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A national evaluation of history in the Swedish compulsory school 2003-2004: a preliminary report

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This paper focuses on some aspects of citizenship and identity, using as its starting point a recent evaluation of the subject of history in the Swedish compulsory school. In recent years the concept of citizenship has been a focus of discussion in both the fields of historical and sociological research. Researchers have contended that citizenship is not immutable nor something necessarily applied to every person in a given geographical region but something that is constantly negotiated and renegotiated as society changes. Different forms of citizenship have also been researched – legal, political, social and economic – and how these relate to each other over different periods of time. It is important that the concept of citizenship also becomes a dynamic element in history in school education.

There is a geographical or spatial aspect to the notion of political citizenship. If a person perceives that he or she belongs to a community – albeit imagined – as a citizen, this community probably is thought of as a spatial unit. Sweden as a country (or state) may be such a unit and the European Union may represent another kind of unit. Answers to chronological questions about Gustav Vasa as a founder of the Swedish national state and about the European Union may – hypothetically – reveal something about how people think about what kind of unit they belong to.

It is at school that most citizens in our society are presented with a consistent description of how society developed, how it functions today and what it can be expected to be like in the future. This is one way of presenting History, dealing with the way we see ourselves and how society wishes to be perceived, often in comparison with the wider world. This gives room for a number of inconsistencies, but what is interesting is that prevailing social norms and values are strongly reflected when society writes curricula for its schools.

History as a discipline has undergone a change. A shift in perspective has occurred so that questions around the making of history, the teacher as the presenter of history and views on the concept of knowledge have been included in the subject. History as a subject has been made didactic. Questions such as the role and function of history in society, history as a way of understanding ourselves, history as a means of establishing identity – both individual and collective – have been brought forward and become important aims in the curriculum for the subject.

One important task for any society is to transmit its cultural heritage from one generation to the next, and this task is undertaken above all in the education system. Teaching in schools is the institutionalised form by which society passes on historical material according to a particular syllabus and curriculum, most often helped by textbooks and trained teachers who lead the learning process. One can therefore claim that the clearest expression in history education of our picture of the past, those beliefs

and values which society wishes to pass on, occurs within the school system. But the curriculum is only one part of many: others are prescribed texts and teaching materials as well as the teachers themselves.

We have looked at how schools fulfil some of the more central goals found in the aims of curricula and syllabuses, as well as those amendments made by the government during the period of evaluation.

Curricula and syllabuses dictate the contents and goals which schools must fulfil. We must therefore be careful to try to determine key concepts in the aims expressed in the goals of course descriptions when we formulate the questions to be used in the evaluation. Earlier research also leads us to be sceptical about the possibility of finding an immediate agreement between stated aims in official documents and what actually occurs in the classroom.

Key concepts in interpreting the *Curriculum for the Compulsory School Lpo 94* are: an emphasis on the inviolability of human life, individual freedom, equal worth of all people, equality between women and men, cultural diversity, and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable. If the evaluation is to have some connection with what students are expected to work with in the classroom in history, this 'moral and ethical competence' has to be present in the background framework of at least some of the questions, if these are to be tied to the curriculum's more fundamental aims.

In the *Curriculum for the Compulsory School Lpo 94*, time and the consciousness of history are two fundamental and structural concepts for the subject of history. In this way, the perspective of the subject also has an orientation towards the future and can be described by a clear model, which can be explained in terms of the thought-diagram Past-Present-Future. We look for history and at the same time keep an eye on the future in an attempt to understand our own times. It is within this double perspective that we try to understand ourselves and our own life situation.

Examples of this can be identified in the syllabus, where students each year are expected to discern important historical events, interpret the past in order to understand the present, interpret sources, acquire knowledge of periods of history and central historical developments and finally gain knowledge of various conditions of life in an historical perspective.

The freedom to express opinions and the ability to influence our own times by the democratic process is quite fundamental in our cultural heritage and in the value system of the curriculum. In an attempt to find out if this is reflected in history classes in school, we asked the students to say when general suffrage was introduced. There might be objections to questions like this, such as 'What conclusions could really be drawn from a survey allegedly measuring chronological knowledge'? We are fully aware of the validity problems, and we also realise all difficulties in interpreting answers from this kind of survey. However, in the nation-wide evaluation undertaken by the Swedish National Agency for Education, surveys like this are used in order to compare the results with previous evaluations. We are aware of the fact that pupils could not be expected to

remember everything that has been taught at school. However, knowledge – even concerning the chronology of events – is not evenly distributed. As a consequence, the variations of answers must be analysed and compared with answers to similar questions asked in previous surveys, and questions concerning different events and conditions must be compared.

