A Recent Swedish Attempt to Weaken State Control and Strengthen School Autonomy: the experiment with local time schedules

LINDA RÖNNBERG
Umeå University, Sweden

ABSTRACT In 1999, after a series of far-reaching reforms aiming at decentralisation, deregulation and increased local autonomy in Swedish education, the Government decided to introduce a five-year experiment, which would develop these reform efforts even further. Even though Swedish compulsory schools already were the most autonomous in Europe with regard to decision making on school time, an experiment which allowed schools to freely decide time allocation and time management was launched. At least on paper, the experiment indicates a shift from state control to local autonomy, allowing school professionals to be free to make decisions on time distribution previously controlled by the state. The aim is to analyse and discuss whether the experiment has affected school autonomy or not and how this can be understood. The theoretical point of departure is a two-dimensional view of autonomy, where both freedom of action and capacity for action need to be taken into account. The freedom of action (the discretionary space for local actors) provided within the experiment is analysed through three properties of the experimental programme: programme clarity, division of responsibilities and control mechanisms. The schools' capacity for action concerns the extent participating schools make use of the discretion provided within the experiment. This is analysed in three schools with reference to their ability to organise themselves in a flexible way, as well as to what extent the schools have shown previous capacity for action and readiness for reform. Based on this analysis of the experiment, it is concluded that if reform efforts are made to increase school autonomy, they should not one-sidedly be focused on increasing local actors' freedom of action (such as abolishing the national time schedule). Such efforts should also be accompanied by measures to reinforce local actors' capacity for action. Unless local actors can make use of the discretion given to them by a superior (political) body, local autonomy will be far less than was intended, since freedom to act exceeds the actual capacity to act.

Introduction

Throughout the industrialised countries, decentralisation (along with, for instance, market-oriented mechanisms) has been one of the key trends and an obvious feature of contemporary policy making, both within the field of education as in other sectors. In Sweden, the system of steering education underwent a radical transformation, particularly during the 1990s. This development turned Sweden from having one of the most centrally regulated and framed education systems to having a system characterised by almost the total opposite (Rothstein, 1992; Lindbom, 1995; Daun, 1997, 2001). Today, Swedish education is described as being one of the most decentralised in the western world (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2002). The process of restructuring Swedish education that has taken place during recent decades has been described as being ‘fundamental’ (Richardson, 1999, p. 106), ‘the most far-reaching in the history of Swedish education’ (Swedish Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 19) and ‘the most far-reaching alteration in a modern public organization in Sweden’ (Helgoy, 2006, p. 100). This article focuses
The Experiment with Local Time Schedules

The members of the Swedish Riksdag assembled one morning in early November of 1999. They were about to make a decision that would emphasise even further the decentralisation strategy that has been dominating the political efforts in education since the beginning of the 1990s. They decided to initiate an experiment which would result in extensive local autonomy regarding decisions on school time. The preceding debate was characterised by consensus from the political parties, the opposition being, if possible, even more determined that the future direction of Swedish education policy was to be marked by the abolition of the national time schedule in the compulsory school system. Approximately 900 out of 5000 Swedish compulsory schools took part in the experiment, which was to be terminated in 2005. It has now been prolonged until 2010 in order to give time for the legislative process.

Overall, the decision to introduce the experiment followed a path outlined by previous policy decisions. Emphasis on decentralisation, deregulation and local autonomy were obvious features both within the experimental programme as well as in reforms that preceded it. Responsibility over key resources, such as finance (1993) and personnel (1989), had already been transferred from the state to the local level. With the experiment, time also became a resource for the local level to manage. However, after the experiment began, other decisions were made that, at least in part, seemed to diverge from the path that the reforms of the 1990s had followed. After being swept off the agenda for several years, the state reintroduced specific grants in education. This was also accompanied by a new system of school inspections, as well as other efforts that, all together, appeared to increase the role of the state. So, on one hand, there were continuing strivings to deregulate, decentralise and increase local autonomy, as in the experiment with local time schedules. On the other, there are some signs that point towards an effort to 'bring the state back in'. The experiment was conducted in the cross-pressure between these two tendencies, making it an interesting case of contemporary policy making in Swedish education.

This cross-pressure is, however, not the only circumstance that makes the Swedish experiment an interesting object of study. From a comparative perspective, Swedish regulation of school time is considered to be 'an exception' (European Commission, 2000, p. 29). When contrasted to other European countries, the Swedish schools have had the most extensive influence on decisions regarding time allocation and management since the mid-1990s (European Commission, 1997, 2000, 2002, 2005; see Appendix 1, Table AI). In this respect, the experiment with local time schedules is further reinforcing the unique Swedish situation.

Time as a content of educational reform has not received much scholarly interest (Lundgren & Colliander, 1991; Gándara, 2000). However, several research projects and evaluations have been undertaken in connection with the Swedish experiment with local time schedules. Overall, their main focus have been on actual implementation of the experiment in a classroom setting (cf. SOU 2005:102; Studies in Educational Policy and Educational Philosophy, 2004:1, for an overview of the projects). By and large, other studies have not highlighted the programme design as a backdrop in order to understand the classroom findings. Even though insights from those projects have been highly valuable, the question addressed in this article has not been scrutinised to any greater extent.

**Aim**

At least on paper, the experiment implies a shift from state control to local autonomy (where school professionals are free to make decisions on time distribution previously held by the state). This article will address the question of whether this shift actually occurred. Drawing on the case of the Swedish experiment with local time schedules (henceforth referred to as LTS), the aim is to analyse and discuss whether the experiment has affected school autonomy or not and how this can be understood.

