



# Stories of School

Exploring the experiences of education reform from students' and their teacher's perspectives

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## Overview

The Swedish school reform is a national programme for children and young people aged 7 – 16 that have newly arrived to Sweden and do not speak Swedish. The reform states that all schools must chart all newly arrived students' prior knowledge and experience. The purpose of this is to better plan the student's education based on their individual circumstances. The reform also seeks to integrate newly arrived students more quickly into mainstream Swedish school education than it was previously done.

To gather user voice on this topic we worked with a group of newly arrived students who attend a school in Karlstad and their language teacher. Their stories provide an understanding of what the education reform is like from both a users' and practitioners' perspectives. These stories explore the students' feelings about their first days at school in Sweden (i.e. shy), how they have found the process of joining a new education system (i.e. supportive) and some of the barriers they have faced or may face in the future (i.e. language and communication).

## Settling in

Many of the students' stories explore their first experiences of Swedish school and how they have settled in. The students' stories acknowledge the difficulties experienced because of the significant language barrier between them and the people in their new school. None of the students spoke Swedish before they started school and so this communication difficulty did hinder them from settling in straight away. In ['Keep Positive'](#) a teenager talks about how she tries to keep positive in order to overcome the frustration she feels when she doesn't understand something. The teenager in ['My Story'](#) explains how not knowing the language was "so difficult" and that she was "so shy". She explains how she felt excluded from jokes in the classroom as she couldn't understand them or why people were laughing.

The teenager in the ['Adjusting to school in Sweden'](#) story echoes these feelings. She describes that she "cried" and was "shy" at first. She felt that she was "unknown" and had "nobody around". The young person who narrates the ['My experience of school in Sweden'](#) also explains how they didn't talk much at first, and mostly listened. However, through making many friends and starting to learn the language, he is now settling in. The teenager in ['My experience in Sweden'](#) also says that learning the language is key to settling in and that newly arriving students should learn it as quickly as possible. This advice is also given by the teenager in the ['Adjusting to school in Sweden'](#) story who says that it would be easier to get to know people if you knew the language, so learning the language is really important. In the Stories of Integration from Germany, [Ismael](#) talks about how not speaking German made settling in "difficult" because he could not "communicate with

people". However, learning German has now enabled him to feel part of German society and the "concerns of the people living [in Germany]" are also now his concerns. What this suggests is that developing strong social ties is key to people settling in to new areas.

## Developing positive relationships with teachers

Although many of the student's stories explore the difficulties they encountered with the language barrier and in settling in, they still all describe their experience at school in Sweden in positive terms. A teenager who shared the second '[My experience of school in Sweden](#)' details how it was hard at first because no-one spoke English, but that she "still liked it more in Sweden" than in her home country. Explaining her reasons for this, she details how the teachers were "supportive" and helped her to "get along in the class."

Many of the other stories also highlight the pivotal role of the teachers in welcoming the new arrivals to the school. For example, the teenager in the '[Adjusting to school in Sweden](#)' story referred to the staff as "very nice". In '[Changing Schools](#)', the teenager describes how he felt respected by the teachers and that they understood how it was hard for him to "move from [his] land and learn many different stuff". In the '[My experience of school in Sweden](#)' the narrator talks about how a teacher setting him homework has helped him to learn. The teenager in '[My experience in Sweden](#)' says that the teachers are "kind" and that instead of hitting students for not doing their homework that they instead take the time to talk to them. These stories suggest that when people move to new places and countries, feeling wanted by the people in the community they are going to be a part of is key to settling in. This is echoed by some of the Stories of Integration gathered in Ingolstadt, Germany such as [Hossam](#) who talks about the "warm welcome" that the German people have given him.

## Language barriers to social barriers

In [Linda's](#) story she explains how whilst the reform is positive in getting the students into Swedish mainstream education that it does only provides a "small window of opportunity" for them to learn the language. She says that the students learn socialising language relatively quickly (i.e. what they use with friends to create social ties), but she feels learning the language of and diversity of subjects in Swedish education takes much longer. For example, as one of the [student's](#) says, in Sweden you get to study and learn about all religions instead of just one. In Linda's opinion

the limited period of integration into the education system means that new arrivals may be at a disadvantage educationally. She feels that they might not reach their full potential and that consequently they may struggle to find a “*role in society*”. This may result in them being “*at the bottom*” of society and thus reduce their social mobility.



[Click here to view the extracts from these stories](#) and [click here to view the feature story](#).

## InnoSI Themes

The reassuring nature of the teaching staff (as explored in the ‘[My experience of school in Sweden](#)’ and ‘[Adjusting to school in Sweden](#)’ stories), and their ability (as described in the ‘[Changing Schools](#)’ story), to understand the student’s as individuals, has enabled them to settle in. Through this process of **personalisation** via getting to know the students and assisting them to settle into the school in a number of ways (i.e. being supportive, setting homework and taking time to consider the difficulties involved in moving country), the teachers have created a welcoming environment in which the students can tap into their own capacities and develop.

The education reform in Sweden is also an example of the **early intervention and life-course perspectives** theme within social investment programmes and policies. In engaging with new arrivals as individuals and making the most of their prior knowledge, the reform seeks to quickly integrate the students in society. However, as [Linda](#) explains, this aim may not be working in practice, as whilst it does assist the students to become socially included quickly, it does not give enough time for students to develop their education skills to their fullest capacity. This may result in them being socially excluded in the longer term as may not be able to find a meaningful role due to educational disadvantage.

## Summary of Insights

-  **Reciprocal Effort:** In order to ‘fit in’ somewhere it is important that people develop meaningful relationships and social ties with the people around them. In a new country, a key part of this is learning the language in order to communicate. It is also important that the experience of meeting the people who already occupy those spaces are positive. This helps to ease the transition.
-  **More Time:** Positive interventions made within restrictive timeframes can ultimately have negative consequences. In the longer term the value of the intervention may be lost due to the lack of time given in order to see it flourish