

‘Post-Truth’ and the Decline of Swedish Education

by Magnus Henrekson and Johan Wennström. Published in *Quillette*, September 18, 2018

In the last 15–20 years, Sweden has suffered a downturn in several important aspects of the elementary and secondary education system. To begin to illustrate the state of Sweden’s schools, we can make a comparison with the heavily criticized American education system. It is a common and understandable belief, in the U.S. and elsewhere, that Swedish schools compare favorably with American schools in terms of educational outcomes. But the weakest American students in 8th grade performed significantly better than the weakest Swedish 8th graders in the TIMSS Mathematics assessment in 2011, one of the international comparative tests that have existed since the 1990s. In the latest cycle of the TIMSS Mathematics assessment, conducted in 2015, the weakest U.S. and Swedish students performed identically, but American students outperformed Swedish students in all other percentiles.

In contrast, Swedish students outperformed their U.S. peers across the entire distribution in 1995. A similar negative development can be observed in Swedish students’ performance in the PISA. Swedish 9th graders performed above the international average in the first cycle of PISA in 2000, but then Sweden’s results steadily deteriorated in each of the three PISA core areas—reading, mathematics, and science—until a low point was reached in 2012. Another PISA assessment conducted in 2012 revealed shortcomings in creativity, critical thinking, curiosity, and perseverance, and ranked Sweden 20th out of 28 countries. The findings in the TIMSS and PISA assessments suggest that there has been a significant decline in knowledge among Swedish students in recent years.

Yet the average merit rating (based on grades) in the final year of Sweden’s elementary schools has markedly improved since the late 1990s, which is highly suspicious. Indeed, the disconnect between international assessments of Swedish students’ performance and their grades is compelling evidence of rampant grade inflation in Swedish elementary schools, and the same problem is showing in secondary education as well.

Furthermore, Sweden has one of the highest levels of absenteeism and late arrivals in the OECD. Depression and anxiety among children aged 10–17 also increased by more than 100 percent from 2006 to 2016. According to Sweden’s National Board of Health and Welfare, the reasons for this dramatic increase are most likely linked to schooling and the transition from school to adult life. Similarly, physicians have suggested that the soaring prescriptions

for ADHD drugs in Sweden, where as many as nine percent of boys are medicated for ADHD in some counties, are related to factors within the school system.

Finally, there is a kind of malaise in the teaching profession. There is an acute shortage of teachers, mainly caused by a high dropout rate among students in education degree programs. A further crisis component is the selection of applicants. Today, only five percent of teachers deem their profession prestigious, and barely half of them would choose the same occupation again. This fall in teaching's status is reflected in the sizable share of applicants with low grades from secondary school and who grew up in homes with less cultural capital. Moreover, teachers are one of the least satisfied groups in the Swedish labor market, even though teachers' relative wages have increased sharply in recent years. A recent study showed that four out of ten active teachers are considering leaving the profession.

What on earth is going on?

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Postmodern, social-constructivist philosophy has been institutionalized in many Western countries' school systems, and this has adversely affected educational quality. This approach contends that knowledge and reality are subjectively constructed, which implies that knowledge cannot be transferred from teacher to student and that objectively measuring academic ability and achievement should not even be attempted. Instead, students should be given freedom of choice in their learning and work independently to acquire supposedly general skills such as creativity and critical thinking, which are considered more durable than 'facts' arbitrarily arranged in core subjects.

Sweden has gone the farthest toward abandoning a knowledge-based core curriculum and a pedagogy in which students internalize and learn to apply knowledge under the teacher's instruction and supervision. Sweden has a long history of incorporating far-reaching social-constructivist ideas into the school system. At the same time, Sweden is also unique among Western democracies in its commitment to for-profit voucher schools and school competition. This combination has proven profoundly toxic for the quality of Sweden's education.

The antecedents of this development extend far back, to when Sweden's modern school system was established in the 1960s. The abandonment of teacher-led instruction was strongly supported by the governing Social Democrats, who described the practice as "authoritarian to its core." Instead, methods that would promote students' independence and general critical thinking abilities were recommended. The first national curriculum for the new school system (enacted in 1962) thus stressed that schools "should work from norms that the pupils accept

and rules that they help to develop.” The second curriculum (enacted in 1969) then called for a breakup of the structure of the traditional subject disciplines and discouraged all types of knowledge measurement.

The third curriculum, enacted by a center-Right government in 1980, had a more clearly expressed social-constructivist underpinning. The government bill that proposed the curriculum called for schoolwork to reflect “the pupils’ view of reality,” which it claimed to be inherently different from adults’ perception of reality, and “build on their curiosity and their questions.” However, the teaching methods used in schools changed very little between the 1960s and 1980s because more senior teachers upheld a traditional teaching culture, guided by a theory of knowledge characterized by a combination of empiricism and rationalism.

