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(IJEPC)**[www.ijepe.com](http://www.ijepe.com)**A REVIEW ON THE STRUCTURE AND PRIORITIES OF THE  
SWEDISH EDUCATION SYSTEM**Alicia Wilson<sup>1</sup>, Azahah Abu Hassan Shaari<sup>2\*</sup><sup>1</sup> School of Social Work, Adelphi University, United States  
Email: [awilson@adelphi.edu](mailto:awilson@adelphi.edu)<sup>2</sup> Center for Research in Psychology and Human Well-Being, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti  
Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia  
Email: [azahah@ukm.edu.my](mailto:azahah@ukm.edu.my)

\* Corresponding Author

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Education, Psychology and  
Counseling*, 8 (50), 253-263.**DOI:** 10.35631/IJEPC.850018This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

Education is closely linked to a person's life chances, income, and well-being worldwide. Therefore, it is crucial to understand what factors influence educational attainment. This conceptual paper employs content analysis methods, using Esping-Andersen's classification of social welfare state concept, to understand the structure of the Swedish education system through a 5-week desk-based data collection. The findings revealed that the Swedish pedagogical system is structured around an objectives-based management system. To improve educational outcomes, the Swedish government prioritizes smaller class sizes, best practices for teacher preparation, adequate compensation for educators, and experiential learning over testing. The paper provides insights into the strengths and challenges of the Swedish pedagogical system and its potential as a model for other nations.

**Keywords:**

Education, Sweden, Social Regime, United States, Welfare State

**Introduction**

Across the world, a person's educational achievement will likely influence their quality of life, level of income, and state of well-being. Therefore, it is important to have a clear understanding of what benefits or hinders one's educational attainment. Today, most schools generally do not function in a way that can effectively meet the specific needs and priorities of every student.

For example, in the United States, the quality of education that a student receives is based on the value and location of their home. Students from low socio economic backgrounds are more likely to fail in school or drop out due to high teacher turnover and poor academic progress due to a lack of resources (Assari et al., 2018).

In contrast, students from higher socio economic backgrounds will have access to plenty of educational resources, including a comprehensive after-school program equipped with the latest and most advanced learning equipment (Hanushek et al., 2019). It is very easy to tell a parent to change the child's school if they don't like it. But it is not so easy for the low-socio economic parent who cannot afford to move to a better area with great schools. As a result, this parent has no choice but to enrol their children in the under-resourced school. A child's education is too important for parents to have to shop around and experiment with schools by trial and error to find a good one. Furthermore, a good school should be available for every child, regardless of their taxation levels, demographic profiles, or cultural differences. One's disadvantage is not an excuse for underachievement.

This conceptual paper employs content analysis methods through a 5-week desk-based data collection and analysis of documents and research articles mainly published in the last ten years, starting in 2013, that were collected and reviewed to understand the structure of the Swedish education system. This paper further explores how Esping-Andersen's classification of social welfare states can help other developed nations, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, adopt their model. Esping-Andersen introduced the concept of social welfare states in the 1990s as a theoretical framework. This conceptual paper aims to explore the structure of the Swedish education system using this framework and determine how their model can benefit other developed countries, including the United Kingdom and the United States.

## Literature Review

### *Sweden's Economy, Political System, And Social Welfare Policies*

According to a recent report by the Sweden GDP per capita Data (2021), Sweden has a highly developed economy, with a gross domestic product per capita of 33513.02 U.S. dollars in 2011 and expected to reach 581000.00 U.S. dollars by the end of 2021. Their main trading partners are Germany, the U.K., Norway, and the U.S., with exports in timber, petroleum products, and motor vehicles. In addition, based on the population of Sweden in 2021, 77% of the population between the ages of 15 and 64 will have a paid job. This is 9% higher than the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) employment average of 68%. In terms of education, 83% of Swedish adults between the ages of 25 and 64 earned the equivalent of a high school diploma, which was higher than the OECD average of 78% (Sweden Population, 2021). Among the Swedish, the top fifth owns 36% of the wealth, while the bottom fifth controls 11% of the wealth. The average Swedish worker pays approximately 22.4% of their income in visible taxes, causing them to be a nation with extraordinarily high tax rates (Asen, 2020). The people's taxes are later used to fund their universal welfare system. As a result, the public sector has the power to execute all levels of government as well as private organizations (Sweden GDP per capita data, 2021).

