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Abstract: An investigation of factors affecting the achievement of good language skills in Swedish schools

In this paper I discuss findings from the first phase of a large-scale study of language achievements in Swedish schools. An inter-disciplinary team comprising language education specialists working alongside economic/population geographers have been given rare access to the most comprehensive data base of citizens in Europe – the Swedish registers. Statistics Sweden includes statistics of the entire Swedish population, i.e. around 10 million people. The first phase of investigation comprises a data study of the total student population that graduated from lower secondary between the years 2000 and 2006, having studied at least one course in a modern language (n=200,000). The analysis draws on data of grades in all school subjects from secondary and upper secondary school, family relations and geographical information of home, workplace and school.

Access to register data has provided a unique opportunity to estimate the determinants of language acquisition, the link between grades in language courses and grades in other subjects (phase 1), and the links between language skills and future life chances (phase 2). The longitudinal characteristic of the dataset allows us to control for unobserved heterogeneity between individuals, such as differences in ability, etc. This has enabled estimation of causal links between socio-demographic and socio-economic background variables on the one hand, and the choice to participate in language education on the other. From this, it has been possible to analyse the role of social factors and the grades acquired in languages and other subjects. The dataset contains 17 explanatory variables, facilitating the investigation of both the cognitive and contextual impact on students' Modern Language grades.

Four themes that make a difference have emerged from our findings. These are: gender, educational focus (e.g. science stream, vocational stream), academic ability, significance of language choices. In my presentation I will briefly explore the implications of these findings, relating them to the findings of other large-scale education studies.

Brief bio

Until June 2017 Janet Enever was Professor of Language Teaching and Learning at Umeå University, Sweden specialising in the fields of early foreign language learning, language globalisation and language policy. She now convenes the MA module in teaching English for Young Learners at Reading University, UK and is the series editor for the Multilingual Matters research series 'Early Language Learning in School Contexts'. She has published widely on early language learning, language policy and language teacher education.