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“Living with Market Forces”
Principals’ Perceptions of Market Competition in Swedish Upper Secondary School Education

Ann-Sofie Holm* & Ulf Lundström**

Abstract
The Swedish education system has undergone major restructuring since the early 1990s. The new policy, including e.g. decentralisation, accountability, school choice and a tax-funded voucher system, has led to an expanding “school market”. This article explores how upper secondary school principals perceive the increased competition among schools and its impact on their work and the school organisation. The data emanate from interviews with principals at eight schools in five municipalities. The presence of the market in everyday work is perceived as a reality, even if its significance varies. The principals argue that competition increases the staff’s efforts and improves school development. However, it is also perceived as problematic since it causes increased stress and uncertainty. The principals’ professional identities seem to have changed from a pedagogical role to a more economic ditto. Most principals are pragmatic and make efforts to handle the new policy context the best they can.

Keywords: upper secondary school principals, market influence, school competition, school leadership

Introduction
Principals are often described as key actors for change in international and national education policy rhetoric. School leadership is regarded as crucial for improving school performance, equity and the capacities of teachers (Pont, Nusche & Moorman 2008). However, the way school leaders shape their roles and how they are influenced by marketisation and school choice policies is scarcely examined. As this is a current strong international policy trend, it is of interest to illuminate how it works in an unusually full-blown “school market” such as Sweden. The expansion of upper secondary independent schools (also called “free schools”) has been rapid, from attracting 2% of all students in 1992/1993 to 24% in 2010/2011 (Skolverket 2011). Further, there is a recent trend that independent school concerns are sold to and incorporated in international private equity firms (Erixon Arreman & Holm 2011a). As research on the impact of these recent changes is still quite limited, this article may contribute to further understanding of the new market-influenced school context.

This article explores how principals in eight Swedish upper secondary schools perceive the increased school marketisation and competition and how this impacts
their work and school organisation. More specifically, we ask how the principals perceive: a) how the new policy context affects their school in terms of competition; b) if and how principals’ work and professional beliefs are changing in response to the new policy context; and c) the impact of the new policy context on the school organisation and quality.

Due to the principals’ crucial position in a school system characterised by decentralisation and school-based management, it is valuable to deepen the understanding of how they respond to the new policies. The research on education policy is highly relevant to this study even if the work of school leaders and their significance is rarely in the focus of this field. One example is Ball (2003:219) who illuminates “the new culture of competitive performativity”. He claims that three policy techniques, i.e. the market, managerialism and performativity, are changing organisations in the public sector. Methods, culture and ethics are being adopted from the private sector. This development opens up the way for more control, which makes school leaders “technicians of transformation” in the new culture (Ball 2003:219). Management is strengthened but its purpose is to produce measurable outputs and transform the organisation into an “auditable commodity” (Ball 2003:225).

Several other policy researchers critically analyse reforms underpinned by neoliberalism, neo-conservatism, marketisation and new public management (e.g. Apple 2001; Walsh 2006; Whitty 1997). Codd (2005) highlights the negative consequences for the overall purposes of public education. He claims that managerialism is obsessed with the notion of quality, emphasising efficiency, external accountability and measurable outcomes, which has resulted in the intensification and deskilling of teachers’ work. Helsby (1999:4) speaks of “a new work order”. By deploying new public management, efforts are made to increase both efficiency and central control. However, “the twin strategies of marketisation of public services and the growth of managerialism, (...) have profound effects upon the work of public sector employees” (Helsby 1999:8). Moos (2009) highlights recent changes of school leadership caused by increased demands for accountability. This means that school leaders need to balance these external demands with the internal demands of teachers for discretion.

