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EDUCATION INQUIRY

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Class and ethnicity at work. Segregation and conflict in a Swedish secondary school

Elisabet Öhrn*

Abstract
Drawing on a study of a Swedish secondary school with a heterogeneous intake, this article provides an analysis of the social relations and segregation within an individual school. As shown in the analysis, young people from different socio-economic backgrounds were largely separated in school, differently positioned and in conflict with each other. The pupils typically referred to the segregation and conflict as ethnic, although strongly underpinned by economics and class. Some of the pupils’ and staff’s wish for a less segregated schooling suggested potential openings for the relations between the groups. However, this was judged to go against the will of resourceful groups of parents with whom the school leadership felt they had to comply. Central to this was parents’ freedom to choose the school, which worked in this context to further the segregation within the particular school.

Keywords: segregation, secondary school, class, ethnicity, freedom of choice

Introduction
School segregation is growing in Sweden. Arnesen and Lundahl (2006: 296) conclude that in a European comparison there is still little tracking and division of pupils at the lower and upper secondary levels in Nordic education, but “[e]quality and uniformity are gradually replaced by diversity and, at least in Sweden, increasing school segregation and growing performance-related differences between pupils and schools”. In an analysis of the changes between 1998 and 2004, the Swedish National Agency for Education (2006: 24) deems changes in schools’ social contexts as well as education reforms to be of significance; that is, residential segregation, larger income gaps and immigration have affected school segregation (and increased variation in pupil performance), but also school reforms as “freedom of choice, increased numbers of independent schools and the decentralisation of the operation of schools to municipalities”. It is hardly surprising that the increased freedom of choice following the reforms of the 1990s (see Lundahl, 2002) is mainly used by resourceful groups, and highly educated parents in urban areas are those most likely to make an active choice of school for their children (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2009).
Although Sweden appears less segregated than many other European countries, the divide within urban areas is striking (e.g. Sernhede, 2007). Studies of the consequences of such segregation conclude there are substantial neighbourhood effects on individual families’ income and employment (Andersson, 2008). Similarly, international research on pupils’ achievements points to the importance of the local context and suggests there are important peer effects (Gustafsson 2006). Also in line with this, van Zanten (2005) proposes that lower-class groups are advantaged by a social mix as it might bring about educational and other opportunities.

Some parents and pupils respond to the situation by choosing more prestigious schools – typically independent schools or schools in more resourceful areas – in the hope of achieving better academic conditions and outcomes. Kallstenius concluded in 2008 that, at the time, a good fifth of all pupils in comprehensive education in Stockholm attended a school other than their geographically closest one. Her interviews with youngsters and parents show their main reasons for choosing a school in a more prestigious area to be the presumed negative development in their local school and hopes of receiving better work conditions and more knowledge in the chosen one.

Hence, schools are exposed to severe competition and need to appear attractive to pupils and parents in order to survive. As shown in this article, such competition might have consequences for relations within individual schools and work against the integration and co-education of pupils with different backgrounds. In the text I draw on a study of a secondary school with a heterogeneous intake to analyse social relations and segregation. The analysis highlights the school’s organisation and, in particular, the various groups’ responses to social differences and segregation in the school. Thus the focus is not, which is otherwise often the case in contemporary research, segregation between schools, but segregation within an individual school and its consequences for different groups of pupils.

The study
The study [1] focussed on young people’s influence in school and involved four schools – two located in small villages in the countryside, and two in different parts of Göteborg – of which one city school is analysed in this text. The school, Rowan school (Rönnskolan, in Swedish), had a socially heterogeneous intake, with some pupils living in a local council estate (referred to as the North) with a large representation of working-class and/or immigrant people, and others living in a middle-class area with private housing (referred to as the South), including terraced houses/smaller houses as well as quite exclusive villas. The individual school classes were organised so as to be largely homogenous with respect to area (and consequently, also with respect to socio-economic background), meaning that pupils from the two areas seldom mixed during lessons.