The following questions will be addressed:

- What were the formal characteristics and arrangements of the LTS experiment and how did they affect the schools' freedom of action?
To what extent did the participating schools use the discretionary space provided in the experiment and how did perceived constraints affect their capacity to act?

Empirical Material and Analysis

The analysis is based on two kinds of data: official documents, and policy texts and data from a longitudinal study in three schools participating in the experiment (the ‘White’, ‘Yellow’ and ‘Green’ schools). An overview of the three schools, according to some statistical measures, is found in Appendix 1, Table AII. The longitudinal study focused on time allocation and time use at the lower secondary stage (pupils 13-16 years of age). It was conducted in a cross-disciplinary research project at Umeå University financed by the Swedish Ministry of Education. An earlier study in the research project (Nyroos & Rönnberg, 2004) highlighted that flexible time allocation was perceived the most difficult in the last years of compulsory school (lower secondary), particularly due to stricter classification of subjects and subject teachers. The collection of data was guided by the ethical rules from the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). In order to ensure confidentiality for participants, the schools are not identified by their real names.

The three schools were chosen to represent varying degrees of flexible time allocation and management. The selection of cases did thus not consider, for instance, socio-economic context, and there are no marked contrasts between the schools in these respects. The study covered a four-year period, with particular emphasis on the years 2002 to 2004. In sum, over 70 interviews (with headmasters, teachers and pupils) and a large collection of written material (schedules, local school plans, annual quality accounts, annual reports to the National School Timetable Delegation [TD], etc.) were included. Furthermore, classroom observations were also undertaken. In this article, I mainly draw on the interviews with headmasters (carried out on three occasions from 2002 to 2004) and the written material from the schools. When relying on interviews, there is always a risk that the story is told in a strategic manner to convey the picture the informant wants to portray for the researcher. In the study, several sources of data have been used. Overall, the observations, the statements in the written material and in the interviews from different actors in the same school tended to converge, i.e. they tell the same story. This can indicate that the strategic element did not play a prominent role in this particular study. (For more on the schools, see Lundahl et al, 2004; Nyroos et al, 2004; Nyroos, 2007; Rönnberg, 2007a.)

The official documents and policy texts (commission reports, bills etc.) are used in order to analyse the local actors’ freedom of action in the LTS experiment, i.e. the scope for action according to the formal arrangements. I draw on the longitudinal study when elucidating the local actors’ capacity for action and discussing the extent to which the scope for action is being utilised locally.

The Shift towards Increased Local Autonomy on Time Distribution

Lundgren (2002) depicts the governing of education systems from two basic components, including where decision-making powers are located (centralised or decentralised) and who makes the decisions (professionals or elected politicians). Along this line of reasoning, decentralisation represents a movement to the lower half of Figure 1 (quadrant 3 and 4). However, the transfer of responsibilities may be directed to either political or professional actors, and still be considered as a decentralised way of governing. As for the governing of the education system as a whole, decision making in matters regarding time allocation have also undergone extensive changes regarding both where decisions are made and who makes them. Up to the 1990s, time allocation was largely determined by central political actors. The national time schedule was very detailed and specific and there was little possibility to adjust it to local needs. With the 1980 curriculum, regulations were loosened to a certain extent, though not to the lengths that became evident in the 1994 curriculum. Within the LTS experiment, the governing of school time is intended to be located in the lower left quadrant (3), where school professionals (and not municipal politicians) are the ones who are supposed to decide the local time distribution.
The Experiment with Local Time Schedules

Thus, the LTS experiment constitutes an example of reducing central and political control while attempting to increase local and professional autonomy in these matters. The primary scope of this article is whether the experiment can be said to increase local autonomy or not, and in so doing, my point of departure is a two-dimensional view of the concept of autonomy.

![](image1.png)

Figure 1. Governing of education systems and Swedish decision making on school time. Source: modified from Lundgren, 2002, p. 7.

The Two Dimensions of Autonomy

The concept of autonomy is complex and its definitions may vary due to the area of study it is applied to. However, in the most basic sense, autonomy can be conceived as independence (Dahl, 1982) and the ‘power to govern without outside controls’ (Berdahl, 1990, p. 171). The power to govern can then refer to either individuals or organisations and institutions. Here, I apply the concept to the latter. The concept is further seen as two-dimensional; on one hand, the concept of autonomy is often perceived as freedom of action: ‘To what degree can societal actors decide their course of action, and to what degree are they compelled to follow a course not chosen by them’ (Etzioni, 1968, p. 251). In this sense of the word, for example, deregulation and/or decentralisation result in an increased autonomy for the lower levels of the hierarchy, whilst centralist and regulatory policies work in the opposite direction. On the other hand, as Figure 2 indicates, the concept of autonomy also needs to include the capacity for action, such as if the ‘autonomous’ actor has the capacity to act according to his/her own discretion (Lundquist, 1987). Together, both freedom and capacity for action comprise a broader definition of autonomy than if either one of them is used.

![](image2.png)

Figure 2. Autonomy. Source: Lundquist, 1987, p. 39.

In point C, the organisation possesses greater freedom of action than it is able to use. In contrast, in point D, the organisation has a surplus of capacity for action. In either case, both situations will result in autonomy at level E (Lundquist, 1987, p. 38). This line of argument implies that increased
autonomy is a function of both increased scope, as well as increased ability for action in order to increase the level of autonomy.

