

## **EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN SWEDEN: TRENDS AND REFORMS**

**Dr. Songül Kilimci**

Uppsala University  
Department of Linguistics and Philology  
songul.kilimci@lingfil.uu.se

**Prof. Dr. Ulla Riis**

Uppsala University  
Pedagogy Department  
ulla.riis@ped.uu.se

### **ÖZET**

Bu çalışmada İsveç, genel eğitim sistemi ve eğitim sisteminde yer alan yönelimler ve yenilikler incelenmiştir. İskandinav ülkeleri arasında önemli bir yer tutan İsveç eğitim sisteminde yeniden yapılanma süreci devam etmektedir. Eğitimde yer alan geçmiş yıllarda yapılan yenileşme çalışmaları özelleştirme, özerkleştirme ve yönetim sistemine yönelik olmuştur. 1940'lerden bu yana bu reformların gerçekleşmesinde herkese eşit eğitim sunma ideolojisi de önemli rol oynamıştır. Bu çalışmanın birinci bölümünde İsveç hakkında genel bilgi, ikinci bölümünde genel eğitim sistemi ve yenileşme çalışmaları, sonuç bölümünde ise İsveç eğitim sisteminde yeni önerilen değişiklikler, eleştiriler ve gelecekle ilgili bazı olası sonuçlar tartışılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler: İsveç, İsveç eğitim sistemi, reformlar, yönelimler, yeniden yapılanma**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to present some brief information about Sweden in general, about its education system and recent reforms and trends in this education system. Sweden is currently under renovation in its education system. Reforms during the 1990s were mainly due to privatization, decentralization and new forms of governance. Providing equal opportunities in education has been a guiding ideology behind the reforms ever since the 1940s. In the concluding part of this paper we discuss some newly proposed changes of the Swedish education system, the critique raised against them, and some possible consequences for the future.

**Key Words: Sweden, Swedish education system, reforms, trends, restructuring**

### **Introduction to Sweden, its Population and its Modern History**

Sweden, one of the Nordic countries in Europe, is a geographically large country (450,000 km<sup>2</sup>) with a small population of nine million people, and hence sparsely populated (ca 20 persons per km<sup>2</sup>). Sweden is a constitutional monarchy with a parliament form of government. The king has only ceremonial functions. The Riksdag (the parliament) is the country's highest decision making body. For almost sixty years (1945-2002) the Social Democrats were the majority party, forming government except during nine years, 1976-1982 and 1991-1994. Today, in 2008, the right-wing parties form government. Sweden is a member of the European Union since 1995. Political issues that have long caused controversy deal with e.g. the defense and the degree of integration of Sweden into to EU, but many issues have been dealt within consensus, e.g. a foreign policy of international peace promotion and the building and sustaining of a welfare society in which the education system is ascribed an important role.

Sweden was long a poor, agrarian society and industrialization started late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. later than in many comparative European countries. Once it had started, however, the industrialization and modernization process was fast. Sweden managed to stay neutral during both World War I and II and did not have to rebuild after the wars. On the contrary, Sweden could benefit economically by exporting from its rich resources of wood, iron and steel to other European countries needing to rebuild their infrastructures after the wars. This laid an economic base for the erecting of the Swedish welfare society and for the creation of e.g. an educational system which was considered one of the internationally most modern ones in the 1960s and 1970s (Riis, 1988).

After World War II Sweden has received fairly large numbers of immigrants from many other countries and today more than every tenth person in Sweden is born outside Sweden. During the 1960s the immigration was mainly a question of increasing the labour force, but beginning in the 1970s the immigration of political refugees started to rise and has since then mirrored the political instabilities and the war crises of the world. The Finnish group, from a neighbouring country, is the largest immigrant group, spread over most of the country, but the majority of the immigrants settle in the metropolitan areas of either the capital of Stockholm or of Malmö, a large city in the south of Sweden. In the Stockholm metropolitan area the second largest group of foreign born are those born in the state of Turkey, totaling more than 20 000, Kurdish refugees form a large group with persons coming from Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and parts of the Caucasus (Westin, 1997).