The study included two 9th grade classes at Rowan school; one class with pupils from the local council estate (whose parents were working class, unemployed or, occasionally, lower-middle-class) and one class with pupils who almost all resided in the
private housing area (their parents were typically middle-class, most of them academicians or employees in senior positions). The fieldwork was carried out in one class with pupils from the South in the autumn semester, and in a class with pupils from the North during the spring semester. In addition to observations and conversations during fieldwork, formal interviews were carried out with pupils in single-sex pairs or groups of three. Also interviewed were a head teacher, a person from the local youth club and two teachers who knew the classes well. Parallel to the observations and interviews in school, I spent time in the surrounding neighbourhood to visit the pupils’ home areas.

Pupils and staff were informed about the study and were asked for consent prior to the fieldwork, in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (Swedish Research Council, 2002). All pupils in the two selected classes and their teachers agreed to the observations, and all pupils but two – one girl and one boy who never turned up for the interviews – were interviewed (in all 46 pupils; 24 girls and 22 boys). All names appearing in the text have been anonymised.

**Segregation, groupings and clashes**

During the fieldwork, the pupils recurrently referred to the segregation of their neighbourhood and how it was reflected in everyday schooling. They mentioned it in their general conversations about life in school and the local community, as well as in response to interview questions about what they would like to change in school. Taken together, the school’s way of organising and handling relations and conflicts between groups from various backgrounds stood out as a prominent theme of pupil concern.

Girls from the private housing area strongly emphasised that Rowan school needed to develop better strategies for handling bullying and fights between groups of pupils. The school, they said, had not acted with sufficient resolution and strength:

Mia: [I wish] that teachers would deal more with bullying. There has been a lot of problems with that. ... There are such huge differences between those of us living in the South and those living in the North.

Lina: Yes, and they get away with calling us names like “Fucking Swedes” and “Rich man’s child”. If we say that we like Sweden or something like that, then we are called racists.

Mia: Mmm, that is what we have to put up with. There is like a kind of reverse racism in this school. It is them that go against us (Girls group E).

Harassment was recurrently connected, as in the interview above, to social and ethnic contrasts and conflicts. Some girls proposed that a “reverse racism” exists in their school, where they would be called “Fucking Swedes” or “Swedish whores” but were not “allowed to call them ‘Blackies’” (Girls group D). The boys from their neighbourhood correspondingly talked about being targets of invectives that they could not return:

Linus: To put it like this: they might think that they are entitled to call us “Fucking Swedes”. But if we call them “Fucking Blackie” for instance, then the whole immigrant group is called on and comes to knock us all down (Boys group C).
The presentation of council estate pupils as a collective threat was a recurrent theme in interviews with pupils from the private housing area, as in Albert’s story about the first day in secondary school: “There was this guy who said that he would bash my brains out. He should go and get his mates” (Boys group A). The private housing pupils held youngsters from the other neighbourhood responsible for starting fights and abuses. They also made references to the latter’s presumed criminal involvement, for instance, as being responsible for the frequent theft and damaging of mopeds parked in the school yard.

The pupils from the residential area considered ideals of non-racism to give immigrants some protection from depreciatory verbal abuses that Swedish youth had to put up with, and also to mean that measures were taken in school against Swedish nationalism, rather than against any form of nationalism (cf. Nayak, 2001; Andersson, 2003; von Brömssen, 2003). Theoretically, “attacks” from minority groups or conflicts between such groups cannot be understood as part of an ideological oppression as it true of white’s attacks on minorities (Troyna & Hacker, 1992). But, as pointed out by Phoenix (2001), it is difficult to untangle these narratives of unfairness with white people justifying racist discourses on the grounds that they have themselves been treated unfairly by black people, and which in this context helped in maintaining existing conflicts.

Pupils from the council estate confirmed that young people from the various housing areas seldom made friends or interacted. They also pointed to the differences and the distance between the groups and referred especially to their different material conditions and social positions:

Esad: They have so much more than us. We came here recently, so we don’t know the language. Our parents work and do the best they can, but we will never get what they [in the residential area] have. They have, like they have more things. They have more status. And they meet with their own kind.

