

Institutionen för pedagogik och specialpedagogik

Exploring socioeconomic inequality in educational opportunity and outcomes in Sweden and beyond

av

Victoria Rolfe

AKADEMISK AVHANDLING

som med tillstånd av Utbildningsvetenskapliga fakulteten vid
Göteborgs universitet för vinnande av doktorsexamen
i pedagogik till offentlig granskning

Tisdagen den 8 juni 2021, kl. 10:00, Göteborgs universitet

Disputationen sker virtuellt

Fakultetsopponent: *Professor Sarah Howie, Stellenbosch University*



GÖTEBORGS
UNIVERSITET

Abstract

Title: Exploring socioeconomic inequality in educational opportunity and outcomes in Sweden and beyond
Author: Victoria Rolfe
Language: English with a Swedish summary
ISBN: 978-91-7963-076-8 (printed)
ISBN: 978-91-7963-077-5 (pdf)
ISSN: 0436-1121
Keywords: inequality, socioeconomic status, opportunity to learn, student achievement, teacher characteristics, TIMSS, PISA

The aim of this thesis is to explore a network of educational inequalities relating to student achievement in international assessment. Theoretically grounded in the understanding of curricula as experiences, the thesis investigates how outcomes are influenced by actions in the classroom in various social contexts. Student socioeconomic background and the amount of exposure to subject content (or Opportunity to Learn - OTL) to are held to significantly influence student outcomes. Socioeconomic inequality of outcomes is a perennial concern in educational science, and a body of literature suggests that there is an equality gap in OTL. Additional consideration is given to teachers, who are essential to the implementation of the curriculum and by their actions effect the experiences of students.

The thesis features an integrative essay and three empirical studies, which draw on data from two international large-scale assessments, PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study). Study I examined the measurement of socioeconomic status over time in Sweden by creating a bespoke, replicable and trustworthy model which is applicable to 15 years of Swedish PISA data. Study II investigated achievement and opportunity gaps in mathematics and science and whether unequal opportunities perpetuate unequal outcomes from an international perspective over time in TIMSS. Strong achievement gaps were observed near universally. Opportunity gaps were less frequently observed, and evidence that schooling perpetuates socioeconomic inequalities in outcomes was confined to a select group of predominantly Anglophone countries. Multiple inequalities in Swedish classrooms were explored in Study III. Overall, Swedish classes experienced substantial gaps in achievement, opportunity and teacher quality, while when classes were grouped by teacher qualification, differing patterns of inequalities emerged. The findings of this study underscore the importance of having high-quality teachers in mathematics classrooms to temper outcome inequality.

Collectively, the findings of the constituent studies confirm the persistence of the achievement gap in Sweden and globally, contextualize the opportunity gap in Sweden, and underline the importance of item choice and construct measurement when modelling inequality using international data.