The relationship between decentralisation and autonomy should not be seen as clear-cut. Decentralisation is a 'highly imprecise notion' (Lauglo, 1995, p. 6), and contextual, in the sense that it is given different meanings in different settings, and often in reference to a state before decentralisation took place (Lundgren, 2002). Yet, the concept of decentralisation basically denotes the distribution of authority within a system or organisation, where the direction of authority and responsibility is transferred from the centre to more peripheral units (Gustafsson, 1987; Lane, 1992; Mühlenbock, 1999; Pierre, 2001). However, this shift of responsibilities does not per se result in a higher degree of autonomy for the recipients of authority (Johansson & Johansson, 1994).

With reference to the two dimensions of autonomy, decentralisation may increase the freedom of action in lower levels, but it does not automatically result in a higher capacity for action. Increased control and monitoring from the state, as well as, for instance, an increased workload at the bottom, may very well result in less capacity for action, even though decentralisation increases freedom of action for local actors. From this point of view, there is no linear and simple one-sided connection between efforts of decentralisation and actual local autonomy. For example, Gustafsson (1999) found that secondary school teachers, paradoxically, experienced that they had more freedom to act in the 1970s, when education was strongly regulated, than after the extensive decentralisation and deregulatory reforms of the 1990s. So, even if the regulatory framework is severely reduced, it should not be presupposed that, for example, teachers will perceive it that way or use the increased freedom to act accordingly.

In this article, freedom of action is to be understood as the discretionary space for local actors that is provided within the experiment. Here, formal characteristics and arrangements of the experimental programme (such as programme design, management and control) that enable or limit freedom of action are focused, i.e. the extent to which the frames set up for the experiment increase freedom of action for local actors. In examining this, three properties of the programme will constitute the base for the assessment.

First, a lack of programme clarity is often made visible through obscure goals that entail several options of action (Vedung, 1997). The absence of clear, consistent goals and objectives that can be ranked, evaluated and controlled can be expected to increase local freedom of action, rather than if the objectives are clearly stated and controlled from above. Therefore, one aspect of the freedom of action provided within the experiment concerns how the goals are stated and handled. Of course, one may argue that a vague programme also can cause a sense of confusion and frustration at the local level. However, that concerns how the local actors perceive their freedom of action, not as such affecting the discretionary space they are provided. In this article, this space is expected to be larger when the programme and its goals are vaguely rather than clearly stated in detail. Second, the division of responsibilities regarding the setting of goals and use of adequate means is seen as another programme characteristic that can affect local actors’ freedom of action. If such responsibilities mainly are found at the school level, it will facilitate their discretion and freedom of action. Last, the control mechanisms present in the experiment is another trait of the programme that can influence the freedom of action at the local level. Those mechanisms can, for instance, be of financial, legal or ex-post evaluative nature. The degree to which the state uses such control mechanisms affects freedom of action at the local level.

Hence, regarding freedom of action, this article departs from the design of the experiment and examines three traits that can be expected to affect the degree to which the local actors are granted freedom of action. The schools’ capacity for action, on the other hand, is defined as to what extent participating schools make use of and take possession of the discretion provided within the experiment. Organisational capabilities, ‘such as skills, abilities, knowledge and resources’ (Lidström, 1991, p. 29) are central components, as well as the ability to achieve results and outcomes. Of course, there could be numerous factors that may influence why schools choose to act in accordance with the degree of freedom of action they possess. I will mainly focus on two conditions that may influence a school’s capacity for action within the experiment.
The first is a well-functioning local school ‘infrastructure’, consisting of, for instance, a flexible organisation and use of staff, finance, time and premises. How certain organisational characteristics either facilitate or impede the ability to take action have been widely recognised, for instance, in the literature focusing on policy implementation (Hill, 2003; Barrett, 2004). In order to exercise their capacity to act, the schools need to provide an environment that is flexible, in the sense that it can be altered and accommodated to allow the desired actions to take place. Second, former capacity to act or readiness for reform (cf. Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991) is an aspect that will be considered when analysing the capacity for action within the experiment. To what extent actors make use of discretion can also depend on their earlier experiences, and willingness to do so. The schools’ reasons to participate in the experiment can reveal something about their former capacity to act and the attitudes towards the experiment. Schools can be expected to join the experiment from different starting points: Some schools may have extensive experience on more flexible time distribution, while others may not. Schools can also have different interests in using the granted freedom. Further, regarding the readiness for action, organisational change is often found to fall well in line with the existing organisational culture and previously held values (Brunsson & Olsen, 1990; Municio, 1995; Sannerstedt, 2001). Thus, the capacity for action can be expected to depend upon the degree to which the actions are congruent or diverging from paths that the organisation already has outlined (cf. Vedung, 1997, 2001 on direction and size of changes).

In sum, the concept of autonomy is divided into two parts, and both will be discussed with reference to the LTS experiment. Freedom of action is defined as the discretionary space that the experiment provides, and the capacity for action is to what extent this space is utilised locally. The discretionary space outlined by the experiment constitutes a common frame for the participating schools to take action within; the size of that space is the same for all participants. However, the expectation is that the schools’ capacities for action may vary considerably, consequently affecting local autonomy. In analysing whether the experiment has increased school autonomy or not, it is important to mention that the units of analysis are the schools and not the individual teachers (for a discussion on individual versus organisational/institutional autonomy, see Lidström, 1991; Alexandersson & Mårdén, 1997). However, in the concluding discussion, I will return to the question of the impact that increased school autonomy might have regarding teacher and professional autonomy.