An overview of current international school leadership is presented by Pont et al. (2008). Effective school leadership is emphasised as a way to improve both the efficiency and equity of schooling. Some of today’s dominant school leadership concepts are described and are frequently recurring in the research literature. Distributed leadership is about sharing and spreading the leadership activities within the organisation (Harris 2008). System leadership positions the school in a wider context and underscores the value of collaboration with other schools. Another popular concept is transformational leadership which focuses on cultural change (Hopkins 2003). In short, “there is a groundswell towards the leadership as empowerment, transformation and community-building and away from the “great-man” theory of leadership” (Harris et al. 2003). Further, some of the school leadership literature follows the lines
of school effectiveness research (SER) (e.g. Höög & Johansson 2005; Mortimore et al. 1988; Rutter et al. 1979). SER emphasises the fact that schools do make a difference, in spite of unequal socio-economic conditions. Research within this perspective has often ended up in lists of traits that characterise effective schools (including effective school leaders and teachers). This development has been criticised for becoming instrumental and for paving the way for the negative impact of the marketisation trend via league tables, performance management techniques, standardisation and deprofessionalisation (Bottery 2001).

Chubb and Moe (1988, 1990) and Hoxby (2002) are prominent advocates of school choice policy. From a Public Choice perspective, Chubb and Moe claim that private schools are superior to public schools since the management is stronger, the teachers are more satisfied and the students perform better. Hoxby maintains that the productivity of public schools rises as a result of school choice. She also claims that students’ achievements rise when they attend voucher or charter schools (Hoxby 2003). However, a study by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University paints a darker picture of the results of charter schools (CREDO 2009), e.g. that the learning results of 37 percent of the students were significantly worse than they would have been if they had remained in traditional public schools.

A substantial part of the school choice literature has focused on a selection of Western countries. An anthology edited by Plank and Sykes (2003) is an exception where the selection is broader. From their analysis of several studies, they conclude that the results show that the more advantaged students benefit from choice programmes, but that the findings are inconsistent as regards the impacts on student achievement and school quality.

The international educational policy trends during recent decades are significant in Sweden as well, including decentralisation, quality, accountability, school choice and marketisation (Lundahl et al. 2010). However, Sweden can be an interesting case as an example of a more developed school market than in many other countries. The “free school model” has also received international attention and been “exported” to some countries (Erixon Arreman & Holm 2011b). Allen (2010) paints a picture of the significance the Swedish reforms have had on England:

The Conservatives’ support proposal to replicate Sweden’s “free school” reforms would be the most radical reform of education in England since the dismantling of selective schooling four decades ago (Allen 2010: 4)

Sweden has a long education and a political ambition to improve the educational level for all as a case of social justice, which has made the marketisation of schools and school choice policy debated issues. However, during the 1980s the social democratic party that had dominated the political scene for several decades started adopting neoliberal discourses (Daun 2003), and the whole political field was increasingly
influenced by ideas about school choice, marketisation and new public manage-
ment. Several government decisions during the beginning of the 1990s resulted in the creation of a “school market”, which includes both public and independent schools. The allocation of resources was devolved to the municipalities, a voucher system was implemented and legislation created favourable terms for independent schools. The conservative government in office between 1991 and 1994 enforced the legislation and voucher system, and argued: “A stimulating competition (...) can contribute to higher quality and productivity in the school system” (Government Bill 1992/93:230:27, our translation). Independent schools were also allowed to operate in a profit-making way. The development was carried on by the subsequent social democratic government. These changes paved the way for the substantial expansion of independent schools and increased competition for students, which is expected to rise as the number of upper secondary students declines over the next few years (Skolverket 2010).

After WWII, the traditional principal role changed from being the most prominent colleague, the primus inter pares (Ekholm et al. 2000), to being a civil servant. The extensive reforms that intended to create an equal, prolonged and integrated education for all demanded a new sort of civil servant able to implement the extensive restructurings. Around 1990, there was a second substantial shift in the principal’s role with the reforms that implied decentralisation, changed governance and devolved responsibility to the municipalities (SOU 2004:116). Principals became site-based managers and executers of both state and municipal education policy responsible for goal-attainment and school development. However, during the last few years this role has become challenged by a new governing force: the logics of the market.

Theoretical framework
One basic assumption of this analysis, in line with an institutional perspective, is that actions are shaped by the norms and formal rules of the institution – in this study the upper secondary school sphere. “The core idea that organizations are deeply embed-
ed in social and political environments suggested that organizational practices and structures are often either reflections of or responses to rules, beliefs, and conventions built into the wider environment” (Powell & Colyvas 2007).