Sweden has one ethnic minority of indigenous origin, the Sami people. The Samis inhabit the north of Sweden, Norway, Finland and the northwest Penninsula of Russia; in all this population reaches some 60 000 persons, of which nearly 20 000 live in Sweden (Nationalencyklopedin, 1995). Traditionally, the Samis were nomads, living on herding reindeers. Today the Samis normally are sedentary but many still make a living from keeping reindeers.

### **The Swedish Education System**

In 1842 a 4-year basic education was introduced for every Swedish citizen, but the large, modern school reform had to wait until 1962. This year the comprehensive school was lengthened from six to nine years, encompassing children from 7 to 16 years of age. During a short period, 1962-1968, there was streaming of the pupils during the last three years (lower secondary school), but from 1969 all streaming was abandoned. Around 1970, about 70 % of all pupils went on to the 3-year upper secondary school and today more than 90 % enter this school form. During the past five years, near to 50 % of the graduates from upper secondary school went on to post-secondary education (university and advanced vocational education) (Swedish Institute, 2008).

Starting in the 1970s an adult education has been built up, in the beginning intended to offer adults with only a short, 6-year primary education the chance to have secondary education. Later, when such a need had been satisfied, this school form turned to offer certain vocational training for adults, a second chance for young persons having failed to benefit from the ordinary secondary education, and education for immigrants.

A special feature of the Swedish school system is the Reform of Immigrant Language Teaching (Hemspråksreformen) of 1976. According to this, the municipalities must provide first language instruction for children with languages other than Swedish in order for these children to develop both that language and Swedish. Another feature of the school system in Sweden is the Sami school, the compulsory school specially designed to meet the needs and living circumstances of the Sami population, including language instruction.

The objective of education policy today is for Sweden to be a leading knowledge nation characterized by high quality education and lifelong learning for growth and justice. This has been approved by the Riksdag (Govt. Bill 2000/01:1, Committee Report 2000/01:UbU1, Parliamentary Communication 2000/01:99) (Swedish National Agency for Education: Skolverket, 2006a).

Guiding principles for the reforming of the Swedish education system the past 50-60 years have been that everyone shall have access to an equivalent education, regardless of sex, ethnic, social or economic background, place of residence or an eventual handicap. This ambition has created a reputation for the country for its pursuit of equality; both equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes. Democracy forms the basis of the national school system. The internationalization of Swedish society, and equivalent values in education are some of the national goals (Lpo 94, 2006).

### **Steering Documents**

The Swedish school system is a goal-based system with a high degree of local responsibility. The main responsibility for education activities lies with the

municipalities and a small number of authorities responsible for independent schools. Various steering documents are used to steer activities, such as school curriculum, course syllabi, etc. The frameworks of these are drawn up nationally and adjustments may – and should – be made at the municipal and the school level. The overall *national goals* are set out by Swedish Parliament and Government in

- The Education Act
- Curriculum for the preschool (Lpfö 98)
- Curriculum for the Compulsory School System, the preschool Class and the Leisure-time Centre (Lpo 94)
- Curriculum for the Non-compulsory School System (Lpf 94)
- Course syllabi for compulsory school etc.
- Program goals for upper secondary school
- 

*The National Agency for Education draws up and takes decisions on*

- Course syllabi for upper secondary school etc.
- Grading criteria for all types of Swedish school
- General recommendations

The National Agency for Education is continually developing and revising the syllabi, the grading criteria and other steering documents to ensure that they help to improve equivalence and achievement of goals, as well as reflect the needs motivated by developments in society, in the working life and in the needs of individuals.

The main responsibility for preschool activities, leisure time care for school children, schools and adult education lies with the municipalities, whose responsibilities include distributing resources and organizing education such that students are able to achieve the national goals. On the basis of this municipal input and the goals and guidelines set out in the steering documents, individual schools, preschools and leisure-time centers can choose work methods suited to their activities and local conditions (Skolverket, 2005).

The higher education is regulated through

- The Higher Education Act
- The Higher Education Ordinance

Swedish National Agency for Higher Education is the supervisory authority for universities and university colleges (the later have only limited resources for research and cannot train at the doctoral level). Compared to the school the institutions for higher education enjoy more freedom of education, but it is mandatory that there is a syllabus for every course given and that formal examiners are appointed. Accountability through

self-evaluation and external inspection has come to play a crucial role since the mid 1990s.