Ibrahim: With their own kind.

Esad: The others are rich. They are rich. They have rich things to talk about (Boys group D).

Such differences in material conditions and social positions were also put forward as the main reasons for the distance between the groups, and the assumed grounds for those living in the private housing area to keep a distance:

Fatima: Those who live in the residential area, they are more like… snobbish.

Katerina: Yes. And I don’t want to be mean, but they act like well “we are the rich ones” and they walk like this [straightens herself up], as if they were special.

Fatima: Yes.

Katerina: But I don’t think it’s anything special about being rich. Okay, maybe I got money too. Maybe I got money too and I don’t think there is any difference between poor people and rich ones.

Fatima: They are like “Wow, look here I am from the South”. It’s like they are rejecting us, not us who reject them (Girls group G).
Some said that such fortunate positions ought to make people act in a more gracious or at least respectful manner, as when Robin said “they got a good upbringing so I think they should be nice to us and respond to us with some respect, because that’s what it’s all about. It is about mutual respect like” (Boys group E).

Pupils from the various neighbourhoods deemed that their working conditions and positions in school differ. For instance, the chances of negotiating space were taken to depend on whether one was considered a “trusted” pupil, and to be an option only for some. Being a “trusted” pupil would include some freedom from teacher control and allow for some flexibility of work in time and space. Marit and Unni from the residential area told about teachers who would allow them to get out of a noisy classroom to work in peace somewhere else in the school and they appreciated this as acts of confidence that one should be careful not to betray (Girls group D). Such flexibility was confirmed by others, some who contrasted their situation to that of the not so trusted pupils, as some boys who explained why they were allowed to do their computer work at home whereas others might find it difficult to obtain permission to leave the classroom: “If the teacher asks Ibrahim [a classmate from the council estate] where he has been, then she would want a paper to verify it. But she won’t want that from us because she can trust us, she trusts us” (Victor, Boy group C).

The field notes confirm that pupils from the private housing area did indeed work from home at times, especially during hours of individual work when pupils were supposed to work on issues of their own choice (Eget arbete, in Swedish) or use computers. These pupils often claimed to have better equipment at home consequently to work better from home and their absence also meant that there was less pressure on the school’s computers. For Rowan school with its relatively scarce resources this might appear quite appealing. However, it meant that pupils from the private housing area indeed had somewhat more flexible, non-regulated working hours than other pupils. The analyses also show that teachers invited them to take part in decisions and that they themselves would initiate and manage such negotiation on issues like the timing and form of tests, the timetable and, occasionally, subject content (see Öhrn, 2005).

The situation was rather different in the researched class from the council estate. During the fieldwork they were rarely invited to negotiations on the kinds of issues that teachers put forward in the other class, but occasionally reported that they had been invited to decide on what to focus on in a subject or when to take a test. Further, the pupils were observed to raise some issues and would in particular urge teachers to allow them to play music while working, which was usually accepted. But this was far from the private housing pupils’ presentation of schooling as largely negotiated and, unlike them, pupils from the council estate seldom suggested changes relating to the content or form of teaching. Especially the boys from this neighbourhood voiced a strong scepticism of the chances of influencing such issues, a finding in line with previous research from schools in working class areas (Öhrn, 1997).
The two classes did not have the same teachers in all subjects and therefore it might be that their different working conditions were partly due to variations in individual teacher attitudes. But teachers also admitted being particularly likely to adhere to the wishes of pupils in the class from the private housing area because of their pleasant manners:

They put it in a very nice way, like “We have been thinking and it would be very good if...”. That’s the way they say it. They don’t say “We have to” or the like, you know. So you understand that it’s something that they really wish. And then you try to satisfy them (Teacher A).

The pupils, as well as occasional teachers, thus pointed to the various groups’ different conditions and positions; the pupils from the private housing area had a somewhat more flexible working situation and, for some teachers, could benefit from the appreciation of their manners.

**Relations of social class and ethnicity**

As shown above, pupils from various parts of the neighbourhood identified each other as separate groups, who were differently positioned in the local school and society at large. But what was understood as the basis of these groupings?