In Sweden, there is a parliamentary system of administration, and the nation is a constitutional monarchy. The highest governing body is the Parliament (Riksdagen). Between the Social Democrats and the Non-Socialists, power has alternated over the past few years (Bolin &

Aylott, 2021). The center-right has just lately amassed enough members in Parliament to establish a coalition government with the Liberal and Moderate Parties. According to Thebault (2021), Stefan Lofven, a member of the Social Democratic Party, served as the country's prime minister until he abruptly resigned in August 2021. Sweden is a special place because, despite their divergent philosophies, the bourgeois government and the Social Democrats both agree that all authority comes from the people. Everyone is free to question how politicians and government organizations use their authority and has the same rights and opportunities to express their opinion. This is the cornerstone of Swedish parliamentary democracy (Bolin & Aylott, 2021).

The Social Democratic Party is a leading political party and the main administration of the welfare state in Sweden, and this party gained power from 1982 to 1991 and again from 1994 onwards (Lindbom, 2001). Under this political party, Sweden has three independent levels of administration: the national government, the county councils, and the municipalities. The broad popular support for the Swedish welfare state is another essential feature. For instance, a mid-1990s survey of Swedish citizens' opinions of the welfare state revealed a consistent trend of support for the current political order (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019). Leading Social Democratic reformers believed that the public sector might advance egalitarianism by providing services on its own and preventing citizens from being dependent on the market. The social sector includes an extensive array of tax-funded, publicly delivered social services as well as a universal social security system with a flat rate and income-related benefits that are generous by international standards (Esping-Anderson, 1990).

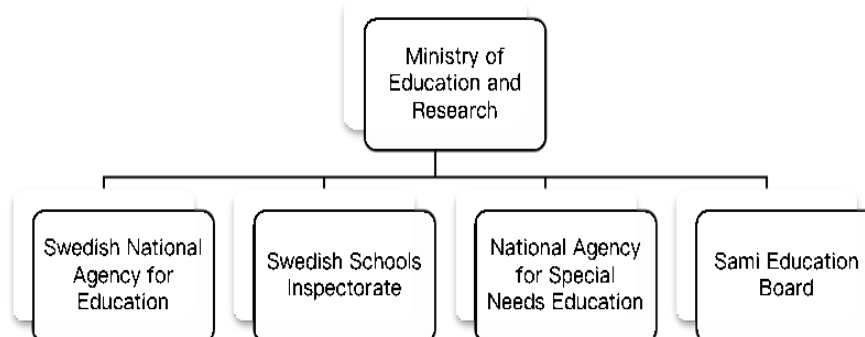
Sweden's implementation of the Health and Medical Services Act in 1982 marked the beginning of its popular support. Everyone in Sweden enjoys equal access to healthcare thanks to this law. The Act guarantees everyone the right to health care within a particular time frame and the freedom to select their preferred medical centre as well as their preferred health care professionals. The state, county councils, and municipalities are each responsible for a portion of the cost of health and medical care. Currently, the government gives general grants to county councils' health and medical services, while the state is responsible for the overall health and medical care policy. Additionally, the government provides unique funds to improve access to healthcare and drug benefits. Additionally, county councils are paid via service fees and patient copays. Patient fees only cover a small portion of the costs for health and medical treatment, which account for around 10% of Sweden's GDP. As a result, the average lifespan in Sweden is rising. Currently, women live an average of 83.5 years, while men live an average of 79.5 years (Sweden Population, 2021).

### *Organizational Structure of the Swedish Education System*

Sweden implemented education reformation, known as a school voucher-funded private school program, after watching the school system decline regarding quality and student attainment in the 1990s (Edmark & Persson, 2021; Charli, 2021). One reason for this decline was the lack of school choice, and the introduction of voucher programs has helped increase students' educational attainment (Edmark & Persson, 2021). The reorganization of the Swedish education system from 1945 to 1975 was part of the construction of the modern welfare state, as equal education opportunities were regarded as crucial to creating a fair and equal society. Today, Sweden has one of the most decentralized education systems globally, which is free of charge from elementary school straight through college.

The Swedish government has been divided into three different ministries: social welfare, falling under the responsibility of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs; labor market, under the responsibility of the Minister of Employment; and education, under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Research (Figure 1). The Ministry of Education and Research is solely responsible for all education and vocational training. This stems from preschool through higher education and research. As a ministry, they prepare the government's bills for Parliament. Once Parliament passes legislation, the government defines the national education goals, while central authorities ensure that educational activities are implemented in line with the legislative framework.

