



Book Review

Johan Samuelsson
*Läroverken och progressivismen:
Perspektiv på historieundervisningens
praktik och policy 1920–1950*

Lund: Nordic Academic Press
2021, 290pp.

The last 50 years of the Swedish parallel school system (c. 1915–1965) was a period of intense developments and shifts for the Grammar Schools – both in structure as well as in pedagogical ideas. Johan Samuelsson's book *The Grammar Schools and Progressivism* deals with forms of teaching in state-organised Swedish secondary schools between 1920 and 1950, specifically regarding how progressive ideas were promoted in the teaching of history.

History teaching is therefore the vehicle utilised by Samuelsson to come closer to progressivism as a pedagogical idea: how it gained ground and broke through in Swedish upper-secondary schools in the first half of the twentieth century. To some degree, the starting point is a critique of the view of the Grammar Schools of the twentieth century as havens for traditional pedagogy, a claim often made by political pundits in debates about the Swedish schooling system and its history. In these debates, the abandonment of a parallel school system in the 1960s has often been seen as a breaking point and the advent of allegedly inferior pedagogical ideas, guiding Swedish education on a path away from solid knowledge towards relativism and towards a downgrading of the teacher profession. By utilising seldom-used source material, i.e., the

descriptions of teaching methods sent in by teachers to the Swedish School Commission of 1946, Samuelsson has a new way of showing that the old Grammar Schools were not traditional havens, and they were not free from modern pedagogy and teaching experiments, even in the first half of the twentieth century.

Samuelsson describes the overall purpose of the study as an analytic endeavour centred on gaining new knowledge about how progressivism, as a pedagogical idea and practice, broke through in Swedish Grammar Schools. The study is mostly based on the method of prosopography. By describing the teachers in a kind of collective biography, he sidesteps the pitfall of portraying the collective effort of schooling, and school change, as something that can be attributed to specific individuals or “heroes.” Looking at the problem of understanding how teaching was conducted historically, or how the “black box of schooling” turns curricula, syllabi, and educational ideas into teaching and learning in the classroom, the way Samuelsson goes about this is fruitful and interesting. However, much of the results from the study is dependent on how progressive education is defined. Samuelsson's definition is based on Larry Cuban's study of American education (Cuban 1993), focusing on student activity in a very broad sense as evidence of progressive ideas.

The first empirical part of the book is not actually based on the teaching descriptions that teachers sent to the 1946 commission, but more on

traditional source materials: periodicals, governmental inquiries, and curricula. Some progressive ideas are pointed out as particularly important in discussions about history teaching, and Samuelsson conjectures that these ideas were promoted earlier, and more rigorously, than perhaps has been shown by earlier research. Samuelsson points to the school commission of 1918, reforms in 1927/28, a governmental inquiry from 1932, teaching instructions from 1935, and especially, their way of highlighting student participation in lessons and in learning. All sources predate the school commission of 1946, which in previous research is mostly highlighted as the big breakthrough for progressive education, and also the beginning of the end for the parallel school system, and consequently the beginning of the end for the Grammar Schools themselves.

As for teachers' own descriptions of their teaching, the study relies on accounts given by around 60 teachers. Only eight teachers describe teaching in the 1930s, either in journals published in the 1930s or by remembering their teaching in the 1930s in their description of their teaching methods sent to the School Commission of 1946. The remaining accounts describe teaching in the 1940s. There is a sound mix of teachers in the sample, with representations of different kinds of Grammar Schools spread over the entire country.

The study is also able to show that progressivism, as defined by Samuelsson, actually had an impact – and in some cases a major impact – on teaching in Grammar Schools early on. While earlier research has especially pointed to changes in the pedagogical approaches in primary schools (the

“*Folkskola*” organised by municipalities), Samuelsson shows that progressive ideals were also present in Grammar Schools in the first half of the twentieth century, already in the 1930s.

While this is an interesting study, utilising exciting new source material, there is a problem of representativity. This is a problem that the author is cognizant of, and on page 38, for example, he states that “this is not a study about the *extent* of progressive education in Grammar Schools, but a study of the *character* of it.” However, there is still an ambition to show, via the prosopographical approach, some kind of “normalcy” in the sample and therefore establish the studied teachers as representatives of Swedish Grammar School Teachers of the 1940s (p. 123). Regardless of this representativity, Samuelsson can show that progressive ideas were a part of teacher culture and were spread and established in the teaching staff at many different Grammar Schools.

A bigger problem is the way Cuban's definition of progressive education is operationalised, as it runs the risk of letting too many parts of the teacher's palette of teaching methods be labelled as “progressive.” While “student participation” might be a reasonable measurement in some cases, it also means that the Grammar Schools' long tradition of teaching for individual growth and development runs the risk of being mistakenly labelled “progressive.”

To some extent, Samuelsson's book shows how new source material can shed light on issues that are discussed, but not completely understood. Nostalgia often plays a big role in anecdotal evidence from political commentators trying to show how the glory days of

youth education are behind us. This makes it important to also study how complex the issue of schooling is—and always has been—and how changes in “the black box of schooling” are most often not defined by turning points, established in curricula, but by slow progress and changes in ideas held by teachers. Even considering my minor objections, Samuelsson’s book is a good example of how educational history can shed a certain light on these matters.

References

Cuban, Larry. *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1890–1980*. New York: Longman, 1993.

*Henrik Åström Elmersjö
Umeå University
henrik.astrom.elmersjo@umu.se*