Much pupil talk explicitly put forward location as vital, i.e. the area of living, and how it reflected the segregation between Swedes and immigrants. Thus, location and ethnicity were typically referred to as interrelated, with immigrants living in the council estate and Swedes living in the private housing area. However, talk about this divide also explicitly referred to material resources. “Swedes” and “immigrants” were alternatively denoted “rich men’s children” and “ghetto kids” (see for instance Girls group E above and group I below). Further, descriptions of the Swedish/immigrant groupings were soaked with references to economics, especially differences in parental incomes, and their consequences for the pupils’ standards of living, housing, clothing and possessions. Occasionally pupils would also talk explicitly about the groups as divided by class. The ethnic divide then was referring to economics and social class. This also showed in the way that concepts referring to ethnicity, or “race”, were used more generally to denote forms of differentiation and discrimination. For instance, one girl explained the distance and conflicts between different economic groups within the residential area (the South) with reference to racism, and said “… there is a bit of racism between white and black pupils in our school, but also between those of us who live in the South” (Unni, Girls group D).

The staff also emphasised the centrality of economics and class for the relations between pupils in school. For instance, the head teacher said in response to my question about clashes between youngsters from the different areas:
... I don’t regard them as so called “Race-conflicts” if you get my meaning, as xenophobia or strangers against those born here, but as social strata. It’s always like that. We saw it clearly last year that those who live in North they show solidarity with each other irrespective of skin colour and origin. It’s them against those in the South (Head teacher).

In the school’s neighbourhood, the area where one lived obviously related to economics as terraced houses and villas in the residential area were quite expensive. The relation to ethnicity, although put forward by the pupils, was in some ways less obvious. While pupils living in the area of private housing – with very few exceptions – were Swedes, pupils living in the council estate were not equally likely to be immigrants. Still this was often claimed; some pupils would maintain that their classmates were immigrants, even when it was pointed out to them that this was obviously not the case.

A similar confusion of “immigrant” with “low-rent areas” was seen in the other city school researched in this project, but not in focus here (see Öhrn 2005, 2009). The school in question was located in an area typically housing working-class and unemployed people, most of them immigrants although also a substantial share was born in Sweden. Again, the area was represented as an immigrant neighbourhood by the pupils. As this was further explored, the economic base of the said cultural/national divide was highlighted. Pupils explained that the Swedish children living in their area were different from those living elsewhere, and Askim and Hovås – two areas in Göteborg – were typically mentioned (Öhrn, 2005: 95-96). Askim and Hovås are wealthy residential areas that were represented by pupils in this study as synonymous with Swedishness. This is similar to findings made elsewhere (Andersson, 2003) with local areas being presented in ways that re-produce the divide between Swedes and Others, and also with Askim standing as the opposite of the multiethnic poor areas in Göteborg. Taken together, the pupils’ categorisation appears not to refer strictly to ethnicity, but to include the economic resources of the neighbourhood. The “real” Swedes are represented as living in wealthy areas.

The prominent position of location in pupils’ analyses of differentiation in this study accords with other Scandinavian research, which shows location to represent class and ethnicity. Teachers refer to girls and boys as “typical” or “atypical” of certain (racialised and classed) neighbourhoods rather than explicitly as “immigrant”, “minority” or “working-class” (e.g. Arnesen, 2002; Gitz-Johansen, 2003; Sandell, 2007). Thus, location has become an important signifier of class and ethnicity (Öhrn & Weiner, 2007; Öhrn, 2009). Consequently, the absence of explicit references to social class in pupils’ talk cannot be taken to imply that these are insignificant categories. They are more likely to be presented as location or to group characteristics, as in Berggren’s study (2001, p 356) where adolescent working-class girls identified and denoted middle-class girls “the spoilt”.
Openings and options for change

As shown by van Zanten (2007, p. 438), schools with a mixed intake are in an exposed position as they have to cater for different kinds of “clients” and to respond to their pressures. Much in line with this, the analysis of Rowan school points to the centrality of parental groups’ resources and, in particular, that the option to choose a school worked to strengthen within school segregation.