We assume that institutions “fashion, enable and constrain political actors as they act within the logic of appropriate action” (March & Olsen 2005:5). Freidson (2001) thus identifies three approaches to understanding how work can be organised and controlled: the logics of the market, bureaucracy and professionalism. In short, the logic of the market includes concepts such as customer satisfaction, competition, selling and buying. The logic of bureaucracy is based on an emphasis on efficiency, regulation, standardisation and control, while the logic of professionalism entails shared knowledge, work culture and ethics, autonomy and trust. The three logics represent a different set of assumptions that make a difference in a workplace (Freidson
This is linked to the idea that organisational practices are responses to rules, values and assumptions built into the wider environment:

The basic logic of action is rule following – prescriptions based on a logic of appropriateness and a sense of rights and obligations derived from an identity and membership in a political community and the ethos, practices and expectations of its institutions. Rules are followed because they are seen as natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate (March & Olsen 2005:8).

However, at the same time we adopt a social constructive view of the principals’ roles in the organisation (March & Olsen 2005). They are shaped by the new policy context and organisational restructuring, but also they are able to shape what sort of principal and school is constructed in the interplay between the old and new educational contexts. Policy impact is not all-determining; there is space for interpretation and negotiation at the local level (Ballet et al. 2006). In a similar way, the principals’ professional identities are constructed in the interaction between the personal and the context, so it is an ongoing process of learning and interpretation (Lamote & Engels 2010). Wenger (1999) describes this as a negotiation of meaning within a community of practice.

As the focus of this paper concerns the introduction of the marketisation of schools, the market logics are highlighted and contrasted to the traditional view of how work in schools is carried out in the tension between the logics of bureaucracy and professionalism. However, Freidson’s concepts are ideal types. None of them exist in a pure form. Instead, they are used as tools for analysing and understanding the impact of the current changes in the educational field.

**Methodology**

This study is part of a larger research project, “Upper secondary education as a market”, financed by the Swedish Research Council. The aim of the project is to analyse the occurrences of market solutions and market steering, the strategies towards them by the involved actors, and their impact on upper secondary education.

The empirical material of the present study stems from semi-structured interviews with principals (two women, six men) at eight upper secondary schools in 2009. Five of the principals work at public schools and three at independent profit-making schools. The schools vary in size; the public schools are quite large and the independent schools are smaller, which reflects the situation in Sweden at large. The selected schools are seated in five municipalities representing various contexts (high and low degrees of a urban-rural context) and various degrees of school competition (based on shares of students in independent schools in the municipality) (Table 1).
Table 1. Selection of schools/principals

| Degree of urban-rural context | Degree of competition |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| High (Urban)                 | High                  |
| City Public                  | City Independent      |
| North Public                 | South Public          |
| North Independent            | South Independent     |
| Low (Rural)                  | Rural Public          |
| Regional Public              |                       |

1 The names of the schools are anonymised and indicate their geographical location (City=city in the South; South=middle-sized town in the South; North=big town in the North; Rural=small town in a northern depopulated municipality; Regional=middle-sized town in a northern depopulated region) and ownership (Public; Independent).

The basis for the interviews was a shared guide concerning the principals’ experiences of the marketisation of upper secondary schools, the effects on their working conditions as well as the school organisation. The interviews lasted about an hour and were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically in accordance with the research questions. The analytical approach was informed by institutionalism and theories of governing and leadership. The findings are organised and presented thematically (Competition and collaboration; Principals in the tension between educational and market values; Effects on the school organisation and quality). Quotations from the respondents are used to illustrate the themes and are selected to both reflect the “common view” and to provide especially descriptive examples.

Findings

Competition and collaboration

The interviews reveal that competition has become a reality in everyday school life: “No issue in the last ten years has meant so much as competition, no other reform has had such an impact in school” one of the principals says. The narrations also show that competition is not only between municipal versus independent schools. All schools are, in one way or another, competing and positioning themselves in relation to the others. However, the experiences of the strength of the market vary with the local conditions, such as e.g. geographic location or which programmes the competitors are running. At schools with declining student numbers, the principals express great concern over the situation and worry about the school’s survival: “it’s about to eat or be eaten” (North Public). Principals at schools with more successful recruitment statistics are more confident. At City Public, the competition seems more about the prestige to attract the “right” kind of students and achieving high admission scores. At Regional Public, which due to its geographic location has few competitors, the relations of competition emerge stronger in the media discourse/rhetoric than
in the daily practice, the principal claims. However, she says she fears the pressure of competition will be harder in the next few years given the decreasing cohorts of upper secondary students.

