

ABSTRACT

Title: Independent schools in Sweden – effects on third-grade students' reading achievement

Language: Swedish, with a summary in English

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The thesis investigates effects of independent schools on students' reading achievement levels in Sweden. The background of the study is a decentralisation and deregulation process of the Swedish school system that started in the early 1990s. Free school choice was introduced in 1992 and in addition a voucher plan was adopted. About 6 percent of the students' on compulsory level now attend independent schools and the proportion is increasing. Economic and pedagogic arguments preceded the change of the educational system. From government it was expected that competition between schools would increase school quality and that greater pedagogical variation would inspire school development.

A first aim is to explore effects of students' social background on the difference in reading achievement levels between public and independent schools. A second aim is to identify effects of parents' educational levels and to reveal factors that mediate this influence. A third aim is to investigate effects of indicators of teacher competence on the difference in reading achievement that has been found between independent and public schools.

The data comes from the Swedish participation in the PIRLS (Progress in Reading Literacy Study) 2001 study conducted by IEA. It comprises some 10 000 third-grade students, of which about 1 000 students were in independent schools. Study I and II relies on data mainly selected from the home questionnaire, representing parents' reports and indicating social background factors. In Study III indicators of teacher competence as reported by teachers in the teacher questionnaire also were used. A total reading achievement score is used as dependent variable in all three studies. Multiple regression analyses was used in all studies and in addition, in Study II, structural equation modelling was employed.

The first study investigates the mean difference in reading achievement between third-graders in public and independent schools in Sweden, with results in favour of independent schools. Social selection was found to characterise independent schools, and indicators of students' cultural capital accounted for the major part of the mean difference between school types.

In the second study, the influence of parents' educational level on students' reading achievement scores was conceptualised and concretised. Almost half of the total effect of parents' education was estimated to be mediated through other variables, that is, the number of books at home, early literacy activities and emergent literacy abilities at the time for school start. The study thus identifies some of the mechanisms through which parents' education influences children's literacy development.

The third study investigates the influence of teacher competence on third-grade students' reading achievement in public and independent schools. Students in independent schools achieved better on the reading test than did students in public schools but when parents' education was kept under control the effect on students' achievement of school type disappeared. While students in independent schools had better-educated parents, students in public schools had better-educated teachers. Though school type had no influence of itself it was a mediating factor for parents' education as well as for teachers' education. These effects, however, worked in opposite directions.

As independent schools are not homogeneous, it is suggested that future research should engage in further exploration of possible effects of subgroups of independent schools. Another important area of research is teacher education. It has undergone a number of changes during the last years and it is unknown how these changes might affect students' achievement