At the end of the year, they determine whether the national goals for education were achieved. Another function of the Ministry of Education and Research is to allocate local tax revenues to each school to cover all expenses. Finally, they oversee the creation of the curriculum and syllabus for the public schools. The Swedish National Agency for Education develops the syllabus for upper secondary and adult education. On the state level, this agency supervisor is responsible for the development and improvement of the education system and ensures that all educational activities are monitored and evaluated. This work is split between four central authorities: the Swedish National Agency for Education, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, the National Agency for Special Needs Education, and the Sami Education Board. Each authority ensures that schools are built and sufficient facilities are provided (Edquist, 2019).



**Figure 1: Agencies Governing Swedish Education Systems**

Source: (Swedish Institute, 2021)

The first organization, the Swedish National Agency for Education, serves as the central administrative body for the public education system for kids, teens, and adults, as well as for preschool programs and after-school care for school-aged kids. The agency's primary duties include evaluating and supervising all educational activities on a national level. They offer fundamental training for school administrators and support teacher competency growth through government-sponsored professional development. The second body, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, is in charge of monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of the educational system. The Inspectorate's job is to ensure that individuals in charge of schools are abiding by the law through routine inspections and the treatment of specific complaints concerning problems in a specific school. Through quality assessments, the Inspectorate learns more about

the effectiveness of specific components of the delivery of education in a more specialized field, such as the instruction of particular topics or the efforts of the schools to reduce early school departure (Edlund & Sahlin, 2021). The National Agency for Special Needs Education was established to coordinate all government funding for special needs education (Göransson et al., 2019).

Their mission is to assist school administration with special education-related concerns and to give children with special needs access to teaching resources that will best benefit them. Allocating government funds to educational institutions and students with disabilities is one of their main responsibilities. Last but not least, the Sami Education Board is a governmental body in charge of integrating Sami education into its mandatory schools by instructing immigrant pupils in their home tongue. They will also offer preschool class activities and after-school care for Sami kids upon request (Svensson, 2017). Each organization we covered is crucial to the Swedish educational system. They provide the government with comprehensive annual reports on the findings of each national school activity. These reports give a thorough overview of the duties held by each member of the educational system and identify the areas that require development and improvement on a national level. The government examines the statistics at the end of every year to evaluate their educational system and afterwards compare it to other nations. These four organizations share the findings and conclusions in various ways, such as through reports and knowledge summaries. Given the ongoing changes to their preschool, obligatory and upper secondary schools, and adult education, this is especially important. According to overall data, the Swedish Education Act has undergone 50 revisions. (Novak, 2019).

## Theoretical Framework

### *Social Democratic Welfare Regime of Esping-Anderson*

According to Esping-Andersen (1990), the social democratic model is one of the three types of the welfare state that embraces class mobilization as a means for the realization of the socialist ideals of equality, justice, freedom, and solidarity. This type of welfare state is based on equality, needs, and economic socialization. Edgarh (2002) states that Sweden is a country where a high priority is placed on public responsibility for social and health services on equal terms for the entire population, and health insurance coverage is universal. Municipalities primarily administer schools, and both tuition and textbooks are free. More than one-fourth of adult Swedes have a post-high school education or higher.

Since the matter of education falls under the Swedish government, it is important to understand the Swedish welfare regime. According to Esping-Anderson (1990), the welfare regime is based on the principles of universalism and de-commodification, which aim to provide services of the highest standards to its citizens equally. Meaning that the regime will ensure that a blue-collar employee will receive the same rights as a white-collar employee. Interestingly, Esping-Anderson (1990) describes this model, in which services are also offered to children, seniors, and the helpless, as a peculiar fusion of liberalism and socialism. Sweden, officially known as the Kingdom of Sweden, is a Nordic country located on the Scandinavian Peninsula in the northern portion of Europe. Sweden's population now numbers 10.1 million people, with 85% of the population living in urban areas (Henriksson et al., 2021).



The Swedish welfare state is often seen as the most highly developed welfare state and a model for others to follow because it has one of the lowest rates of poverty in the world (Lindbom, 2001). Sweden is a wealthy country by international standards. From the mid-1990s up until mid-2008, Sweden's economic performance improved strongly relative to that of many of the larger European Union (EU) economies, and it has been one of the few to show a solid rebound from recession in 2010–11 (Sweden Economy, 2012). The Swedish welfare system is different from other Western countries in regards to its universalism and solidarity system, that is, the public provision of income, goods, and services to all Swedish citizens without regard to previous contributions (Valocchi, 1992). This is consistent with Esping-Andersen's definition of the social democratic welfare state that he put forth in 1990.