**Freedom of Action**

*Programme Clarity*

It is strikingly difficult to find consistent and detailed statements of the objectives for the LTS experiment. In a preparatory report by the Ministry of Education, the purpose of the experiment was ‘to strengthen and emphasise management by objectives and thereby ultimately create better opportunities for pupils to reach the national objectives’ (Swedish Ministry of Education, Ds 1999, 1, p. 50). A similar statement can also be found in an earlier Government Bill (1997/98, p. 94). However, after the experiment was launched, the goals have been very vaguely expressed by, for instance, the National School Timetable Delegation (who had the overall responsibility for leading the experiment and providing the decision makers with recommendations). In fact, when the experiment was running, it was easier to find references to what the experiment did not intend (such as creating municipal time schedules, SOU 2004:35) than to find the explicit aims of the experiment. Instead, on several occasions, the Timetable Delegation underlined that there were no models or solutions that they were advocating, not wanting to affect what the schools chose to do or not within the experiment (SOU 2004:35; SOU 2005:101).

Still, the vaguely expressed goals of the LTS should not be interpreted as the absence of intentions or expectations that the policy makers hope the LTS experiment can fulfil. Besides the previously mentioned ambition to increase pupil achievement, there are also other (however, more or less implicit) desired results that an analysis of the official policy documents brings to the fore. There is a need to:
(a) Break through stagnation (an expressed desire for a change to take place, in particular regarding teaching and working methods),
(b) Strengthen the efforts of management by objectives and decentralisation (a reinforcement of the current direction of Swedish education),
(c) Adjust the steering mechanisms to what works in reality (removing an already dysfunctional and outdated steering mechanism),
(d) Put the needs of the pupils on top of the agenda (inflexible use and allocation of time does not ensure the equal treatment of pupils but may be a false security). (Rönnberg, 2007b)

However, these intentions are neither explicitly stated to the participating schools nor controlled and measured by the state. Even though such intentions exist, lurking in the background, they are not used in such a way that will give the programme additional clarity. Also, Sigfridsson & Sundberg (2005) characterise the experiment as vague and general rather than specific with straightforward evaluative intentions. The LTS experiment is deliberately designed in a vague manner, not trying to define and direct the local LTS projects in schools (as the Timetable Delegation repeatedly had stated). This lack of programme clarity will contribute to an increased scope for local action within the experiment.

**Division of Responsibilities**

As mentioned in the introductory section, Swedish schools possessed far-reaching decision-making power on school time even before the experiment began. Thus, it can be noted that, to a substantial degree, the division of responsibilities already was delegated to the school level. Schools participating in the experiment are free to decide how many hours different subjects are to be taught. The overall national time schedule states the number of hours allocated to each subject or groups of subjects in total, which the schools and municipalities are free to distribute over the nine years of compulsory school. This total can also be reduced by up to 20 per cent, so the number of hours for each subject is not fixed. Hence, even in the existing schedule, there is substantial room for local actors to adjust time allocation to their needs. With the experiment, there are no state regulations concerning how many hours, for instance, of civics, English or mathematics the pupils are entitled to receive. Whether participating in the LTS or not, schools are still to offer each pupil 6665 hours of teacher-supervised instruction time over the whole nine-year period. But how these hours should be allocated to different subjects or activities is up to the participating schools to decide, as long as they respect the other statutes of the Education Act, Curriculum and Syllabi.

The discussion of programme clarity raised the vague programme goals set by the state. With reference to the division of responsibilities, it is of importance to draw attention to the three levels (state, municipalities and schools) responsible for setting the goals of the experiment. When the decision to introduce an experiment was made, all Swedish municipalities received an invitation to take part in it. Those who signed up were asked to state their goals to be reached within the experiment in their application. The municipalities were responsible for selecting the schools, if not all, located in the municipality that were to be included in the experiment. Each school participating (about 900) also stated their goals. The Timetable Delegation did not make a comprehensive assessment of whether the locally formulated goals were acceptable or not from their point of view. They did not approve or disapprove of certain participants based on the goals the schools had stated. The responsibility to set goals was to a large extent transferred to the local level and the schools. So, the schools could set their own goals, and freely decide the means to use to reach them (cf. Hudson, 20077, on self-regulation). The state did not provide economic grants to the schools participating in the experiment; there was no funding from the state available for the schools to use in order to attain their objectives. Instead, the means (as well as the setting of goals) were tasks for which the schools took responsibility. To rephrase Osborne & Gaebler (1994), the division of responsibilities within the experiment meant that the schools, overall, were both ‘rowing’ and ‘steering’, as well as financing and building the boat. The division of responsibilities meant that the state largely stepped aside, while the schools were accorded far-reaching responsibilities for setting up and executing the experiment.
The Experiment with Local Time Schedules

So, with reference to the division of responsibilities, Swedish schools received additional freedom to choose their own courses of action within the LTS experiment. The programme design also directed setting of objectives to the school level and means to reach them. On the whole, the division of responsibilities points towards an increased local freedom of action.