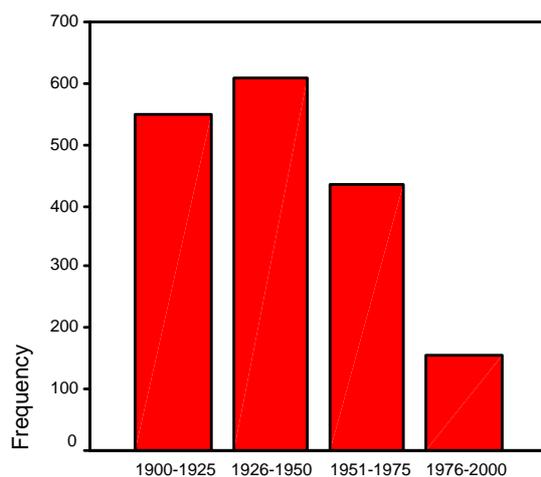
When we are analysing the answers to particular chronological questions, like the dates of King Gustav Vasa's reign and 'When was the European Union established?', we believe that the answers reveal something about citizenship, and not just about Swedish cultural heritage or present-day historical issues. In our opinion, it is possible to interpret – very cautiously – the results together with answers to open questions. This is our methodology, but in this short paper we give only a brief account of our findings.

Some of the questions found in the questionnaire under the heading 'About when did this happen?' are given below.

Questions of knowledge

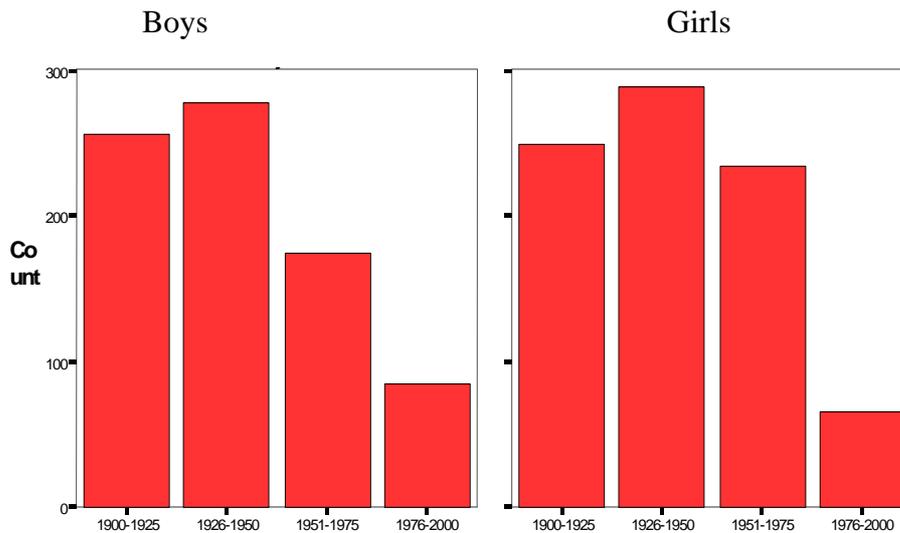
History as democracy

Figure 1: General suffrage is introduced in Sweden



Result

Most of the students answered the question, with only 1% not answering. The answers to the question show a wide spread, above all in the first three 25-year periods during the 20th century. The majority of the students (66%) answer that general suffrage was introduced before 1950. 34% consign the introduction of general suffrage to post-1950.

Figure 2: General suffrage is introduced in Sweden - distribution according to gender

As we can see by the answers when distributed according to sex, more girls than boys chose the alternative 1951-1975. Otherwise there are no great differences. The sample is too small to judge if there are differences caused by varying ethnic backgrounds. The distribution of answers by students with an immigrant background do not show any significant differences in comparison with their Swedish colleagues.