### **The Swedish School System**

The Swedish public school system is made up of compulsory and non-compulsory schooling. Compulsory schooling includes the regular compulsory school, the Sami school, the special school, and the programs for pupils with learning disabilities. Non-compulsory schooling includes the preschool class, the upper secondary school, the upper secondary school for pupils with learning disabilities, the municipal adult education, and the adult education for adults with learning disabilities.

All education throughout the public school system is free. There is usually no charge to students or their parents for teaching materials, school meals, health services or transports (Skolverket, 2005).

### **The Education Act**

The Education Act states that the education shall ‘provide the pupils with knowledge and, in co-operation with the homes, promote their harmonious development into responsible human beings and members of the community’. Consideration shall be given to students with special needs both within the ordinary school class and by means of the schools for pupils with special learning disabilities.

The Education Act also extends the right of education to adults. This can be provided through municipally run adult education (Komvux), or in adult education for adults with learning disabilities (Särvux) (National Agency for Education: NAE, 2006).

### **Responsibility and Governance**

Within the objectives and framework established by Government and Parliament, the individual municipality may determine how its schools are to be run. A local school plan describing the funding, organization, development and evaluation of school activities shall be adopted by each municipality. Using the approved curriculum, national objectives and the local school plan, the principal of each school draws up a local work plan. This shall be done in consultation with the school’s teachers and other personnel.

The National Agency for Education shall evaluate, follow up and supervise the public school system in Sweden. Every three years, the National Agency for Education presents an overview of the school system to Government and Parliament. This forms the basis for a revision of the national development plan for schools. The National Agency for Education has a supervisory role to ensure that the provisions of the

Education Act are being complied with and that the rights of the individual student are respected (NAE, 2006).

### **The School Year**

The school (academic) year normally begins at the end of August and runs to the beginning of June the following year, comprising a total of about 40 weeks. The regular school week is five days long, Monday through Friday. A longer holiday of just over two weeks is taken from around the 20th December to the beginning of January (Skolverket, 2005).

### **Preschool**

The preschool is open to children 1-5 years of age. Municipalities are obligated to provide a place in preschool for children whose parents work or study. Since the early 1970s the majority of Swedish women hold an ordinary job and hence a large number, close to 80 %, of the children of 1-5 years attend preschool. The tradition of preschool is to emphasize play and development of the individual and of the social skills (Skolverket, 2005).

### **Compulsory Education**

Included in compulsory schooling are, as said, the regular compulsory school, the Sami school, the special school, and the programs for pupils with learning disabilities. The 9-year compulsory school program is for all children between the ages of 7-16 years and the instruction is co-educational, girls and boys being taught together in all subjects. Upon the request of the parents, a child may begin school one year earlier, at the age of 6, and he or she is then registered in the preschool class. The preschool class program shall comprise a minimum of 525 hours over the year and stimulate the learning and development of each child, as well as lay the foundations for continued schooling.

Special schools offer a 10-year program for the deaf and hard of hearing and the similar holds true for pupils with learning disabilities (Skolverket, 2005). Sami children can receive education in Sami School corresponding to the first 6 years of ordinary compulsory school. The aim of the immigrant language instruction and of the instruction in the sami language in the Sami school is to help the development of the child as a bilingual person, to support his or her learning of all other subjects and to reinforce the self-esteem of the child.

### **Upper Secondary Education**

As said, almost all compulsory school students continue on – usually directly – to upper secondary school and the majority of these complete their upper secondary education in 3 years. Upper secondary education is divided into 17 national 3-year programs ranging from e.g. construction, industry and food to arts, science, technology and social science. All of the programs shall offer a broad general education and a basic eligibility to continue studies at the post-secondary or university level. Parallel to the national programs, there is an individual study programs for pupils who did not reach the minimum targets in Swedish, English and Maths while in compulsory school. They

have another chance in studies individually designed for them and when they catch up they can transfer to one of the 17 ordinary programs.

Upper secondary education for the learning disabled offers vocational training in the form of national-, specially designed- or individual programs, similar to those of regular upper secondary school. The national programs for the learning disabled are however fewer in number and specially oriented to vocational training. Upper secondary programs for the learning disabled are 4 years in length (Skolverket, 2005).