For the principals at the public schools the competition seems to imply a specific dilemma since they are also, in line with the municipal policy, expected to co-operate regarding e.g. marketing, the distribution of programmes, student admission etc. Even though the principals told us about the recently expanded co-ordination and collaboration between municipalities and public schools, competition is nevertheless perceived as unavoidable.

So we [the schools in the municipality, authors’ comment] are competing quite hard against each other, even if it’s in a good spirit. Sometimes people get annoyed when our programmes collide, but actually we have no choice. Since all schools market themselves, it becomes natural to market yourself against the others (North Public).

Some narrations indicate that collaboration agreements between public schools might be at the cost of smaller ones. The principal at Rural Public says that in his region the spirit of hospitality has weakened lately and it has become harder for schools to obtain permission to visit each other to inform about their activities. This has had a negative impact on the student numbers in his own school, he argues. The principal at City Public thinks that the focus on reputation and popular/unpopular schools is likely to increase the polarisation between students and between schools.

The respondents at the three independent schools describe issues with collaboration within their school concerns. The principal at City Independent expresses security in being part of a “corporate umbrella” which keeps the school “on track”. She admits that her school would probably not have survived without the financial support from the company. However, being part of a large school concern can be problematic if some of its members fail or behave badly. The principal at North Independent has experienced that a bad reputation can easily spread from one school brand to another, and claims it is hard to stop a negative rumour. There are arguments that competition is not on equal terms for the independent versus the public schools. For example, the rules for the different types of schools differ and are perceived as unfair. Such views are expressed by the principals of both school types and make them feel aggrieved so that some are asking for more stringent rules.

Most of the interviewees maintain they would prefer to avoid the pressure to compete and promote themselves, but since the present situation requires it they need to handle it and make the best of it. They actually have no choice, they have to adapt to the changing conditions, they argue.

So this is the system now and we have to respond to it. (...) That’s the reality so it’s ready to go. (...) we must learn to live with the market forces and make the best use of them (South Public).
The principal at South Independent says that he recently tried to initiate collaboration between the independent and public schools in his municipality, partly in order to save advertising costs for both. However, the initiative was rejected by the municipality. The principal argues that this is forcing his school to be "more aggressive" in its marketing, a situation that he would rather have avoided: "It is unfortunately not my choice". This feeling of actually having no choice but to compete is also expressed in some other interviews, pointing to an effect of the market situation: the dilemma of balancing competition and collaboration. Below, some other tensions are discussed.

**Principals in the tension between educational and market values**

The respondents’ narratives suggest that their work and professional identities have been affected by the logic of the market. "Competition has, of course, become a considerable part of the focus of my work" (Rural Public). Since attracting students is crucial to the survival of the schools, an outgoing and customer-oriented approach is required.

If we don’t get any students, the teachers won’t have a job anymore (...) So we have to be very good at what we do and we have to work really hard, and constantly have market thinking in our minds (South Independent).

The principal of City Public claims that today each school needs to "prove itself" and clarify its vision in order to justify its existence. Marketing has thus become an "integral part" of his profession, which implies that before any decision is to be taken he must address the question: "Does it fit into the image of the school, does it help us to attract students, does it cost more than it tastes".

For all the principals the marketing (or "information", as some prefer to call it) has become a highly prioritised task, including advertising in brochures, on the Internet or on TV, presence at school trade fairs, arranging open houses, innovating the school profile or creating attractive programmes and so on. The marketing tasks involve most of the staff at school and also cost a lot of money, the principals argue. Some claim that the time their teachers spend on advertising and promoting tasks is at the cost of their teaching duties, thus threatening the quality of education. "This means that you’re teaching less and spend less time with the students because you’re so busy planning how to promote it" (Rural Public). In addition, the students are described as engaged in promoting their school as inter-trained “ambassadors” or “frontline fighters” in the dialogue with prospective students. The principals’ vocabulary is clearly influenced by the economic discourse and concepts such as "business", "profits" and "deliver results" are common in the interviews. There are also principals who talk about education in terms of "selling a product to 16-year-olds".