Youngsters from the two areas were largely separated at the school as the classes were set up to be almost homogenous with respect to area in which one lived. The pupils came to secondary school from different schools in different areas and the school typically chose not to mix them.

Pupils living in the council estate largely considered the segregation to be unfair. They said that classes with pupils from the residential area offered more peace and quiet, better opportunities to learn the language and, consequently, a chance to obtain higher marks. Not all thought that mixed classes would bring about any closer interactions among the various groups. Some said that pupils would stick to their old groups even if they were mixed with others and some seemed to think that this was just as well. Still, pupils from the council estate generally supported the idea of mixing pupils from different areas of living:

Öhrn: For whom would that [mixing pupils] be beneficial?
Louise: For both groups of pupils, for both social classes so to speak. So they could understand each other. Now they say like “well, they are such Rich men’s children” and the others like, “well, they are such fucking...”
Rita: ... poor ghetto kids” (Girls group I).

Thus, mixing pupils was considered beneficial for “both social classes”, including those from the private housing area. All were said to gain from learning about the other’s ways of living, both “ghetto kids” and “rich men’s children”. However, pupils from the residential area generally appeared slightly more hesitant about the advantages. Some of them were doubtful as to whether much could be gained, believing that the two groups would still remain separated and prefer to stay apart.

But also among the pupils from the private housing estate voices were raised against the dangers of separating people of different (ethnic) backgrounds. Some contrasted the situation in their mixed school to schools in wealthy surroundings with a homogeneous intake. The lack of immigrants in these schools, meaning that Swedish youngsters rarely meet with people from other countries, was believed to further narrowness and racism. When discussing a school in a wealthy area, a girl says:

Marit: That school is known as a Nazi-school. No, I don’t think it’s good. It’s better with some immigrants. I really do think so. It’s like your former school (Unni’s previous school in Askim, a wealthy one with few immigrants), a lot of the pupils are opposed to immigrants there.
Unni: So I gladly go to the same school as immigrants. As long as one doesn’t have to be scared! I mean, we’re all humans. It shouldn’t be that we need to lock ourselves away in one
building while they have to be elsewhere and do their thing. We should all be able to be here together, but you shouldn’t have to be afraid (Girls group E).

This view was confirmed by conversations overheard during lessons and breaks, when pupils from the private housing area talked and sometimes joked about all-Swedish, wealthy, racist schools. The arguments in favour of diversity resembled some of those voiced by middle-class parents choosing comprehensive, inner-city schooling for their children in Crozier et al. (2008). The parents in their study pointed to the value of diverse experiences for knowing the situation of others and hence appreciating one’s own privileged background as well as being able to navigate in a future globalised world. Crozier et al. (2008) argues that this diverse experience represents a form of cultural capital as it provides a range of narratives and discourses. Similarly, a youth club worker in this study comments on the mixed intake of pupils by saying:

I think it’s a good school because you see people from all possible social classes. You see a reflection of reality. This is what it is going to look like in the future for these people. If you are to live in a society together then you should know that there are different kinds of people. There isn’t just one kind. And that is what they get to learn here (Youth worker E).

The staff with whom I spoke were in favour of mixing pupils in the classes, but argued that the parents from the private residential area would not appreciate it. One boy, himself living in the area, claimed that his parents had actually previously protested against mixing pupils:

Linus: ... When my sister attended this school, she graduated two years ago, then the school asked the parents if they should mix the classes. The Southern parents didn’t want to. They didn’t want to be mixed with the immigrants, you know (Boys group C).

As mentioned initially, several studies point to the growing school segregation in Sweden as being related to, among other thing, the freedom to choose schools. As shown in this study, such choices also add to the strengthening of segregation within the individual school. The mere threat that the well-off parents from the private housing area would move their children to another (independent) school kept the local school from mixing pupils. Such threats lived through stories as the one reiterated by Linus above and in others, among them an often told incident a couple of years ago when parents from the private housing estate, in an act against mixed classes, were said to have collectively moved all pupils in a class to another school.

