in the same way as those to parents but deal directly with the assertion that school choice has, for example, led to differences in quality between schools in the authority.

There are fewer affirmative answers from local authority officials compared with how parents perceive the matter. It should, however, be observed that officials representing cities, suburban local authorities and big towns share this perception to a considerably higher degree than those representing other parts of the country, e.g. agricultural and sparsely populated parts of the country. For example, 38% of officials from cities, suburban local authorities and big towns consider that school choice has had segregating effects in terms of the ethnicity of pupils. We have investigated two cases in greater depth: S:t Ilians school and its peripheral schools in Vasterås and Tureberg school and its peripheral schools in Sollentuna. S:t Ilians school is a local authority school that is attracting pupils while Tureberg is a local authority school that is losing pupils. We would emphasise that the observations in these two cases (two schools and their peripheral schools) obviously do not apply to the country as a whole.

What we are doing is to demonstrate different mechanisms or patterns that are relevant to school choice in the schools field.

Similar mechanisms and 'results' can obviously arise in different contexts under similar circumstances. Both cases are evidence that a clear tendency for school choice leads to segregation in the sense that the pupil populations have become more homogeneous in terms of ethnicity and performance. The proportion of pupils with foreign backgrounds in year 9 of S:t Ilians has increased (from 24 % to 42 %) over the last 4 years at the same time as the proportion who achieved the knowledge targets fell from

82 % till 68 %.

Tureberg school in Sollentuna exhibits a similar change but not so dramatically. The proportion of pupils with a foreign background has increased from 42 % to 50 % at the same time as even fewer achieved the knowledge targets (from 75 % to 54 %) except in 2000 (79 %).

It should however be noted that Tureberg school has always had a very high proportion of pupils with a foreign background, i.e. 40 %. The two independent schools falling within the same area as S:t Ilians and Tureberg schools respectively reflect an opposite but not so dramatic tendency. The proportion of pupils with foreign backgrounds in year 9 of Fryxellska school has fallen from 14 % to 5 % while the proportion of pupils who achieved the knowledge targets is approximately the same as the country as a whole, i.e. a slight deterioration. Johansson's school in Sollentuna, on the other hand, exhibits a fluctuation that is difficult to assess. The school has changed in order to have a smaller proportion of pupils with foreign backgrounds (from 14 % in 1998 to 11 % in 2000, but 21 % in 1999) at the same time as relatively more pupils have achieved the knowledge targets (from 90% in 1998 to 96% in 2000). The latter is the highest figure we have for achieving the targets among the schools we have investigated. On this point too the school had a poor 1999 with 82 % achieving the knowledge targets. Hence achievement of the targets appears to correlate with the proportion of pupils with foreign backgrounds.

The two cases we investigated in detail show indications that school choice reinforces segregation both ethnically and in terms of performance.

The question is the extent to which the positive effects of school choice such as revitalisation of the school system, school development and/or increased willingness to listen and/or involvement can counterbalance its negative consequences such as the perceived differences in quality between different schools, between schools in cities and other parts of the country and segregation.

One might also wonder to what extent the positive aspects of school choice increase quality in the school system as a whole so that even relatively unpopular schools have developed in absolute terms in comparison with the period before the school choice reforms.

Chapter 7

School choice and equivalence

7.1. EQUIVALENCE

The overall objective of the study is to investigate school choice from the point of view of equivalence (likvärdighet). Just like school choice, the concept of equivalence also needs to be discussed and problematised. In order to create scope to take a broad perspective on the meaning of the term equivalence, we shall briefly discuss another associated and central concept in Swedish education policy, equality.

When equality is discussed in an educational context, a number of distinctions are usually stressed of which we will name two: 'equal access' to education means that no one may be excluded from, prevented from obtaining or obstructed in education as a result of irrelevant factors (sex, race, class, ethnicity, etc). The aims of the principle are hardly ambitious from an equality point of view, it requires no redistribution but may be described in terms of everyone being given the same chances. The fact of everyone being given formal entitlement to all parts of the education system can constitute a criterion that guarantees all citizens certain rights to education. The importance of financial and social circumstances for all pupils to have a real chance to obtain or benefit by education does not take this principle as its starting point. The principle is, however, relevant to the ongoing schools debate in two respects. First, the geographical factor may mean that access to education can be viewed as problematic and, second, the question of the position of various minorities has made the validity of the principle of current interest. The principle of 'equal opportunities' implies increased stringency in terms of the language of equality and the requirement that society must guarantee the admissions aspect is insufficient. Society must, furthermore, compensate different individuals and groups in different ways since irrelevant factors should not be allowed to affect the education of the individual pupil. Irrelevant factors generally include sex, class, ethnicity and aptitude. One step in the direction of equal opportunities would be to favour the position of the least favoured or for educational resources to be distributed in accordance with the aptitude of every pupil. 'Equal opportunities' implies different amounts of resources for pupils.