In their work, the school leaders have to balance economic and pedagogical issues. Most of them stress that the pedagogical issues should be the governing source of the
investments, but nevertheless the economic issues have won priority at the expense of educational ones:

My job has changed quite a lot. I think my profession has gone from being an educational leader to an executive finance director, with economics, marketing, and education as equally important issues. (...) The main governing force is the budget, the money. The economic frameworks are more pronounced than the ideological ones, I think (City Public).

It is mainly the municipal principals who talk about the market-oriented working conditions in terms of change. The independent schools in this study are relatively new and, more than others, their principals seem to cultivate an enterprise culture and describe the intense planning and resource management more as part of the job. South Independent is the most striking example of this new entrepreneurial leadership. The principal adopts a manager role and describes his school as “a company of its own” based on a “profit mentality”. He is not an educated teacher but a business economist who uses strategic recruitment for hiring teachers (or “associates/employees” as he prefers to call them), with the “right” attitude. This is particularly important, he argues, since they are expected to take care of a range of different tasks, e.g. that of caretakers and cleaners, in contrast to the “mainstream schools”. Since his staff work 40 hours a week, there is always a teacher present at the school available for students with difficulties, he claims. The school has no collective employment contract, unlike in most public schools. A new element in the organisation is that teachers are given bonuses that are linked to performance. Further, the principal claims that his ambition is to make the South Independent staff shareholders in the school company.

The perception that the role of the principal has become more manager-like and similar to a business leader emerges in many narrations. One of the principals stresses that, in a strict sense, all schools, public as well as independent, are run like companies:

Even a public school is like a business company. It has to set out and hold a budget that is dependent on the students. I don’t think there is much difference. (...) All schools, businesses or organisations have to make profit; otherwise, they can’t renovate or further train their staff or such (City Independent).

Stress and uncertainty seem prevalent in the principals’ everyday work. An increased workload and concerns for the school’s survival are some of the reasons for this. The principals express anxiety about the teachers’ jobs since a declining number of students ultimately leads to cutbacks. “The uncertainty is a concern each year, for all of us” (South Public). Competition is thus described as something that is always in their minds and an aspect that might “permeate the school”:

Yes, it [competition, authors’ comment] is always there, especially the period before the students are going to choose their upper secondary education. I think this is a ubiquitous issue that exists at all schools since competition has increased. The harsh reality is that the
teachers are dependent on the students in order to keep their jobs. Of course, this is something you have in mind... (North Independent).

If we lose our students, we lose our staff (...) The strategic work concerns how to respond to the declining number of students. This is obviously an issue on the teachers’ agenda (North Public).

Several of the principals express uncertainty over which strategies are the most successful to reach potential students and which aspects ultimately determine their choices. It is hard to predict what attracts young people today and what kind of information sells the school the best. Especially schools with declining numbers of applicants try desperately to find solutions to this. The principal at Rural Public describes how he and his staff school struggles to find a winning concept and whether it is the school or the programmes they should profile. At schools that already have clearly identified brand names and concepts, this question seems less problematic. The principal at Regional Public says she is really proud that her school has not yet “fallen into any unethical traps” and started a programme for nail painting, despite an expressed interest for this among the students.

There seem to be a tension dealing with market values versus the political aim of social justice. The principal at City Public talks about his dilemma of whether he should invest in the “breadth” or “peak” at his school. On one hand, he thinks that offering a multitude of programmes, theoretical as well as vocational, would be more dynamic as it would promote diversity and attract a “mix” of students. On the other hand, he presumes that it would be more profitable for the school to clarify its profile and invest in a few prestigious programmes:

Both alternatives have advantages and that is what makes it so complicated. It is good not to get only one kind of people in one place. I don’t like that there will be some independent schools that have only blond Swedes with the same interests, the same taste in music and the same style. (...) I think it is good to have a big school. (...) students who have academic careers ahead will be mixed with those who don’t really know what they want to. That is one good thing for students to be mixed. The bad thing is of course ... with the competition, it is easier to stand out and niche that we are a school that is preparatory for higher education... (City Public).