## Discussion

### *A Comparison of Preschool Education Systems in Sweden and the United States*

Historically, Sweden offers what every parent wants: a good school for their child (Bergmark & Hansson, 2021). In 1985, the Sweden Education Act established that all children and young people must have equal access to education, regardless of gender, their place of residence, ability or disability, or social or economic factors. The goal in Sweden is to provide every student with the knowledge and skills, in conjunction with their home, to promote their harmonious development into responsible human beings and well-educated citizens. Since school is mandatory for all students through grade nine, the act introduced school choice in 1992. School choice is the freedom given to every parent to choose a school based on its quality, their child's needs, and not their home address, which is currently a policy in the United States (Hanushek et al., 2019).

To ensure equality in all schools, the Swedish government also decided to create a preschool curriculum that promoted gender-aware education (Lachance, 2020; Ledman et al., 2018; Magnusson et al., 2019). The objective is for children to have the same opportunities in life regardless of gender (Shutts et al., 2021). The Swedish government believes in the importance of providing early childhood education. Preschool plays an intrinsic part in the daily lives of families with children and is a prerequisite for reconciling parenting and work. Sweden has a highly coordinated system that cares for children ages one through five, known as preschool activities. In 2019, more than 95% of all children aged one to five were enrolled in preschool activities (Ginner Hau et al., 2019). Interactive preschool activities such as singing, storytelling, and games required active participation and interaction to promote and strengthen students' sense of togetherness and positive social interaction, intended to promote a broad spectrum of contact and social community.

After turning six, students begin pre-school classes, which are designed to encourage each child's learning and development and lay a solid foundation for studying in compulsory school. Students are in class for 525 hours per year. To prevent students from attending compulsory school without achieving the basic skills, the Swedish government decided on a reading, writing, and arithmetic initiative so that more students could achieve the knowledge goals. According to Bose and Bäckman (2020), almost all preschool teachers have specialized training, and the majority hold degrees equating to a bachelor's degree. The Minister of Education and Research has also acknowledged that families may want to place their children in family daycares or some form of educational care under private management. This is acceptable as long as the service provided maintains the same level of quality and safety as

corresponding municipal services (Roll-Pettersson et al., 2016). Participating in a high-quality preschool program makes kids more prepared for kindergarten and improves their academic and social outcomes over the long term (Vallberg Roth, 2020).

In 2000, little over half of the three- to five-year-olds in the US who were not yet in kindergarten were enrolled in preschool (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2020). This contrasts with nations like Sweden and Italy, both of which have preschool enrollment rates for three, four, and five-year-olds that are almost 100%. (Vallberg Roth, 2020). Although the number of children attending preschool has increased, access to preschool varies greatly between states and even within one state. Only ten states account for three-fourths of all state preschool spending, while eleven states do not fund preschool at all. Only a few states have made an effort to provide preschool access to all students; the other states with programs concentrate their resources on pupils at risk for academic failure. The funding situation is still dire, even in states that have committed to preschool programs. For instance, New York started a universal pre-K program in 1997 but had to halt it in 2001 owing to financial restrictions despite having 30% of all four-year-olds enrolled (Pac, 2021).

In terms of program quality, there are also significant differences in class size, student-teacher ratios, teacher credentials, and pay, as well as in the amount of funds allocated per student. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) created ten quality indicators to evaluate state preschool programs and currently uses them. These include curricular standards, various evaluation systems for teachers, staffing levels and class sizes, regulations for vision, hearing, and health screenings, as well as meal service. Based on this checklist, NIEER rates Florida, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and North Carolina as remarkable for new advances, while Arkansas, Illinois, New Jersey, and Oklahoma are rated as the leaders in the preschool sector (Barnett & Jung, 2020). In contrasting the two nations, we think that the United States should study how Sweden manages its educational system and consider how it may help them if they even adopted a portion of it.

### *The Swedish Independent Schools and the Voucher Program*

Between the ages of seven and sixteen, or what are known as elementary and junior high school in the United States, students must attend compulsory education in Sweden by law. The educational possibilities available to students in upper secondary school between the ages of 16 and 19 depend on their desired future occupations. Students have the option to enroll in programs that prepare them for university studies during this period, while others may choose to attend classes tailored toward a certain profession.