It was not until the early 1990s when the oldest teachers retired that this traditional culture was displaced by the new learning paradigm. At the same time, a new center-Right government enacted a fourth curriculum in 1994, which adopted an even more explicit social-constructivist view of schooling. A committee comprised mostly of pedagogues and staff from the Ministry of Education who drafted the curriculum stated that “what is knowledge in one place is not necessarily knowledge in other places” and that “there are no ‘pure’ facts,” only facts that take on meaning from what we can see or detect. In line with these arguments, the committee suggested that “the selection of facts can vary locally” and that “not all pupils everywhere need to work with the same facts to reach a common understanding.”

This proposal was realized in the curriculum. It did not come to include a prescribed content to be covered in the form of detailed course syllabi; it merely established a number of goals and objectives that it expected schools to concretize at the local level. The goals were unspecific and open to interpretation, which, in effect, transferred the responsibility for determining the content of and methods for elementary and secondary education from the state to the individual schools and their pupils. Indeed, the pupils were expected to assume successively greater responsibility for the planning and content of their education, whereas the teachers’ main priority was to support self-directed learning.

In tandem with the revised curriculum, a new grading system was enacted. One of the system’s defining features was that it eliminated the anchoring function of centrally administered standardized test scores and gave individual teachers full autonomy to assign grades. Teachers were, in turn, instructed to “utilize all available information about the pupil’s knowledge” and arrive at “an all-round judgment” when assigning grades, i.e. not just focus on tests results and other traditional forms of assessment. Heavily influenced by the social-

constructivist view that objectively measurable knowledge does not exist, these grading instructions opened the door for arbitrary grading decisions and complaints about bad grades that could be easily dismissed as subjectively determined, leading to *de facto* negotiations between teachers and pupils.

These were hazardous conditions for school competition between public schools and for-profit voucher schools, which had come into existence just a few years earlier through Sweden's school choice reform (enacted in 1992). With the changes to the curriculum and the grading system, there were no longer any institutional barriers to competition in dimensions other than educational quality, including grading. Independent schools – Sweden's equivalent of charter schools – seem to have quickly taken advantage of this opportunity, as demonstrated by the fact that as early as 1997, independent secondary schools were prone to inflate grades.

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The improvement in final grades during the period that Sweden slipped down international rankings was most likely due to this marriage between what we can refer to as 'post-truth' schooling and marketized education. The lax framework of the school system, which did not specify in detail what was to be taught or what knowledge level pupils had to attain to be assigned a certain grade, allowed independent schools to begin inflating grades. This phenomenon gave pupils and parents an incentive to choose independent schools to receive higher grades. The introduction of grade inflation forced public schools, as well as independent schools with high academic standards, to gradually adapt to remain competitive.

It is an established fact that well-functioning systems of school choice and competition presuppose that the state holds schools accountable for their performance by measuring what knowledge their pupils have acquired—for example, through external exit exams. But the regulatory documents issued by the Swedish state invalidated the very conception of objective knowledge. Therefore, both 'producers' and 'consumers' of education in the marketized school system became susceptible to fraudulent behavior, if not in a strictly legal sense, at least relative to the fundamental purpose of elementary and secondary education.

These lessons from Sweden indicate that countries with a tradition of social-constructivist practices in their education system, and which are considering implementing or expanding market-based school reforms, should proceed with caution. For example, the U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has stated that she wants to enact a model of school choice that is identical to the one Sweden has.

With the current national curriculum, enacted by a center-Right government in 2011, the state appears to have reclaimed some of its former regulatory functions. There are now more detailed course syllabi and grading criteria for each subject. However, a close reading of the curriculum reveals it to be just as influenced by postmodern, social-constructivist philosophy as the previous one. In particular, it does not explicitly specify what knowledge pupils must acquire to be assigned a particular grade. Hence, schools still have a strong economic incentive to affirm the social-constructivist view of knowledge. Since 2008, there is also a Swedish equivalent of Ofsted, the British schools inspectorate, whose task, in effect, is to enforce this view.

Against this background, it is not surprising that Swedish students perform worse academically and are poorer in skills that hinge on subject-specific knowledge. The sharp rise in truancy, ADHD diagnoses, depression, and anxiety among Swedish pupils is equally unsurprising in a learning environment that eliminates teacher-centered direct instruction and continually overloads the pupils' working memory, as they have to piece together information on their own. Naturally, a large number of teachers will also find their job unsatisfactory and consider leaving their profession when subject expertise is secondary, and the curriculum grants extensive influence regarding content and planning to their pupils. However, as in other countries with schools that are failing due to social-constructive educational reforms, the problems of the Swedish school system are not intractable. A paradigm shift in the view of truth and knowledge has the potential to yield radical improvements.

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