Comments

From the standpoint of the curriculum's foundation values of democracy, freedom and equality, the result is interesting. In the syllabus for history, cultural heritage is held to be a central theme of history education. The introduction of general suffrage can reasonably thought to be central to our cultural heritage. We would like to have gone deeper with this question in order to find out if it is the dates that pose the problems for the students, or if students are not taught about this democratic breakthrough in the Swedish compulsory school. One can speculate whether the fact that the girls in much greater numbers than the boys thought that general suffrage was introduced after 1950 shows a connection to another question of democracy – equality between men and women today. Perhaps the girls reason like this: as equality has not yet been fully accomplished, it cannot be long since general suffrage was introduced. From the perspective of citizenship this is an interesting reflection.

Students' explanations of why Sweden became a welfare state, and the welfare state as historical consciousness

Open answers about the welfare state

It is possible to a certain extent to get a feel for the students' consciousness of history and in what way they include the notion of citizenship through their answers to the open

questions ‘About when did the Swedish welfare system develop’ and ‘Why did the welfare system increase?’.

We have chosen to group the students’ answers to the question as to why the welfare state developed in the following categories:

- industrialisation
- changes in agriculture
- peace
- immigration
- more complex explanations.

Examples of the last kind of answer are ‘because Sweden was poor and there was injustice’ and ‘Our land was quite rich, we are a neutral county and we didn’t like different sorts of religions’.

Changes in agriculture as an explanation for the welfare state

Thirty-one answers came under the category of an explanation that defined changes in agriculture as the underlying factor in the development of the welfare state. Most of these answers give dates during the 20th century. Examples of this type of answer are:

Because agriculture became more efficient, people moved into the cities and found work in factories and household appliances were invented to look after housework so that the women could work less in the home and more at a place of work.

Industrialisation as an explanation of welfare development

One hundred and three fall into the group of answers using industrialisation as an explanation of the development of the welfare state. Most answers use dates between 1800 and 1960, with the majority referring to the time after 1850. Examples of this type of answer are:

Because more move into the cities and started working. Industrialisation started. More people stayed in Sweden.”

...modernised and better ruled and more efficient.

Peace as an explanation of the welfare state

Fifty-four answers can be categorised as those using peace as an explanation for the development of the welfare state. Most of these answers give dates around or after 1945. Examples of these answers are:

The Second World War made the country richer. We were neutral and sold a lot of iron ore and weapons to other countries. We built up our country while other countries were at war. We also had a general

education system so that children learned to read. We had forests and sold timber. Trustworthy politicians.

Sweden was able to put more money into healthcare, child minding services and housing.

Immigration as an explanation of the welfare state

Forty answers used immigration as an explanation of the development of the welfare state. All of them referred to the period after 1800. A little more than half of the answers referred to the period after 1945.

Immigrants came here to work and then we could export more and the economy grew. Cities grew and businesses etc started up. We countries helped each other more.

...immigrants began to work, paid taxis and increased the prosperity in our country.

Historical explanations

Sixty-five of the explanations of the Swedish welfare state bear such complexity and multiple themes that they make up their own category of answer. All these answers are oriented in the 20th century. Examples of these complex answers are:

There were more jobs...It became a more democratic society; more people had power in decision-making.

...More democratic power, ...People had more to say in politics (not women)....

...Socialistic ideologies made their way to Sweden and workers started to make demands on their employers and started to organise themselves to struggle for a socialist society.

Summary

The answers show how students have understood the teaching of an historic period central to Sweden. They show not only how the students have thought of important factors to explain increased prosperity in Sweden, but also how they conceive what this has meant for their own time. When reading them, one can recognise the different explanations for increased prosperity that have been presented in Swedish historical research. What is interesting is the students' ability to connect the various changes in agriculture, the emancipation of women, peace and not least the significance of immigration. These open answers to an open question on a central theme reveal the students' consciousness of history and how the students view citizenship through the descriptions they give in their answers.

Trustworthy politicians – utilise national resources – transform profit into social welfare-democracy. The students describe in their answers to this question a close relationship between freedom and welfare, between power and subject or to express it differently, between society and its citizens.