Control Mechanisms

There is a commonly accepted notion that increased decentralisation might have more of a reverse effect on the local scope of action than was intended. If increased control is introduced, alongside decentralisation reforms, the scope for local action may be largely circumscribed (Hudson & Rönnberg, 2007). When discussing the use and classification of policy instruments, legal and economic means of control are often pointed to, and considered as ‘strong’ in comparison to, for instance, assessments, evaluations or ideological means of control (Vedung, 1998; Lundgren, 2002; Jordan et al, 2005). In the LTS experiment, the state did not rely on any economic or legal means of control at all. As already mentioned, no economic funds were attached to the experiment by the state. Consequently, poor performance could not be controlled or corrected by, for example, withdrawal of project means. Furthermore, there was no possibility on legal grounds either to suspend schools from the experiment, or to sanction or ban certain activities.

However, the participating schools sent written evaluative documentation of their work to the Timetable Delegation on an annual basis. The Delegation proposed a set of themes and key words on how to ‘structure’ and gave ‘examples’ (SOU 2005:101, p. 257) in this documentation. Through those themes, the schools may have gained insights on what issues and areas changes were desired, thus making this feature of the experiment an attempt to, by ex-post evaluative means, control the activities that were undertaken in the experiment. But the Delegation did not deliver individual feedback to each school based on their yearly documentation. Neither was the documentation subjected to public display, thus providing transparency and accountability, nor evaluated in relation to the schools’ objectives or level of goal attainment. Hence, while the documentation could have been used in a more explicit controlling fashion, it may still be regarded as a form of control mechanism. The extent to which the state maintains and uses means of control in the experiment might reduce the local actors’ freedom of action. Even though the ex-post evaluative documentation may be viewed as an example of retained state control, the use of that means was not executed to its full potential. Considering the absence of economic and legal control, paired with the unutilised follow-ups, the state possessed relatively weak means of control in the LTS.

Freedom of Action: summing up

Properties of the experimental programme, its vagueness, the division of responsibilities to the school level, as well as the relative absence of strong control mechanisms point towards an increased freedom of action for participating schools. The explicit statement not to create municipal time schedules also indicates the schools to be the primary actors receiving increased scope for action. The possibility, then, for the schools to choose their own courses of action, without being bound to a route not chosen by them, is extensive. Thus, the discretionary space provided within the experiment for the schools to take action can be considered as far-reaching.

Capacity for Action

Courses of Action Taken within the Experiment

Notably, the courses of action taken by the three schools (the White, Yellow and Green) within the experiment have mainly concerned changes in working forms, i.e. the use of time, rather than allocation of time. According to teachers and headmasters in the three schools studied, new ways of working and organising pupils and staff have come to represent the courses of action the schools have taken when participating.
In the White school the new way of working has been named Thematic Studies (TS). When TS was run, the ordinary subject-based schedule was set aside for longer or shorter periods of time, and several teachers worked with the classes from a particular cross-disciplinary theme (W headmaster, 2002; W annual report TD, 2001, 2002). Starting from a common course to be followed by all pupils, there were also possibilities for individualised intensification in certain areas, based on the pupils’ needs and choices. The organisation of the TS required intense cooperation among subject teachers, and a very important arena for those discussions was the teacher teams. The teams had extensive freedom to make time-related decisions. The TS can be characterised by far-reaching subject integration, room for individualised instruction and pupil influence and collaboration in teacher teams.

In the Yellow and Green schools, the activities have been labelled as Open Lessons (OL). In both schools, time was redistributed from the theoretical subjects to the OL. In the Yellow school, OL were inserted in the school schedule over the entire week, while in the Green school, a whole school day was devoted to OL. The organisation was rather similar though: During the OL, the pupils were more or less free to decide what subjects they wanted to work with, and they could choose to go to a classroom where a subject teacher was available for instruction and supervision (Y annual report TD, 2001, 2002; G annual report TD, 2001; G quality account, 2001). In both schools, there were discussions on whether the pupils were to be allowed to prepare for tests and do homework during these lessons or not, both of which occurred frequently (Y headmaster, 2002; G headmaster, 2002). In addition to the OL, the Green school had also set up two classes for low-achieving pupils (one for girls and one for boys) related to the experiment. In these classes, the pupils mainly studied practical and aesthetic subjects and had one class teacher in all subjects, instead of several subject teachers (G headmaster, 2002, 2004).

The courses of action the schools themselves view as being connected to the LTS thus seem to be centred on new ways of working and, hence, new ways of organising staff and pupils. Cross-disciplinary instruction and teacher teamwork were more common and intense in the White school and the TS compared to the two other schools. The OL were to a large extent still based on individual subjects and they could be carried out without demanding such intense collaboration between the teachers as was the case in the White school.

Local ‘Infrastructure’

The local school ‘infrastructure’ concerns to what extent the organisation and the use of resources, for example, staff, premises and time, can assist or facilitate actions wanted to be taken in the context of the LTS experiment. Even if no state funds were available, the three schools could still make certain decisions and arrangements regarding other resources they possessed in order to organise in a flexible way. Starting with the organisation of staff, the White school was characterised by well-functioning teacher teams that were responsible for many decisions the headmasters of the two other schools had not delegated to their personnel. At the outset of the experiment, the Green school was in the process of forming such teams, and the Yellow school had organised teacher teams the year before the experiment, but these teams did not take on duties and responsibilities to the same extent as the teams in the White school (G quality account, 2003; Y headmaster, 2002). In the Green school, the teachers were not too enthusiastic about working in teams, and in the Yellow school, the teachers in practical and aesthetic subjects experienced some difficulties of becoming fully integrated in the team. When implementing changes that required reorganisation of teachers and time, all three headmasters perceived the possibilities of holding joint discussions and planning as very important. The teams in the White school constituted an arena for such planning and discussions, and the teams had received extra time from the headmaster to make this possible (W headmaster, 2002). When the TS was not running, the teachers in the team had full responsibility FOR distributing the subject-based school time among themselves. This was a process that required close cooperation and well-functioning teams. In the Green and Yellow schools, such time was scarce and such distribution did not take place in the
teams (even though some attempts were made in that direction) (G headmaster, 2004; Y headmaster, 2003).