Some must have more, others less. A reading difficulty will then justify extra resources, more time may need to be set aside for some pupils etc. Achieving equal opportunity requires some redistribution of resources which has been the main criticism in new-liberal quarters since the principle may be viewed as a restriction of the freedom of those who already have sufficient resources. One complication in this context is how society is to compensate those born under unfavourable conditions. Even if individuals A and B have equal ability at the age of 6, their general living conditions may differ so much that in the long term this makes it significantly harder for the one with the worse conditions to finish school. The question of how much society must compensate or even correct for differences in background is obviously difficult.

Looking specifically at the term equivalent/equivalence, it is nothing new in Swedish education policy. It appeared, for example, at the time of the nine-year school debate in the 1950s although not as frequently as the term equality. In one of many comments on Skolkommisionen [the Schools' Commission's] main report of 1948, the National Association of Secondary School Teachers [Riksförbundet för Läröverkslärarna] described equivalence in the following terms:

The National Association also considers that the comprehensively differentiated school with fully equivalent grouping is the type of school that does justice to all types of ability at the same time as its activities actively contribute to bridging the divide between practical and theoretical education and the exercise of a trade that has long existed in our society. (Tidskrift för Sveriges Läröverkslärare [Swedish Secondary School Teachers' Journal] 8/1950)

The quotation emphasises the importance of a comprehensive/nine-year school being able to incorporate different sets, which was a way of retaining the more secondary school oriented character of the old junior secondary school. Different sets should be simply different and here the term equivalence acquired a coordinating function since it was thereby possible to handle the requirement for disparity and similarity. The thought was to design the comprehensive/nine-year school in such a way that it was differentiated and hence varied and that the different sets be recognised as being of equal value. Under close scrutiny, this wording and argument are extremely contemporary both in terms of the design of the present 'gymnasium' and the discussions on independent schools. It has, to give one example, been questioned whether all sets in a 'gymnasium' should follow three-year courses with such an extensive element of core subjects. Under the above view of equivalence and bearing in mind the radically different content of the different types of school, it should be possible for considerable differences in the standard of knowledge of pupils to exist.

Differences between the different desires of pupils and parents should, under this approach, be handled organisationally by parallel schools.

Against this approach has been set the value of a common and coherent school. In school policy documents from the post-war period, it is generally speaking more common for the contrast between freedom and differentiation on the one hand and equivalence/equality on the other to be stressed. School choice has often been contrasted with equivalence, particularly during the so-called nine-year school debate up to the end of the 1960s. Freedom to choose different study routes in the nine-year school and what was called differentiation 'were regarded by many to be in opposition to the striving for equivalence' (SOU 1992:94 p. 43). As educational policy documents from the end of the 1980s onwards no longer described the goals of the school system to the same extent in terms of a common and coherent school and of schools being characterised by equality, opportunities also opened up for handling differences in a different way. Besides schools no longer needing such strong state influence, there is no longer such a strong emphasis on matters of 'similarity' and 'uniformity':

In this context I would stress that equivalence does not mean homogeneous in the sense of everything being the same. Quite the reverse, within the framework set by the government there must be room to adapt teaching and the organisation of education to the needs of different pupils at different schools. (Government bill 1990/91:18 p. 27)

The curriculum puts the distinction between 'identical' and 'equivalent' in a similar way:

An equivalent education does not mean that the teaching must be designed in the same way everywhere or that schools' resources must be distributed identically. Regard must be had for pupils' different circumstances, needs and levels of knowledge... Teaching can therefore never be identical for all. (Lpf 94 p. 24)

This depicts a principle for the allocation of resources in which all are treated alike as an incorrect solution. Neither may the teaching itself be designed identically. During the 1960s and 70s differences between pupils were handled within the common school while during the era of parallel schools they were handled by different types of school intended for different categories of pupil. It is important to stress that even during the period when the ideas of the common school were at their peak, differences were to be handled in different ways and teaching was to be individualised. To put it crudely, the aspiration toward equality put a stop on the old parallel schools. However, in distinction from equality, the concept of equivalence finds it easier to incorporate other values such as freedom and diversity. Furthermore, the concept of equivalence allows room for the requirement

for new organisational forms. Scope is provided for both school choice and independent schools within the goal of equivalence thus:

As regards independent schools, equivalent education means partly that the school provides knowledge and skills that are substantially equivalent in nature and level to the knowledge and skills imparted by the nine-year school and partly that the school is also otherwise substantially equivalent in its general goals to the nine-year school. (SOU 1995:109 p. 40)

In the above passage we can try changing the expression 'equivalent education' to 'an equal education system'. The notion of equal schools conies into conflict with an organisational model and institutional solution based on parallel schools because differences and disparities both in the type of school and between pupils stand in the way of the goal of the common school. It would appear difficult to combine equality with school choice if school choice leads to increased differences, whether these be differences in the matter of access to education or differences between the results of the education of individual pupils. The concept of equality centres on individuals and social categories while that of equivalence, besides implying equality, may in addition be seen as part of the revised system of control in which more responsibility is placed on local school producers. As a result, the comparison is partly shifted from the individual and group level to a local authority and business level.

At the same time, it is important to stress the clear elements of 'uniform' and 'common' that are also contained within the concept of equivalence. In 'gymnasium' this may be observed in the thinking on a common core:

Equivalence is provided for mainly by all programmes of study having a number of common subjects or activities. (Government bill 1990/ 91:85 p. 96)

The import of the concept of equivalence has changed at the same time as its meanings have partly moved in different directions. Equivalence is a contentious concept that is characterised by a conflict of meanings. In the context of evaluation it may be worrisome if the concept and its meaning cannot be pinned down or clearly defined. At the same time, we must recognise that concepts of this type embodying normative aspects should be specifically regarded as contentious. The fact that talk of equivalence caught on in the 1980s may be interpreted as a questioning of the rather radical formulations on equality in education policy, particularly in the 1970s. This meant that equality became an embarrassment in that the goal was not achieved at all while simultaneously being increasingly questioned as the values of society changed. In comparison with equality, equivalence is a softer and possibly more ambiguous term.

7.2. DOES SCHOOL CHOICE FAVOUR EQUIVALENCE?

The National Agency for Education has previously discussed equivalence, partly in an anthology (*Equivalence in schools*, National Agency for Education 1995) and partly in a report (*Equivalence - a divided responsibility*, National Agency for Education's report 110). In the latter a model for equivalence consisting of three elements is proposed: 'equal access to education', 'equivalent education' and 'equal value of education'.

The first element, 'equal access', recalls what we said earlier of equality as being in part 'equal access' and in part 'equal opportunities'.

School choice thus comes to be related to topics such as the provision of education, information, selection and financial and social circumstances. It is central to this aspect that both provision and social circumstances are viewed with the individual as the point of reference and this aspect is therefore called for simplicity's sake the individual aspect.

The second aspect, 'equivalent education', is stated in the report to be a kind of objective that determines the outer limits of variations in quality and content for every type of school and activity. In practical terms it involves guaranteeing a comprehensive range in terms of choice of language and guaranteeing instruction in Swedish for immigrants. This part also means that teaching follows the curriculum and that staff have the training required. Pupils are entitled to stable schooling and must receive support in achieving their goals and both pupils and parents must be given influence in the school.

This aspect recalls what we said earlier of equality as 'equal opportunity'. It relates to a large extent with the level of activity and is therefore called the activity aspect of equivalence.

The third aspect, 'equal value of education', involves the opportunities for the individual pupil to profit from either further study or education that provides sufficient qualifications to enter the labour market (*Equivalence - a divided responsibility*, National Agency for Education's report no. 110, p. 30-36).

Generally speaking, the individual aspect (the first) has the clearest connection with this study. It is not news that the provision of education is different in the country. Although the school choice reforms have not appreciably changed access to education since demographic factors presumably continue to have the greatest significance as regards provision, the case studies show that competitive thinking has taken root in schools.

To be sure, schools as a whole do not act as a market but in local authorities with a strong element of competition, school closures are a reality. It is striking how often those working in schools present competition as a threat. Talk of collaboration has been replaced by talk of competition.

Competition also manifests itself in other ways. Places at attractive schools do not meet demand. When examined in detail, realising the principle of 'equal access' to education requires overprovision of schools. Various forms of selection mechanism are already in use and a clear division of not only pupils but also schools into 'better' and 'worse' is today a reality, which affects the opportunities for different pupils to get the education they want. As a result, the school system is becoming more differentiated in the sense that we are getting schools with different statuses and are thus approaching the point of talking about a new type of parallel school system.