The students' attitudes towards the subject of history

Another kind of issue is how the students' attitude to the subject is related to the teacher and the method of study, but the situation is more complex than this. It is clear that content and meaning in what one does is decisive for the long-term atmosphere in the classroom. If we continue to investigate what students think their history lessons have been about - or what they should have been about - and use the curriculum and syllabus' aims as starting points, then questions about democracy and the search for information become central.

Of those students who expressed an opinion, about 50% considered the teaching of history to have been about democracy, either moderately or a lot. But almost as many do not know or think that they have not had any, or little, teaching about democracy. This is surprising, considering how fundamental values are stressed in the curriculum. Would students like to have been taught more about democracy?

Figure 3: Have your lessons been about democracy or about being democratic?

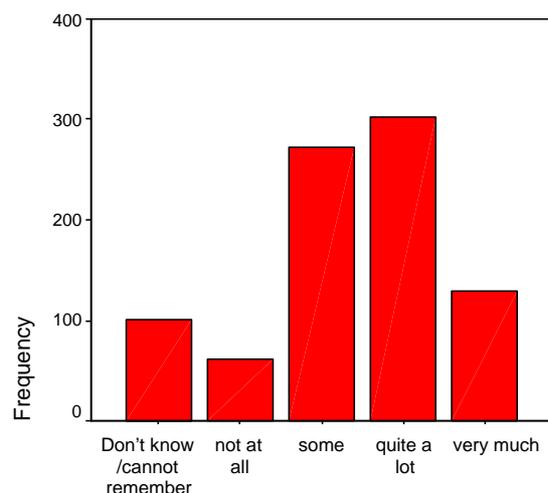
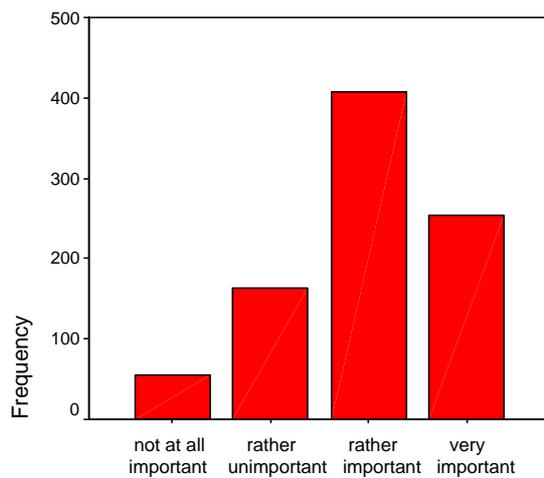


Figure 4: How important is it that your lessons are about democracy or about being democratic?



Democracy seems to be an important question for young people in Sweden and it would have been interesting to go deeper and to interview some of the students.

Instead of a conclusion

'Instead of a conclusion' indicates more of our summary and thoughts about how we intend to continue our research, rather than an analysis of the results.

About knowledge of history in Year 9 and the contents of history as a subject

We do not intend to take up the same questions discussed earlier, but to consider some questions that are worth further analysis. A little more than half of the students say that they have had teaching in school about democracy and about being democratic, while at the same time a clear majority considers that they should spend more time learning about these issues. In view of the curriculum's clear emphasis on questions of democracy, it is surprising that less than one third of the students can point to when general suffrage was introduced in Sweden, given a choice of intervals of 25-year periods. In fact there were more who thought this democratic breakthrough took place *after* 1950. In the answers that fall into the latter category, most came from girls. Can this mean that girls to a greater extent take into account their unequal status today when placing the right to vote closer to the present day?

We conclude by identifying questions for which we should continue to seek answers. In questions about contemporary history that clearly bear on our own time and situation, between one third to one quarter of respondents cannot date the establishment of the European Union. Other questions bears a relation to what the syllabus for history calls

cultural heritage and which we have tried to include in the question, among others, about the date of Gustav Vasa's accession to the Swedish throne. It is clear that the syllabus is designed to make cultural heritage an important part of the teaching of history, but at the same time one must accept that much fewer than half the students can place Gustav Vasa in his correct century.

Finally, it is interesting to see how students formulate themselves when describing the background of the Swedish welfare state and bring forward central value concepts such as democracy and equality between men and women, and solidarity. Sometimes this is done within the framework of Swedish society, but it is also interesting to note how the students see immigration and contact with other people as a step in the development of Swedish prosperity.