Another trait of the White school was the procedure for staff recruitment. When the school was established in 2000 and teachers applied for the open posts, only teachers who agreed to the stated (pro-development) vision of the school were employed. Many teachers applied, and those who were recruited were left with a feeling of being ‘hand-picked’ (W teacher 4) and included in ‘a chosen few’ (W teacher 2). The teachers that were appointed to the White school thus were dedicated to changing and challenging the way of conducting education and using time. The Yellow and Green schools experienced more ‘institutional constraints’ in this respect. As the headmaster in the White school put it: ‘It is always harder to change already established structures, than to make a fresh start’ (W headmaster, 2004). In the Yellow school, the teachers tended to view the OL as a zero sum game, where the amount of time taken from a subject to open lessons was to be accompanied by an assignment to the pupils equal to that time (Y headmaster, 2003, 2004). The teachers handed out open lesson assignments to the pupils, thus reducing the opportunities for the pupils to decide themselves to what they wanted to devote the lessons. Also in the Green school, the teachers were committed to their subjects to a large extent, leaving little room for cross-disciplinary and team discussions. The Green school had further suffered from high teacher turnover, further limiting the school’s capacity for action (G headmaster, 2004; G quality account, 2002).

Considering the White school teachers’ strong commitment to change and high development ambitions, there was also a feeling of heavy and increased workload that affected their capacity for action. The changes they launched and the work connected with elaborating and increasing the time for TS had ‘involved much more work ... to talk, to think and to reach decisions ... we have to reduce the stress both pupils and teachers are experiencing’ (W annual report TD, 2004). The teachers’ workload was not emphasised to the same extent in the two other schools. When it comes to the use and organisation of premises, all three schools experienced difficulties as they were not as flexible as they may have wanted. This was particularly evident in the Yellow and Green schools, which had differentiated instruction in the three core subjects (Swedish, English and mathematics), resulting in the schedule being strongly framed and difficult to adjust.

In sum, the organisation and use of resources, i.e. the local ‘infrastructure’, were the most flexible in the White school, followed by the Yellow and Green. Even if premises were a common constraint for all three schools, the White school had resources and a flexibility the others lacked. This concerned, for instance, the function and use of teacher teams, as well as recruitment of personnel and lack of institutional constraints that were present in the Yellow and Green schools, rendering change more difficult in those schools.

Readiness and Former Capacity to Reform

Freedom of action is, however, not only restricted to the use and flexible alteration of resources, it is also a matter of previous capacity to reform, i.e. to what extent there is a readiness and willingness to initiate change. The process and arguments that were present in the schools when applying for the LTS can serve as an indicator for the readiness and capacity for action.

When the White school was established, it had an explicit commission from the Municipal School Board to work in a progressive and flexible way, also regarding time allocation and management. By the same token, the White school was also selected for a school development project that was to result in good examples for other schools in the municipality to follow. As already mentioned, when personnel were recruited to the new school, the headmaster could tell them that the school was to be included in the LTS experiment, thus ensuring that the teachers eventually employed also were dedicated to take action within the experiment (W headmaster, 2002).

The situation in the Green school was quite different. The headmaster persuaded the teachers to participate and there were some scepticism towards the experiment. It was ‘not at all evident’ that they would take part (G headmaster, 2004). In particular, teachers in practical and/or aesthetic
subjects expressed particular worries, as they were afraid of being cut off if time distribution was to be decided locally (G headmaster, 2002). The headmaster felt that it was hard to initiate discussions and projects on school development, and participating in the LTS might therefore at least ‘make something happen’ (G headmaster, 2003) breaking the perceived stagnation. But it is not an easy task, since ‘I have the old way of thinking with me ... it is like that, if you are stuck with something, even if it hasn’t been working out well, you still carry that with you and may feel a bit restrained by it too’ (G headmaster, 2002).

Also in the Yellow school, the invitation to join the LTS was not received without some doubts. After discussions, involving local union representatives, they still decided to join, even though, for instance, the parents had stated that they wanted the school to withdraw from the experiment if the pupils’ achievements decreased (Y headmaster 2002). By participating, the school wanted to develop ideas (such as OL) that were formulated even before the experiment. The headmaster particularly pointed to the older teachers as resistant to change (Y headmaster, 2003, 2004).

The three schools differed with regard to the level of commitment or interest the staff took in the experiment. The readiness to reform and the willingness and openness to change are characteristics that are well in line with the situation in the White school. In contrast, the experiment was received with more scepticism in the other two schools. Even though the Yellow and Green schools both had initiated ideas they felt were suitable to elaborate in the experiment, some of the teachers had certain reservations. In the Green school, change had previously proven to be difficult, and if joining a national experiment ‘one has to do at least something’ (G headmaster, 2004).