A tendency toward such a development may be said to undermine the principles of both 'equal access' and 'equal opportunity'.

School choice puts the question of information in the limelight. Here the situation in terms of both availability and content can be interpreted differently in this study. Although generally speaking information in the Swedish school system is being improved, a system centred around the choice of school makes considerably higher demands in this respect than one that is more centrally controlled.

A positive interpretation is that those who will and can actually obtain the information they need.

A critical interpretation is that increased school choice requires will, knowledge and time to the extent that ever larger groups of parents and pupils end up being left outside. Great differences between different individuals as regards information risk undermining the principles of both 'equal access' and 'equal opportunity'.

The issues of selection and segregation are intimately connected and form part of the individual aspect of equivalence. Strictly speaking, schools and their various types are open to all but school choice is exercised differently by different groups of parent.

Over the relatively short period of which we are now talking, the school choice reforms have not reduced segregation in the school system. Choice is exercised to a greater extent by the highly educated and is commoner in cities. The highly educated are manifestly over represented in the independent schools category. The ideas of parents, the assessments of senior administrators and the results of the case studies all point in the same direction.

So far as the activity aspect of equivalence (the second) is concerned, the majority of issues have no direct connection with this study. However, one does require comment. The results are not unequivocal but it seems as if school choice has favourable effects on influence, primarily willingness to listen. School choice increases competition, which compels schools and local authorities to listen. At the same time, one must also stress here that influence as involvement varies greatly between different groups of parents. It is mainly parents who have themselves made a choice of school who believe that school choice leads to increased involvement.

The third aspect of equivalence, equal value of education, is difficult to relate to this study. It is too early to give an opinion on whether increased school choice can affect the readiness of pupils to opt for higher studies or whether the school choice reforms affect their situation as regards the labour market and working life. A general assessment is that an education system that both exhibits large qualitative differences and built-in organisational solutions that reinforce these, has difficulty in convincing its consumers that all education is of equal value. A counter argument might be that society's system of rewards is by no means based on meritocratic principles, i.e. neither individuals nor the labour market regard educational qualifications as prime movers for entry into working life.

Although great uncertainty about the effects of the 'knowledge society' prevails, it would appear improbable that educational factors will in the immediate future diminish in importance as instruments of selection or as a basis of vocational qualification. The greater the importance the education factor acquires as an entry ticket to the labour market and possibly as an important element of the young people of today attempting to find their identity, the more important it becomes to the individual that every single person's education be increased rather than diminished in value.

A system with built-in quality differences and hence also differences in how education is valued can lose legitimacy, as the response to the survey indicate.

Another counter argument is that the school choice reforms have positive effects (development of schools, influence etc.) for a majority of parents/pupils. Their schooling is improved as are the conditions for continued study, which in turn satisfies the need for professional qualifications.

Assume that half benefit and a quarter lose from school choice and on a quarter it has no effect. Using a utilitarian view of justice we should be satisfied with such a situation.

Since many reforms and priorities in the educational field are consciously or unconsciously supported and legitimised by utilitarian arguments, the school choice reforms might very well be put forward as an example of a successful reform. The middle classes are favoured as presumably are the elite and overall the performance of the country's schools is possibly improved.

There is, however, a crucial obstacle to this, which is precisely the interpretation of equivalence. In the history of Swedish educational policy, there is a tradition of combining utilitarianism with equality. Society is regarded as being good if everyone obtains a good education. A development in the schools field characterised as 'parallel school systems' would therefore be worrying from an equality point of view, at least where this is understood as 'equal opportunities'.

Possibly substantial differences between both individuals and schools in terms of circumstances and results should not be understood as a diver-

gence from the principle of equivalence.

Earlier we gave an example of such a view of equivalence. As appeared from the secondary school teachers' comments on the new nine-year school, institutionalised differences could presumably be defensible and compatible with equivalence, at least on condition that the disadvantaged are accorded respect and recognised as being equally valuable.

The interpretation of equivalence that the National Agency for Education has previously used and to which we refer does, however, imply a situation that is characterised by a substantial group of pupils and parents lacking information on choosing a school and by opportunities to make a choice of school varying: this constitutes a deviation from the principle of equivalence.

One great challenge from the increased emphasis on school choice is the extent to which Swedish schools can and should form a coherent system in future.

School choice affects equivalence in different ways and the effects tend to run in different directions, which obviously complicates the picture. An additional complication is the ambivalence and ambiguity that surrounds the concept of equivalence.