**Effects on the school organisation and quality**

The interviews indicate contradictions and ambivalences connected to the impact of marketisation on the school organisation as well as the quality aspects. In this section we will exemplify how the principals on one hand highlight several negative effects of the tougher competition (some of which were already discussed above), but also, on the other hand, celebrate its positive incentives for improvements. Moreover, a “survival of the fittest” discourse emerges in the interviews, parallel to a common view that aspects other than quality determine the students’ school choices.
There are opinions that the freedom of choice is positive, but also that the huge range of schools and programmes can complicate the students’ choices. During recent years the principals have noticed an increase in changes and drop outs, a trend that also has consequences for the school organisation. They describe it as “extremely difficult” to predict the numbers of students applying since the search trend changes so quickly. The organisational work is also affected by other schools starting up or closing down. Some principals say that the short lead times for taking in students and an escalation of altered programme/school choices have hampered long-term planning and co-ordination. The situation has enhanced the demands to be strategic and flexible and to adapt to the students’ desires:

Readjustments are faster each year... there are trends in different directions. We’ve had enormous pressure on our vocational programmes, and we’re obliged to respond to it so we can take on the students. (...) So we have to be quite fast when we rearrange things, which puts great pressure on the organisation, both on the leadership and on the staff. We must be flexible (South Public).

We adapt, of course. Every year we make an overview of the programmes we offer and we adapt to the students’ aspirations and needs (...) We constantly need to reinvent ourselves (Regional Public).

The principals highlight that the unpredictability and demands for customer satisfaction sometimes challenge professional judgement and autonomy. There are descriptions of far-reaching efforts to “patch up” study plans for students who “jump” between schools or programmes during the semester. “If the option is that students drop out, we have to do something” (North Public). The struggle to recruit and/or keep students occasionally risks forcing the school staff to compromise and push the limits. The Rural Public principal says “It is quite clear that the situation of competition has resulted in sacrifices on parts of the quality of education in order to attract students”. As an example, he describes how some schools redesign their courses and reduce the number of teaching hours in less popular subjects in fear of losing their students. He confesses that his own school has succumbed to this strategy and adapted to the students’ requests:

The students did not want these foreign languages so we stood up for them and took those subjects away immediately, even though we felt the drop in quality. And this strategy has been common in many contexts. You change the subjects according to the students’ wishes, regardless of whether or not is it good for them, or for Sweden, in the long run (Rural Public).

Even though the perceived exposure to competition varies between the schools, there is almost a consensus among the principals that freedom of choice and competition is a driving force for the development of their schools. Since school quality is by and large viewed as linked to customer (i.e. student) satisfaction, the interviewees provide numerous examples of how the pressure to attract students is becoming an incentive
for schools and their employees to make an effort and improve. The only way to get good schools is by being alert, they claim. The principal at Rural Public describes that the threat of losing their jobs has pushed his teachers to keep up, “sharpen up” their teaching and be more outward. City Public’s principal adds: “For some, it might be an incentive and some might wake up from their slumber”. Thus, competition is perceived as an external driving force when the internal one is not enough:

Now, you’re forced to ask yourself, “what are we good at?” (...) Pride is important! But when your existence is threatened and your future is threatened, the situation forces you to develop as well. (...) Without competition, you have no reason to improve yourself as you’re not facing any immediate threats. It’s only the internal momentum that promotes development, or a new report from the National Agency of Education. But this gives you external stimuli to actually develop something (North Public).

The principal at South Public adds that quality improvements have been a prioritised issue among his staff. He thinks that the deregulation reforms have resulted in more space and freedom for schools to develop and respond to the students’ requests. The principals at the independent schools argue that the emergence of free schools has provided incentives for improvements at public schools. “I would like to be clear and say that free schools have initiated and even taken school development in Sweden a step further – we have been pioneers” (City Independent). From having previously been, as one interviewee put it “stagnant organisations”, the public schools are now forced to “wake up” and see that their existence is not to be taken for granted anymore.