*Was the Discretionary Space Used?*

As noted earlier, even without the experiment, there is considerable room for schools to adjust time allocation to their own needs. For instance, subjects can be reduced by up to 20 per cent according to the national time schedule (which was abolished in the experiment). Activities such as the Open Lessons are therefore already allowed within the existing legislative framework. The Yellow and Green schools had started their OL before participating in the experiment, and the time allocated to OL did not exceed the 20 per cent already sanctioned. Thus the two schools did not fully use the discretionary space the experiment provided, since the activity already was legitimate even with the overall national time schedule. In the White school, the TS were extended over time in both scope and length. In 2003, the TS were estimated to take up to 40 per cent of the pupils’ school time (W annual report TD, 2003), thus making the activity go outside the frames set up by the abolished national time schedule.

Another matter, related to the use of the discretionary space, is whether the national time schedule needed to be abolished in order for changes to take place. All three headmasters agreed, on the whole, that the LTS experiment had been of secondary importance concerning the courses of action that had been pursued in the three schools:

I think other factors have been more important ... I think we would have done this anyway.
(W headmaster, 2004)

What we did, it would have happened in any case, with or without the experiment.
(Y headmaster, 2002)

The experiment may have been of minor importance. (Y headmaster, 2004)

It is very likely one also could do this within the existing national time schedule.
(G headmaster, 2003)

It is difficult to separate the experiment from an ongoing developmental trend and other factors that affect the inner work of schools, such as the teachers’ view of good instruction and cross-disciplinary work. At best, the experiment may have served the function of legitimising changes that would have taken place anyway. Overall, one should not assume that the experiment per se
The Experiment with Local Time Schedules

has been the dominating force of initiating changes and deciding which courses of action to implement locally.

**Capacity for Action: summing up**

The study of the three schools made evident that the schools' capacity for action within the experiment, firstly, varies and, secondly, is decisive by the extent to which the discretionary space is used. The White school possessed a more extensive capacity for action than the Yellow and particularly the Green school. Both with regard to the flexible local ‘infrastructure’ and the readiness and willingness for change, the White school showed some characteristics the other two did not. Nevertheless, even in the White school, there were constraints such as premises and high workload affecting their capacity for action. The perceived constraints (regarding both the organisation and use of staff and resources and previously outlined practices that were hard to change and alter, due to, for instance, the teachers’ attitudes and preferences) made change more difficult in the Yellow, and most notably, in the Green school. Thus, their capacity for action was made more restricted than in the White case.

**Concluding Remarks**

*Increased School Autonomy*

Based on the discussion on programme clarity, division of responsibilities and control mechanisms, the LTS experiment has increased the schools’ freedom of action. According to the logic underlying the two dimensions of autonomy, in order for the experiment to result in an increased autonomy, it needs to be accompanied by increased capacity for action (see Figure 2). However, the results from the empirical study suggest that an increased *freedom* to act regarding time-related decisions has not been followed by an increased *capacity* to act to the same extent, in particular in the Yellow and Green schools. In short, schools seem to have more freedom to act compared to the amount of freedom they are able and willing to use.

The local capacity for action was defined as to what extent the schools use and take possession of the discretion provided in the experiment. In the Yellow and Green schools, constraining factors such as the role and function of teacher teams, lack of time for collaborative teacher planning, and teacher and head teacher opinions and preferences, such as willingness to change and reform, affected their capacity to act. Even in the White school, perceptions of increased workload and lack of flexible premises constrained their capacity for action. Thus, if the local capacity for action is also taken into account when discussing local autonomy, the experiment does not come across as favourable for local autonomy as the experimental policy initiative appeared at first sight. The experiment is connected to changed ways of working and teaching. Such changes require a flexible local ‘infrastructure’ with time for the teachers to cooperate with each other (often in teams) as well as a readiness and interest to change and reform.

The study of the LTS experiment tells us that although the schools have received an increased freedom of action, the capacity to act is, to a lesser or larger extent, constrained when it encounters the everyday life of school activities. Even though the results from the longitudinal study can not be generalised to the wider population of participating schools, it is still reasonable to argue that the removal of an external frame (the overall national time schedule) by itself does not result in increased school autonomy. Hence, this article concludes that reform efforts to enhance local autonomy must be accompanied by efforts to enhance local actors’ capacity for action. If the freedom of action disposed to the local level is more extensive than the actual capacity to act, autonomy will be far lesser than if the two dimensions accompany each other.

In the official policy texts preceding the experiment, it is largely taken for granted that removal of regulation will have an impact on actions taken at the local level (i.e. rushing local actors to make use of the discretion given to them). As the case of the LTS experiment shows, such assumptions should not *a priori* be taken for granted in educational policy making.
Symbolic Politics?

In the LTS experiment, the efforts were almost exclusively directed towards increasing local freedom of action. There were no funds, training or other policy instruments used in the experiment that were directed towards increasing the schools’ capacity for action. The Timetable Delegation (SOU 2004:35, p. 50; SOU 2005:101, p. 223) pointed, for instance, to the need for further training within the experiment, but the state did not provide such additional resources. Instead, the state left the use and allocation of appropriate means to the school level, much in line with the dominating rhetoric of management by objectives and results.

Symbolic politics, where ‘an intervention is inaugurated for other purposes than to attain substantive results’ (Vedung, 1997, p. 217) is often associated with the lack of resources and guidelines for implementation (cf. Lundquist, 1987; Santesson-Wilson, 2003; Bengtsson, 2004). In that sense, the LTS experiment shows certain features that may point in a political symbolic, rather than instrumental, direction. That is not to state that the LTS was a purely symbolic act, although symbolic politics can serve as a part of the explanation as to why efforts to increase the schools’ capacity for action were not undertaken. If symbolic politics are at play, the aim of a reform is reached just by launching it (and thus, for example, increasing the state’s credibility or satisfying local demands), no matter the output and outcome. This leaves the questions of means to improve capacity for action and the extent to which the discretionary space in reality is used as much less important to the policy makers.

