



Book Review

Matts Dahlkvist

En landsbygdens skolreform?

Den geografiska dimensionen

i bygget av en enhetsskola

Uppsala universitet (PhD diss.)

2022, 264 pp.

The history of twentieth century rural Sweden constitutes the backdrop of Matts Dahlkvist's dissertation *En landsbygdens skolreform? Den geografiska dimensionen i bygget av en enhetsskola* (A School Reform for the Countryside? The Geographical Dimension in the Construction of a Unitary Compulsory School System). The author uses his own native place, the rural Trönö municipality in the county of Gävleborg, as the situated example of a school reform. The time period that his study investigates is spanning from 1927 up to 1972. According to him, this is motivated by a societal ambition during these years to unify the school system in Sweden. This was a unification that for the countryside, according to Dahlkvist, had the aim to strengthen rural societies but either did not strengthen them enough or even speeded up urbanisation.

Efforts for expanding schooling in rural Sweden have been followed by at least two main obstacles: parental resistance, and lack of teachers. The first one resulting in parents from rural areas often airing reluctance towards schooling, during the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth century. Children were needed for labour in the households which meant that rural schools often had to keep shorter se-

mester periods than city-schools and that part time reading was considered a good alternative from people of the countryside. Efforts from school boards or inspectors to increase the amount of schooldays or introduce full time reading could be seen as provocative and raised protests from parents in rural areas. Up until the 1940s, school boards in rural districts were familiar with handling requests from parents asking for their children to be dismissed from school because their labour was needed to support their household.

In terms of teacher recruitment both economical, geographical and gender issues were an obstacle for rural schools during the first half of the twentieth century. Although seminars for female teachers were distributed across the country, rural districts found it hard to motivate female teachers to move to their schools. And even if they did, these teachers only were to teach children up to age nine. Male teachers for children of higher ages were even harder to recruit. Their teacher training institutions were more centralized, making it hard for distant school districts to recruit. They were also paid a higher salary than female teachers, which made it an economical challenge for sparsely populated and poor municipalities to employ these teachers. This shaped a logic that made it desirable for school boards to form large classes for each teacher. Classes with children of mixed ages where thus a normal solution for schools in rural areas since each age group could not fill a class of their own.

In the 1920s the debate for an egalitarian school system in Sweden had come to a point where reforms were both wanted from a big portion of the public opinion and made possible through majorities within parliament. The established order was a parallel system where all children attended the primary school (*folkskolan*) up to age nine. From age ten the system segregated most children from those who entered secondary school (*realskolan*). Children who stayed in primary school graduated after six years with no way to study further at a higher level except for the two-year continuation school (*fortsättningsskolan*) which focused on vocational training. Since the secondary schools were all located in cities, this parallel system excluded countryside-children from attending *realskolan*. Parliamentarians from rural districts thus supported ideas of making the entrance to secondary school more flexible. In 1927 changes in the connection between *folkskolan* and *realskolan* were introduced. This meant that children could join secondary school either from year four or from year seven. From the perspective of the rural population this made *realskolan* more accessible since children from year seven were supposed to be old enough to stay away over the weeks for attending school in the city.

During the period of Dahlkwist's study the legitimacy for schooling in rural areas was on the rise and the societal ambitions for realising equal opportunities in schooling grew. This led to a process with experimental activities in the 1950s, followed by new legislation in 1962 that replaced the parallel school system (*folkskola* and *realskola*) with a unitary compulsory school sys-

tem (*grundskola*). The reform was fully implemented nationwide in 1972. Over the years from 1927 to 1972 Dahlkwist studies how national intentions got realized in the interaction between state and municipal actors, considering the simultaneous demands for national unification and local room for action during the different phases of the reform for a unitary compulsory school.

Dahlkwist designs his study inspired by curriculum theory by building his research questions in relation to the concepts of the formulation- and the realization arena of the curriculum. The analytical aspect of his study relies to a large extent on the political scientist Michael Lipsky's concept of street-level bureaucracy which Dahlkwist reformulates into country-road bureaucracy. Dahlkwist makes a complex but systematic construction of research questions categorized by the two political arenas mentioned above. To understand his questions, one first must grasp two political strategic areas that he identifies and finds relevant for geographic equalization during the whole period. The first, *unifying*, stands for a national political ambition to equalize geographic differences in schooling through implementation of national standards. The second, *local room for action*, stands for a similar political ambition but by allowing pragmatic solutions on a local level. Dahlkwist finds these two strategies specifically relevant when studying the national formulation arena. When analysing the local realization arena, he puts focus on what significant actors do in the *cross-pressure* between national ambitions and local conditions. He also highlights critical moments in time when the pursuit for

unifying and *local room for action* seems to be in extra high conflict against each other. After grasping these specifications, the questions that Dahlkvist asks turns out to be straightforward. He examines arguments and intentions in the formulation arena. In the realization arena, he investigates interaction patterns and conflicts during that period.

Method-wise a big portion of the study relies on state public investigations (*Statens offentliga utredningar, SOU*), school inspector reports and local documentation from the municipality, mainly school board minutes. These sources are supplemented with newspaper and magazine material. For the later part of the study period (from the 1950s onward) Dahlkvist has made interviews with people living in the Trönö countryside and asked for their memories of schooling. He analyses the material thematically in a systematic manner driven by the logic of his questions. Thus, he begins with looking for national intentions on unifying the school system followed by a similar analysis of actions made on the local realisation arena. After this he turns to the theme of local room for action and starts by describing intentions articulated at the formulation arena followed by actions on the realisation arena.