It is harder to achieve goals that are tied to a concept that is in itself based on different values. Few would deny in principle the existence of fundamental conflicts between freedom and equality/equivalence. Maximising both freedom and equality runs into obstacles.

Particular variants of freedom accord more or less well with different perceptions of equality. The goal of 'equal opportunities' cannot be combined with a view of freedom that emphasises 'freedom from' as radical equality goals require redistribution via the state.

Given the results of this study, a conservative assessment is that, all in all, school choice challenges several of the sub-objectives embodied in the goal of equivalence. The most serious threat is the segregating effects that directly challenge the goal of a common school open to all.

A counter argument might be that it is not school choice in itself that is the problem, but that other factors such as financial limitations, patchy information and unfavourable demographic developments are the underlying and real problem.

The credibility of the counter argument is founded on the extent to which school choice is combined with and hedged around by conditions. In specially designed school choice projects with conditions laid down in which, for example, special endeavours are made to provide information or to give vulnerable groups 'equal opportunities', school choice can have quite different effects.

When all is said and done, it is a political judgement whether social changes that ultimately have their basis in the value 'freedom' can be combined with conditional elements based on other values.

Summary

School choice is an ambiguous term whose importance in the school policy debate has changed over the last 20 years. The differences between how moderates and social democrats use the term have decreased over time.

One abiding difference in the schools policy debate is, however, that in the moderate argument the opposition between school choice and equivalence has virtually been eliminated while the social democratic argument continues to see certain conflicts between the values of school choice and equivalence.

The issue of school choice is a legitimate part of schools policy. A majority of parents in Sweden regard choice in schools favourably and more and more are taking advantage of the opportunity.

Parents are more likely to opt for schools than out of them.

There are substantial differences between different groups of parents in terms of how well informed they are in matters of the choice of school and the extent to which they choose a school. The study shows that parents with higher education living in city areas and who have themselves made a choice of school are more likely than others to consider themselves as well informed.

In particular, independent schools are chosen by parents with higher education and, generally speaking, an active choice of school occurs considerably more often in the 'Choice Authorities'. Putting it slightly more bluntly, one might say that the likelihood of parents making a choice of school increases dramatically if they live in a city and are highly educated.

Attitudes to both independent schools and competition between different schools are considerably more favourable among parents with a high level of education, parents from metropolitan areas and those who have chosen independent schools.

It should also be stressed that the results point to increased uncertainty in the assessment of the effects of school choice. Thus the proportion of parents who are uncertain of whether they approve of independent schools has increased since 1993.

A somewhat fragmented picture emerges when the effects of school choice on the development of schools is assessed at the administrative level of local authorities. In some successful schools, school choice is felt to have favoured creation of a specific reputation and diversity while failing schools lack the conditions for development.

In local authorities in sparsely populated areas, school choice can involve increases in costs.

In the matter of influence, too, the picture is somewhat fragmented, although the main tendency is for parents to see school choice as a posi-

ve driving force behind involvement. The majority of parents and representatives of local authorities consider that school choice increases pressure on schools and authorities and has as a result increased their willingness to listen.

As regards the effects of school choice on segregation, a more uniform picture emerges. In the survey of parents, a majority considered that school choice led to high profile schools attracting certain categories of pupil and that differences in quality between different schools was increasing.

Senior administrators in cities and suburban local authorities were of a similar view. In the two cases specifically studied, the results also show fairly unambiguously that segregation has in fact increased.

Since both school choice and equivalence are examples of ambiguous terms that are characterised by a prevailing conflict over their meaning, it is not possible to give a simple yes/no answer to the question of whether school choice and the associated reforms in the schools field are accommodated within an equivalence approach.

Some effects such as increased willingness to listen do not conflict at all with equivalence, quite the reverse. Other effects such as increased perceived differences in quality between schools and actual increased segregation are hard to see as fitting in with those aspects of equivalence that the National Agency for Education has previously reported.

Today, views on school choice in the schools field vary depending mainly on socio-economic factors and, if this trend continues there will be further polarisation of views on reforms that embody ideas of school choice.

A conservative interpretation is that the 'battle for school choice' is not yet over.

In order for positive perceptions of school choice to become established over time, even after institutional solutions characterised by school choice have been implemented, it must be possible for school choice to be tied to and identified with other positive values such as enhanced democracy, educational development and justice. If instead school choice is linked to increased differences coupled with segregation, and as a result creates uncertainty over the value of ideas on school choice, the legitimacy of the reforms will in the long-term be undermined.