### **Adult Education**

A person has the right to begin an upper secondary education in a regular upper secondary school up until the year he/she turns 20. After that, there are different types of municipally run adult education programs. Among these are municipal adult education (Komvux) and education for adults with learning disabilities (Särvux). Komvux and Särvux are basic education, corresponding to compulsory school and programs for pupils with learning disabilities, respectively, and non-compulsory education, corresponding to regular upper secondary and upper secondary courses for pupils with learning disabilities, respectively. Komvux also offers continuing education programs that give specialized skills in a particular occupational field (Skolverket, 2005).

The Swedish Agency for Flexible Learning serves as a complement to municipal adult programs for people living in rural areas or persons with small children, with difficulties to leave the place where they live. Part of the program is therefore done by distance, in addition to students making regular visits to the school, often at weekends, for teacher directed instruction.

Swedish for immigrants (SFI) is designed to provide newcomers with knowledge of the Swedish language and the Swedish society. Municipalities have an obligation to offer SFI to new adult immigrants. SFI programs may be organized in different ways depending on the municipality, but more often than not, the municipal adult education is responsible for the organization (Skolverket, 2005).

### **University and Post-secondary Education**

As said, almost half of the youth population continue on to study at the university or some other part of the post-secondary level within three years of completing upper secondary school (Högskoleverket, 2008). The difference between the sexes is notable; more than 50 % of the women continue compared to some 37 % of the men (ibid.). A much larger proportion of students come from highly educated families (ca 70 %) than from families with low educational attainment (ca 25 %) (Forsberg and Lundgren 2004). The number of students in higher education increased by more than 60 percent in 1991-2002.

Universities and institutions of higher education offer students specific programs or individual courses of study. Most universities and post-secondary institutions in Sweden are state-run, and they are allocated to more than 30 towns and cities across the country.

The past years there has been much work on restructuring the Swedish system of higher education according to the Bologna process. Before 2007 the main structure was that of a 3-year cycle, followed by a 1-year cycle and a 4-year cycle, the last one aiming at the doctor degree. Several professional educations, however, like those of engineers, medical doctors, etc. had other cycles, usually longer ones. Other professional educations had shorter cycles. Today the Bologna idea of 3+2+3 is adopted for most educational programs except for the longest ones. The doctor cycle may still be four years. The most important consequence of the adjustment to the Bologna process so far has been an increased interest from foreign students to study in Sweden for the second, 2-year cycle.

### **A Summary**

In brief, the Swedish education system is constructed as shown in figure 1 below (inspired by an education map provided by Skolverket, 2005).

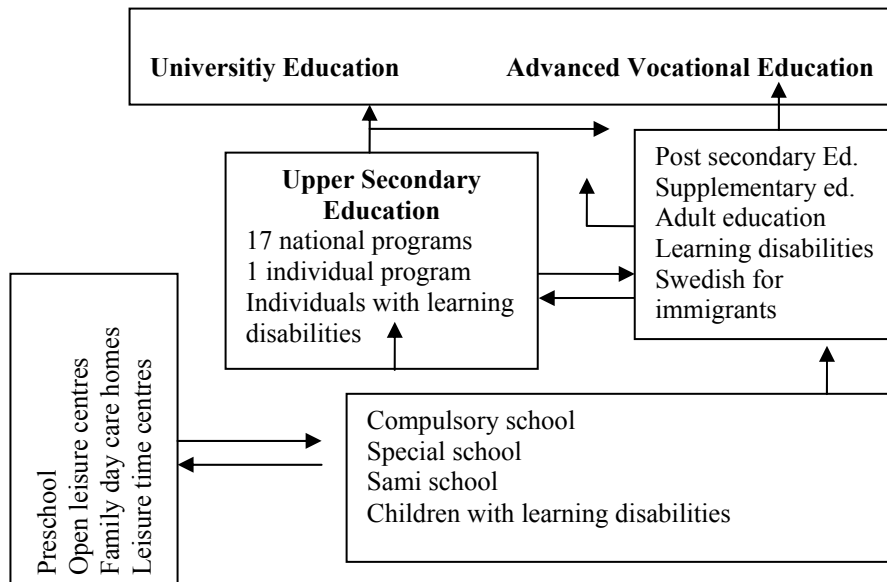


Figure 1. The framework of transmission in Swedish education system

### **Independent Schools**

Most children attend a municipal school close to their home. However, since the early 1990s, students and their parents have the right to choose another municipal school, or a privately run, independent school. In 2005 about 7 % of compulsory school students and 13 % of upper secondary school students attended an independent school (Swedish Institute, 2008).



