

SHORT PAPER 1:
THEORIES REGARDING EDUCATIONAL
VARIANCES BETWEEN SWEDEN AND
FINLAND

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Kira Lowe

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Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	Theory 1: Immigration	2
3	Theory 2: Parental Leave	3
4	Theory 3: School Choice	3
5	Summary and Conclusion	4
6	References	6

1 Introduction

Throughout recent years, many news publications have criticized Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders for his excessive praise of the Nordic political and economic model, specifically his mentions of socialism in Sweden (O’Neal, 2019). Regardless of Mr. Sanders’ characterization of the Swedish government, the Swedes do, in many ways, appear to have a better social benefits. However, when one specifically looks at the state of education in Sweden, it is readily apparent that the education system seems to be declining to a level below other Nordic countries and, in one case, below the United States.

In the following sections, I will examine differences in educational performance between Sweden and Finland. These two countries are similar in many ways; they are in close proximity and share a border, have relatively similar gross domestic products (GDP) per capita, have similar political economic systems, and spend roughly the same amount on elementary and secondary education per student and on teacher salaries (NCES, 2019 & Startz, 2016). Despite all these commonalities, Swedish students are not performing as well as Finnish students on international exams, specifically the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) exam. Not only are scores in math, reading, and science significantly lower in Sweden than in Finland, but also Swedish students are more likely to have anxiety and experience greater inequity between and within schools than their Finnish counterparts (OECD Volume I, 2017).

The PISA exam was developed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). By asking students to not only reproduce knowledge but also to reapply that knowledge in different settings, the test aims to measure student knowledge and skills in a way that predicts likelihood of success in society. The OECD specifically developed this exam to allow stakeholders to compare education systems in order to set achievement goals and determine policy (OECD Volume I, 2017). The exam is administered every three years and results, including a robust analysis and discussion of policy implications, are published the in the following years leading up to the next exam. The most recently available report is

based on the 2015 PISA exam which found that Finland was among the very top performers of the 72 countries examined, whereas Sweden was roughly at the average (OECD Volumes I & III, 2017). In the following sections, some potential causes for this discrepancy will be discussed.

2 Theory 1: Immigration

One theory is that Sweden's much higher proportion of immigrants and asylum seekers, specifically a high volume of unaccompanied minors, could create the *appearance* of a decline in student performance. Immigration has been the primary cause of population growth in Sweden for decades, however, the volume and diversity of immigrants and asylum seekers has increased in recent years. Sweden saw almost five times as many immigrants in 2016 than Finland, primarily refugees. In 2015 alone, over 35,000 unaccompanied minors sought asylum in Sweden; the same year, Finland welcomed fewer than 5,000 (Karlsdóttir et al., 2018).

Many studies have attempted to quantify whether high populations of immigrant children have had a positive or negative impact on the education of natural-born citizens, however this topic is of minor interest to this theory. Instead, the primary focus is that a significant increase in refugees in the year of the test and the year immediately proceeding it could have caused a significant number of test-takers to be students who did not receive the benefit of Swedish schooling for a sufficient period of time to catch up to native students. PISA analysis shows that Sweden not only had an above-average increase in first-generation immigrants among test-takers, but also that those students were less likely to have educated parents (OECD Volume I, 2017). This change could explain not only a lower average score in the key subjects, but also the increased percentage of students under-performing, increased student anxiety scores, and increased equity between and within schools.

3 Theory 2: Parental Leave

Another theory which could explain why Sweden's PISA scores were much lower than Finland's is that Finland has a more robust family leave program. Keeping parents at home with children for a longer period of time during a child's first years increases the likelihood that a parent will speak to their child. Talking to a child is very beneficial to their language outcomes as they grow older (Gilkerson et al., 2018). Additionally, many studies have shown that increased parental leave is positively correlated with student achievement (Løken Salvanes, 2015 Heuveline, Yang Timberlake, 2010).

While many Nordic countries have, by American standards, very robust parental leave policies, Finland has a policy which reaches far beyond that of Sweden. While both countries offer a similar number of paid time off at a high rate of pay, the maximum potential duration of post-natal leave benefits is 16 months (1.25 years) in Sweden and 36 months (3 years) in Finland (Moss, 2015). Additionally, 96% of private sector employees covered parental leave at full salary for at least part of the leave; 66% of those covered leave at 100% pay for a period of three months ¹ (Moss, 2015). The significant difference in paid leave time creates substantial potential for increased achievement later in childhood.

4 Theory 3: School Choice

A final theory on the cause of education differences between Sweden and Norway concerns the ability of families to elect to send students to schools other than the one assigned to them, often at no additional cost. Both countries have some degree of school choice with more flexibility than what is currently available in the majority of the U.S. Sweden and Finland both cover the cost of education up to the amount that would be spent in their assigned public school regardless of the school a family chooses. Despite the similarities in their choice policies, a few key differences could have negatively impacted PISA results.

¹Unfortunately, comparable data was not available for Sweden.

In both countries, students are assigned to a school based on proximity to their residence, but they are "given a general right to enroll in any public school they wish" with fairly minimal restriction (PISA, 2019). However, Sweden does not require an application if a family wishes to attend a school other than the one that is assigned (PISA, 2019). Fewer students chose to stay in their assigned schools in Sweden than in Finland, possibly due to Sweden allowing more freedom of enrollment in other schools. Fewer than 50% of schools in Finland compete for students, whereas roughly 70% of schools compete for students in Sweden (PISA, 2019). This may be due to the fact that private schools are far more popular in Sweden. In 2015, 17.9% of students were enrolled in private schools in Sweden as compared to 4.5% in Finland. However, increased competition does not appear to have caused an increase in school quality. Profits are generally low in private schools in Sweden and private businesses are not inclined to invest much in a market where there is little benefit to them. Private schools in Sweden were also less regulated than in Finland, leading to poor student performance and the collapse of several companies, leaving students to find another school (Pollard, 2013).

The inequity created by school choice in Sweden has increased segregation between school types above that of Finland (PISA Volume III, 2017). Increased competition and segregation has created a wide gap in quality differences between the two countries - variation in performance between and within schools was roughly 5% in Finland but roughly 18% in Sweden (PISA, 2019). This not only accounts for increased inequity in Swedish schools, but also explains why Sweden's subject scores were lower and why they have a higher share of students who are under-performing on the PISA exam.

5 Summary and Conclusion

Both political and economic conditions have contributed to a difference between PISA scores in Sweden and Finland. State policies regarding family leave and school choice were

both possible causes of disparity between scores, whereas very high immigration in Sweden could explain why their PISA results were lower than they otherwise would have been. Policymakers should examine conditions in Finland closely if they wish to emulate the success of Finnish schools. Similarly, it is important to note what Sweden has done that could have caused their previous successes to deteriorate.

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