Rowan school teachers reported that they wanted to mix pupils from various areas, to further achievement and relations between groups. But the local politicians, who feared losing pupils (which would mean a financial loss) were said to have put an end to it:

The teachers have struggled for mixing pupils. But we aren’t allowed to do it for the local politicians. We have got orders about it. The head teacher got orders not to ... (Teacher A).
The head teacher verified the politicians’ orders and considered them to comply with demands of resourceful parents, and thus to hinder the mixing of pupils from different areas:

... it’s close to panic in the South when the their children are to start here. If we would then talk about breaking their classes and mix them with terrible, dangerous immigrants they would ... go away. Anyway, we have not mixed the classes. The school leadership decided this, because the politicians did not support it. If the politicians said that all should, we must ... but they said that we shall win the pupils, win the pupils, as many as possible. That’s our goal. So we largely let them stay in their old classes. ... The classes from the South have seldom been divided in recent years (Head teacher).

During my stay there were parental actions to support the building of a new secondary school within the private housing estate. If the plans had been realised – which they were not – young people from the two areas were believed to largely choose separate schools. This ran against the local policy that stated that pupils from different areas should attend the same secondary school and not be separated. As we have seen though, pupils attended the same school without interacting or associating much and, at least in the researched classes, arrived at the conclusion that social background was most important to their schooling.

**Concluding remarks**

This study shows a secondary school with a heterogeneous intake to be a setting where pupils from different areas of living were largely kept apart and developed different relations to schooling. The social segregation of the neighbourhood reflected in the school’s organisation and affected pupils’ social interactions, their working conditions and their positions. Thus pupils were not only segregated according to social background in school, they also experienced different conditions and relations.

As the pupils from the different areas rarely visited each other’s neighbourhood in their spare time, they were unlikely to meet, except at school. Thus the school provided a possible meeting point, but as it segregated pupils according to area of living they seldom met during lessons. The young people from the various areas identified each other as separate groups, who largely distanced themselves from each other and from time to time were involved in conflicts. The segregation and conflict between the groups was often referred to in terms of ethnicity, but strongly related to economics and class. “Swedes” and “immigrants” were alternatively denoted “rich men’s children” and “ghetto kids” and the descriptions of the Swedish/immigrant groupings were soaked with references to economic circumstances. The ethnic divide put forward by the pupils was clearly underpinned by economics and class.

The distance and conflicts between the youth living in different areas was obvious. But it should also be noted that there were some understandings of complexities (see Öhrn, 2005). The within group differences in the residential pupils’ economic capital
(obvious to themselves) were pointed out by some pupils living elsewhere. Further, pupils from the private housing area voiced some understanding about the difficulties faced by immigrants. Pupils living in the council estate argued that pupils from various backgrounds should be mixed in the teaching groups. Although the pupils from the private housing estate seemed less convinced about the good of mixing pupils, they still considered a variation of pupils within the school to be important in order not to further racism the way homogenous Swedish whiteness was assumed to do.

However, these openings, as well as the staff’s wish for mixed classes, ran against the reported will of resourceful groups of parents that the local school leaders — referring to orders from the local politicians — felt they needed to comply with. Otherwise, these groups might choose other schools for their children. This would leave the school with a reduced number of pupils and thereby, a reduced budget. Consequently, political decisions that grant parents the right to choose school for their children helped in this context to provide resourceful groups with means of influence and furthered segregation in the local school.

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**Endnotes**

[1] The study, “Young people as political actors”, was funded by the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research.

[2] The concepts “Swedes” and “immigrant” are used here in accordance with the students’ own usage. “Swedes” usually refer to a person born in Sweden with (one or two) Swedish parents. “Immigrant” refers to those who themselves and/or their parents were born outside Sweden. Consequently, even young people who themselves were born in Sweden might claim not to be Swedes (also see von Brömssen, 2003). The concept “immigrant” has been criticised for stereotyping and marginalising people, but can also be claimed as a unifying concept by the young people themselves (Sernhede, 2007).
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