Independent schools are open to everyone and must be approved by the National Agency for Education. The municipality in which the student resides pays the independent school a yearly grant per student, almost amounting to the cost per pupil in the municipal school. The education of an independent school shall adhere to the national curriculum and syllabi and shall have the same basic objectives as the municipal schools, but it may have a profile that distinguishes it from the municipal school. For example, schools may have a particular religious character or use a special educational approach such as Montessori or Waldorf. About half of the total number of independent schools in 2006 were confessional in character and the other half used a special educational approach. If an independent school does not comply with applicable regulations, the National Agency for Education may withdraw its approval (Skolverket, 2006a).

Independent schools above the compulsory school level can be one of two kinds: those that correspond to municipal upper secondary, i.e., those that offer upper secondary programs and receive municipal grants, or those that offer supplementary programs. Among the latter are schools with programs in e.g. fine arts and handicrafts (Skolverket, 2006a).

In addition to the types of schools mentioned, there are also a number of international schools in Sweden that receive partial government funding. These schools are intended primarily for the children of foreign nationals whose stay in Sweden is temporary (Skolverket, 2006a).

### **Trends and Reforms in Swedish Education**

The 1962 education act introduced the 9-year, comprehensive, co-educational school all over the country; during the 1970s the upper secondary education was expanded to accommodate practically all adolescents 16-19 years of age; and in the 1970s a system for adult education was established. Ever since the 1960s the university system has expanded in number of students, one wave occurring in the 1960s, one in the late 1970s and one during the years 1991-2002. All this change was long brought about in an air of political consensus. In the 1980s, however, this consensus came to an end. The changes in the governance of Swedish schools during the 1990s in many ways represent a radical ideological shift, reflecting a movement toward decentralization, accountability and competition.

The concepts of decentralization and “goal steering” (the practice of governing by defining a broad set of goals for local governments to achieve rather than by setting strict regulations) became widespread. In the 1980s, the government introduced three major policy initiatives regarding school:

- Decentralization of administrative bodies and transferal of the decision-making process to lower levels in the state apparatus,
- Privatization of public companies and service units,
- Reduction of public expenditures (Montin 1992 in Daun 2004).

The Swedish central government took the first major step toward its decentralization of public education in 1990 when it transferred the authority for primary and secondary education to the municipalities. As a result of this reform, the municipalities were given full financial responsibility for primary and secondary schools. Responsibility for teacher employment was shifted from the central government to the municipalities and to the school level. One consequence of this change of responsibility is that curricula and syllabi are put together in a new way. Another step taken in early 1990s by central government was that of allowing for private, independent schools, financed by taxes as any other public good. Both these reforms are questioned today: The “municipality reform” is criticized for putting the principle of equal standards at risk. Studies of student academic achievement indicate that the inter-school variation has increased during the past decade (Skolverket, 2007). The “privatization” reform is criticized on much the same ground, but above all the critique is that some religious schools, together with the homes, seem to isolate the pupils within a sub-culture of the larger Swedish society.

Participation in school governance was one prominent feature of the rhetoric of Swedish reforms in the 1990s. Several decisions were made to increase the participation of teachers, parents, and students in school governance. For students, participation implies the right to have an impact on the content and working methods in courses, as well as the right to choose among programs and, to some extent, courses (Forsberg and Lundgren, 2004). In general terms the measures to increase participation seem to have worked as intended.

New grading systems, independent schools, a 3-year universal upper secondary school based on programmes and courses, a new type of school – preschool class, childcare integrated into the educational system, a curriculum for preschool, the government Adult Education Initiative (Kunskapslyftet), which meant a change in adult education, are other major changes accomplished in the 1990s (Swedish National Agency for Education, report no. 283, 2006a).

The change process has continued into the new millennium. Within the preschool system, a maximum fee and the right to attend a universal preschool have been introduced for 4–5-year olds and several proposals aimed at modernizing and changing upper secondary school within the framework of today’s programme-structured upper secondary education have been prepared for introduction in the school year 2007/08 (Skolverket, 2006a). In March 2008 a government committee of inquiry proposed a new structure for the upper secondary education in which some programs will be all vocational and will not give eligibility for studies at the university level (SOU 2008:27). This proposition is criticized for abandoning the principle of every level of the education system giving the individual eligibility for studies at the following level.