During the academic year 2016–2017, one or more independent or private schools operated in 215 of Sweden's 290 cities (Swedish Institute, 2021). Less than 1% of all students in upper secondary schools and obligatory education attended private schools prior to the educational reform in the 1990s. Today, 20% of upper secondary pupils and 10% of students enrolled in compulsory education select independent schools. In some parts of the nation, nearly half of all kids attend independent schools. This compels every school to perform its very best work and grants every child the right to obtain an equal education (Wiborg, 2019). No matter whether they are public or private, all schools must adhere to the same national curriculum.

In 1994, the Swedish government introduced a four-step grade system, from G.I.G. (failed) to MVG (pass with particular distinction). This new educational reform was implemented

simultaneously with the new curriculum in 2011, and letter grades are transformed into a point system between 0 (failed) and 20 (MVG or A) to calculate the merit rating. The 16 subjects are then combined into a score between 0 and 320 (Thor, 2020). On average, Swedish independent or private schools show better student outcomes, including grades, graduation rates, test results, and post-secondary studies, than public schools (Edmark & Persson, 2021). By 2017, the sum of all students' grades had been calculated, and the public schools' average was 218 points, while the independent schools proved to have 241 points (Thor, 2020). However, in a recent study by the National Board of Education (2017), the quality of the public school system has increased (Edmark & Persson, 2021). This report suggested that public schools are becoming more efficient and successful, both in using given resources and attaining higher student results than the national average. The report also concluded that the public schools realized that to compete with the independent schools, they needed to step up their game. Otherwise, they would lose students and thus revenues because the public schools' funding from the local school boards is paid as an amount per student. In conclusion, Sweden's school-independent voucher program shows that competition truly works.

### *Comprehensive Opportunities and Professional Standards for Student Success*

The ambition in the Swedish educational system is to ensure that every child leaves compulsory school with at least basic skills, in other words, a "no child left behind" ambition (Magnsson et al., 2019). In 2015, according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 15-year-old students from Sweden scored 506 points and students from the United States scored 505, compared to an average of 487 points in reading literacy. In addition, Swedish students scored 502 points in mathematics, while students in the United States scored 478 points, compared to an average of 489 points in all OECD countries. Finally, 499 points in science are compared to an average of 489 points in other OECD countries such as Australia, Belgium, and Canada (Education GPS, OECD, 2016). In addition, Sweden's students scored 493 versus Iceland's 473. The United States scored 496. On the students' science beliefs, engagement, and motivation, 15-year-old students from Sweden scored 493, while students from Norway scored 498, and the United States scored 496 (Hopfenbeck et al., 2019; OECD, 2016). While there are many indicators to explain successful student outcomes, PISA overall results have proven that Swedish educational systems are comprehensive and provide equal opportunities for students in schools across Sweden.

The Swedish educational system made its first attempt to improve teachers' professional standards in 1803. (Lindmark, 2006). At that time, the state mandated that in order to be qualified to teach, instructors had to complete a university exam. The first teacher-training facility was established in 1842. By 1977, there had been significant revisions to the requirements. Secondary teachers had to complete a four-year undergraduate degree, nearly always majoring in two disciplines that were frequently the topics they taught their students, then spend an additional year taking the necessary teacher preparation courses. Additionally, candidates for teaching positions in fields requiring specialized training, such as painting, music, and physical education, had to go to institutions designed specifically for that purpose. In 1988, certification was implemented as a result of the disparities in teachers' training in terms of both quantity and quality (Novak, 2019). Swedish teachers are regarded as trusted professionals as a result of their credentials and training, which is reflected in the degree of autonomy with which they carry out their tasks.



## Conclusion

Currently, the Swedish pedagogical system has a strong foundation for important evaluation and assessment components (Jedemark, 2019). All educational activities in Sweden are structured around an objectives-based management system, with national curriculum goals being modified in local work plans for each school and student development plans at the individual level. Assessment and evaluation activities are conducted at every level of the educational system. Making sure that the data collected at all levels is properly integrated and utilized, however, continues to present issues. Although the accountability aspect of evaluation and assessment has drawn more attention, it is now more important to make sure that local governments and educational institutions have the resources, incentives, and expertise to use data and feedback to improve their operations. The Swedish have demonstrated that, in any nation, regardless of its size or makeup, it is wise to forgo testing in favor of spending money on expanded curricula, smaller class sizes, and better teacher preparation, compensation, and treatment.

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