Professional versus School Autonomy

Even if the schools, and subsequently their autonomy, have been the primary focus of the article, it is still pertinent to draw some attention to the individual teacher and his/her professional autonomy in the context of the LTS experiment. The White school can be regarded as possessing the highest capacity for action and thus the highest degree of local autonomy of the three schools studied. In this school, the teacher teams constituted an important and vital arena for initiating, planning and implementing changes, such as the TS. In Sweden, and elsewhere, there has been an emerging trend of intensified teacher teamwork. This is often associated with cross-disciplinary ambitions, both in the LTS experiment as well as in general. These features are furthermore often viewed to be equal to (good) progress and improvement (Berg & Scherp, 2003; Tillberg, 2003; Helgøy & Homme, 2007).

However, this development can be argued to limit the scope for the professional teacher (OECD, 1995). As Cribb & Gewirtz (2007) point out, teacher autonomy is not only constrained by state regulation, but also by other teachers. Collaboration in the teacher team restricts individual professional autonomy (understood as the teacher’s own ability and right to set up and carry out their teaching as they see fit), since the teacher has to adapt, modify and adjust his/her way of teaching to the outcome of collective decisions made by the team. Sykes (1999, p. 238) asserts that ‘as analysts have noted, participatory decision making may actually reduce individual autonomy even as it increases collective efficacy’. The work with TS in the White school also posed a challenge to the teachers’ ‘subject identity’. Thus, it can be argued that the school’s increased capacity for action was made at the expense of the individual teachers’ professional autonomy (at least to a certain extent). This observation is also in accordance with Westlund (2003), who claims that the increased scope for action provided in the LTS experiment can only be utilised by the schools and/or teacher teams, and not by the individual teacher. Westlund further views the reduced freedom for the individual teacher as a ‘collaboration cost for the benefit of local school autonomy’ (2003, p. 94). In sum, school autonomy can not automatically and uncritically be translated into increased professional autonomy. The relationship between school and professional autonomy is complex: it can not be presumed that professional autonomy always will benefit from increased school autonomy.
Finally

The Swedish experiment with localised control of time schedules has shown that if reform efforts are made to increase local autonomy, they should not one-sidedly be focused on increasing local actors’ freedom of action; such efforts should also be accompanied by measures to reinforce local actors’ capacity for action. Thus, policy makers should not assume that increased local freedom to act will either be utilised locally or actually enhance local autonomy.

References


The Experiment with Local Time Schedules


LINDA RÖNNBERG has a doctoral degree in Political Science. She has participated in a cross-disciplinary research project that put particular focus on the experiment with local time schedules in compulsory education, financed by the Swedish Ministry of Education. Her doctoral thesis focuses on this reform, and through a policy theoretical framework, the roles, perceptions and actions from different organisational levels are highlighted within the context of the experiment. Correspondence: Linda Rönnberg, Department of Political Science, Umeå University, SE- 901 87 Umeå, Sweden (linda.ronnberg@pol.umu.se).

229
APPENDIX 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK (E/W)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK (NI)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK (SC)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium – NL</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium – Fr</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liechtenstein</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table AI. Lower secondary school autonomy regarding decision making on school-time, 1995-2003.

Note: Pupils 13-16 years of age. The higher sum, the more school autonomy in these matters (maximum = 14). For each year, seven variables (number of days/year, number of hours/year, number of hours/week, number of hours/subject, duration of a period, start and end of lessons, distribution of subjects during the week, ranging from 0: No autonomy. 1: Limited autonomy. 2: Autonomy for decisions) have been included. With the LTS experiment, the Swedish sum would be 13 instead of 12. The only decision Swedish schools not are fully authorized to make, if the experiment is taken into account, is determining the number of schooldays per year. It may finally be noted that the definition of autonomy by the EC only takes freedom of action into account, not whether this freedom actually is exercised or not (capacity of action). Source: European Commission 1997; 2000; 2002; 2005.
The Experiment with Local Time Schedules

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Yellow</th>
<th>Green</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Established (year)</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>1962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>approx. number of pupils, grade 7-9</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher–pupil ratio</td>
<td>Varies: Above and in line with national average</td>
<td>Above national average</td>
<td>In line with national average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of pupils not born in Sweden (grade 9)</td>
<td>Below national average</td>
<td>Below or in line with national average</td>
<td>Clearly below national average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational level of parents (grade 9)</td>
<td>Above national average</td>
<td>Varies: Above and in line with national average</td>
<td>Above national average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of pupils reaching educational objectives (grade 9)</td>
<td>Somewhat above national average</td>
<td>Varies: Above and in line with national average</td>
<td>Varies: Both below and above national average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marks (grade 9)</td>
<td>Clearly above national average</td>
<td>Mainly slightly below average</td>
<td>Mainly in line with national average</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table AII. Some characteristics of the White, Yellow and Green schools (1999-2004).
Source: National Agency for Education, 2005a, b.

Quoted Empirical References from the Longitudinal Study

White school
W Teacher 2, interview 2002.
W Teacher 4, interview 2002.

Yellow school

Green school