After this descriptive part of the study, Dahlkvist sharpens the analysis by building a model for defining critical moments and out of them study actors and agency. His model for defining critical moments starts with a definition of conflicts. For a matter to be called a conflict in his study, Dahlkvist demands it to be related to the unifying of the school system or to the local room for action in decisions on schooling.

His model continues by identifying conflicts during the period and investigates whether any part of the period was more riddled with conflict than others. Such a period he calls a critical moment. It is within such a critical moment that Dahlkvist believes that agency may become most visible. He considers actors being relevant because of their roles, not as persons. This means that when he studies agency, the role or the function of the role is in the centre (i.e., school inspector or parental group) not the specific individuals.

Although the study aims to visualise agency within conflicts, the main results show a linked logic from the formulation arena to the realisation arena where both national and local decision-makers grew more and more united in the pursuit of a unified school system. When actions at the local level deviated from national ambitions, this was most often made as an adaption to what locally seemed realistic at the time and not as a principal resistance towards the national aim for creating a unit school. It was thus not the ambition to give children in Trönö countryside a good schooling that stirred conflicts. Rather it was what measures or what resources should be used for reaching this goal that characterised the disagreements.

One example of conflict was when the Trönö school board arranged evening-classes to avoid schooling to compete with household work. The school inspector found this taking the local room for action too far and demanded classes to be run at daytime, a demand that was followed by the school board. Another example of conflict was when the school inspector complained at inefficient administration by the Trönö

school board and asked for employment of a head teacher. The school board hesitated in following that demand, not by protesting to the idea but rather by showing the economic difficulty to fulfil it. They supported the ambition to employ a head teacher but asked for patience until it was economically possible. All in all, Dahlkvist tells a school reform history where conflicts most of all seem to be examples of obstacles or uncertainties that needed to be handled, not expressions of competing interests trying to win power over rural societal development.

Dahlkvist pinpoints the years 1942–1957 as a critical moment for reforming schooling in Trönö. It is a period when the legitimacy of a reformed school needed to be tested through concrete local decisions concerning for example centralisation of the extended primary school, school buses or building of a centralised school for the whole district. During this critical moment, he identifies five specific groups of actors active within the conflicts. These were parents, the teachers, the head teacher, the school board, and the school inspection. Three of them (teachers, head teacher and school board) Dahlkvist considers being country-road bureaucrats often acting in a cross-pressure position between parents and inspection. In analysing the actor-group's approach towards the national goals for unifying the school system with room for local action, he shows that no group was strongly against it. However, parents could show ambivalent resistance against the ambitions for unification of schooling and the inspection could, from their part, show ambivalent resistance against a local room for action.

This meant that when conflict arose, the country-road bureaucrats could use pragmatic ways of negotiation to handle the conflicts. This could be done by convincing the inspection that their demands were reasonable but difficult to implement in the short term due to a reluctant parental opinion. This could also be done by assuring the parents that their dissatisfaction was legitimate but that the school district still had to comply with the requirements of the inspection. Dahlkvist shows that the country-road bureaucrats within these pragmatic negotiations had great use of delay strategy and social relations to solve conflicts or make them less problematic.

This dissertation shares interesting and valuable empirical findings on how the implementation of a unified school system in rural areas of Sweden was realized. Dahlkvist gives a nuanced description of conflicts that could arise in such a process, and he elaborates on how significant actors may have similar and contradictory interests at the same time. A problem with the thesis is its framing within a discussion on the rural depopulation. In the introduction of the thesis, Dahlkvist makes a broad overview of conditions for rural Sweden, both historical and present. In this, he visualises village schools as important societal hubs and he suggest that when such hubs vanish it makes rural societies weaker. Based on this premise, Dahlkvist weaves an overarching question into the thesis: Was this a school reform for the countryside?

Although this big question is relevant in connection to the thesis, the empirical study does not really help answering it. At least not in the

manner that Dahlkvist seems to wish. In the final discussion, he asks whether the unification of the Swedish school system has been successful in relation to the goal of geographic equalization. To answer this, he cannot use his own study but needs to go to present day discussions to diagnose the situation of the countryside and the consequences of school centralization. His answer seems to be that the unification of the Swedish school system in fact was the implementation of an urban norm for schooling and is thus problematic for the societies of the countryside.

When reading Dahlkvist's thesis, I can agree that an urban norm for schooling may have been a dominant feature for the unification project. What puzzles me is that the characteristics of conflicts that Dahlkvist shows does not seem to be conflicts between urban and rural norms. Over the period the countryside bureaucrats never showed principal disagreements with new national standards for schooling. The rural parent's initial scepticism against schooling competing with household work may be considered expressions of a rural norm. If so, that norm weakened over time and was replaced by practical issues on how fast and with what methods schooling should be centralised in the district. To me it appears as if Dahlkvist wanted to show that the unification of the Swedish school system worsened the rural depopulation, and that the reform project did this by making false promises of geographical equalization through local room for decision. What he really shows is that the majority of rural decisionmakers and parents to school children found schooling more and more important over the

years from 1927–1972. In this process, people of rural districts like Trönö accepted centralisation of countryside-schools since it seemed to be the best way to serve countryside children with good schooling.

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