The large expansion of higher education in the past 15 years has been severely criticized too. The expansion of numbers of students has not been accompanied by the corresponding expansion of resources for teacher time, localities, libraries, etc. This has

meant, in addition, that the time for research for the teachers has diminished and that the connection between research and instruction, characteristic to higher education, has partly been lost. Lately, some political initiatives have been taken to partly restore the former balance and to allocate more economic resources for university teaching. At the same time the pressure on accountability on part of the higher education institutions will increase in the years to come.

### **Conclusion**

There have been a great changes in the education system of Sweden, from the preschool level, through compulsory and secondary school to the level of higher education. Forsberg and Lundgren (2004) analyse this in terms of a restructuring and they maintain that Swedish education the past 15 years provides a case study of policy change implemented by a welfare state in transition, with scarce finances, governance problems, and (at least in the perception of some of the population) a lack of legitimacy. The hope was that decentralization, deregulation, and freedom of choice for school children and their parents would increase democratic participation, efficiency, and professionalism. At the same time, however, greater control in the form of accountability for results occurred at every level of the education system and, in fact, contributed to renewed centralization. To complicate matters, the restructuring began during the economic recession of the 1990s (Forsberg and Lundgren, 2004).

The consequences of the changes for students and teachers, as well as for Swedish society as a whole, remain to be seen, and this could be an interesting object of study for many researchers in education. Since Sweden share practically all these changes with its members of the European Union and with most other countries of the modern world, there could also be plenty of room for research in comparative education.

### **References**

- Daun, H. (2004). Privatisation, Decentralisation and Governance in Education in the Czech Republic, England, France, Germany and Sweden. *International Review of Education*, 50, 3225-346.
- Forsberg, E., Lundgren, U.P. (2004). Sweden: A welfare State in Transition. In: Rothberg, I. (ed.): *Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education Reform*. Lanham, Maryland: ScarecrowEducation.
- Högskoleverket (2008). Statistisk analys 2008/1. (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education. Statistical analyses 2008/1).
- Lpo 94 (2006). Curriculum for the compulsory school system, the preschool class and the leisure-time centre. Stockholm: Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden and National Agency for Education.

- Lpo 98 (2001). Curriculum for the compulsory school system, the preschool class and the leisure-time centre. Stockholm: Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden and National Agency for Education.
- National Agency For Education (2006). National Agency for Education's official statistics for 2006. Statistics Sweden's Education Costs 2002–2006 (UF 12 SM 0701) and Statistics Sweden's National Accounts – Quarterly GDP 2006:4.
- Nationalencyklopedin (1995). (The Swedish National Encyklopaedia).
- Riis, U. (ed.) (1988). *Naturvetenskaplig undervisning i svensk skola – Huvudresultat från en IEA-undersökning*. F 88:2 Stockholm: Skolöverstyrelsen (National Board of Education: Science education in the Swedish school – Main results from an IEA-study).
- Skolverket (2006a). *Descriptive Data for Preschool Activities, School-Age Childcare, Schools and Adult Education in Sweden*, Stockholm: National Agency for Education.
- Skolverket (2006b). *Educational Results in National Level*. Stockholm: National Agency for Education.
- Skolverket (2007). *PISA 2006. 15-åringars förmåga att förstå, tolka och reflektera – naturvetenskap, matematik och läsförståelse*. Skolverkets Rapport 306. Stockholm: Skolverket (National Agency for Education: PISA 2006.<sup>1</sup> The ability of 15-years old to understand, interpret and reflect – Science, Mathematics and Reading).
- SOU 2008:27. *Framtidsvägen - en reformerad gymnasieskola* (The way ahead – A reform of the upper secondary school)
- Swedish Institute (2008). [www.sweden.se/templates/cs/FactSheet\\_15974](http://www.sweden.se/templates/cs/FactSheet_15974)
- Westin, C. (1997). *Metropolis, 2<sup>nd</sup> International Metropolis conference*, Copenhagen 25-28 September 1997.

---

<sup>1</sup> PISA, Programme for International Student Assessment, is an initiative of the OECD with more than 40 participating countries, among them Turkey and Sweden.