Quality is in the public debate often connected to the reasons for the students’ choices, i.e. students are expected to choose the qualitatively “best school”. In line with this, some principals further the discourse that the competition will lead to a natural selection of schools whereby the strongest ones will survive and the weaker ones will vanish.

It will be a natural progress for the schools. At present, when competition is getting tougher, the schools that can’t keep up with the standards won’t get any students (...) Naturally, the worst schools will shut down. Hopefully, it will be the good schools that remain (City Independent).

However, this “survival of the fittest” view is not always consistent with the principals’ own multiple examples of reasons for student choice that can hardly be described as connected to quality. One principal says that even trivial facts, such as a newly opened store in the neighbourhood, might in some cases be a determining factor:

Why does a sixteen/seventeen-year-old choose a certain school? we asked the students. “Gina Tricot” [a fashion brand, authors’ comment] is one of their answers. “Because Gina Tricot has opened here”. This is a fact! (...) But travelling from N [a nearby town, authors’ comment] and choosing this school can’t be only because it’s new and that’s cool. It’s because there is a whole town here. The students want to break free, there are various things that attract them (South Public).
Other examples of what might also be crucial in the student school choice process concern the schools’ promotional offers, their geographic location, or group trends among the students. “So quality determines very little. Actually, most of it is on the surface” (North Public). The examples problematise the quality discourse and the assumption that school choice is a rational choice made by fully informed customers.

**Conclusions**

The findings show that the market influences are having an impact on the principals and their work. At their schools, the logic of the market is perceived as a reality, even if its significance varies due to local conditions. There is a mixture of opinions about the strength and impact of competition, e.g. depending on how successful the school is at recruiting new students or whether it is a public or an independent school. The principals’ professional identity seems to have begun to change from a pedagogical role to a more economic and (customer-) service-oriented one; a move in the direction towards a provider-consumer relationship (Powell & Colyvas 2007). Even if the interviews demonstrate contradictory views of the effects of competition and school choice, the principals are complying with this prevalent policy. They are pragmatic and make efforts to handle the new policy context the best they can. Most of them argue that competition per se might be positive since it increases the teachers’ efforts and improves school development. However, they do not link it explicitly with improved student achievement. Further, the situation implies an increased workload along with other aspects that seem to contradict notions of professional values and quality – aspects that problematise the school choice rhetoric. The overall picture of which qualities are actually promoted by competition is contradictory. The findings partly run counter to the current school-leadership research as well; for example, the value of collaboration with other schools which is emphasised in system leadership and the sharing of leadership that the distributed leadership speaks for.

The presence of the market in everyday work confirms the findings of a study conducted by the Swedish National Agency for Education: “The principals describe a process in which they, the teachers and other staff, gradually realise that their work is not just about education but that they are actors on a competitive market as well” (Skolverket 2010:63, *our translation*). This is an example of overlapping logics: It shows the impact of market logics but at the same time that the marketisation of education is a highly prioritised government policy (i.e. the logic of bureaucracy). A similar situation is described in a study of English headteachers in the 1990s:

> While, in principle, the dilemma in the 1990s for English headteachers as school leaders is whether they should take the path of market or community accountability in schooling, this formulation of the leadership dilemma is over simplified. In the first place, the “options” are heavily constrained by government empowerment of, and advocacy for, market accountability (Grace 1997:314, 315).
The head teachers in Grace’s material expressed a resistance to the market influence “because they believe that market forces and market values in education will be im- mical to educational and professional values” (Grace 1997: 314). This differs to one finding of our study: Even if the principals perceive that the marketisation of schools is problematic, they loyally carry out this prevalent policy. The difference could be explained by the varying national contexts and time periods although, considering the long tradition of democratic and equity intentions in Swedish education policy, this seems quite unlikely. Rather, the explanation concerns a new spirit of the age in which the marketisation of public services and new public management are taken for granted in many work contexts – a spirit which was not significant in Swedish schools at the time of Grace’s study.

The findings also illustrate conflicting logics. The market-influenced flexibility discourse competes with the tradition of long-term planning, an element of the bureaucratic logic. The demands to satisfy customers and to prioritise marketisation (expressions of the logic of the market) sometimes oppose the principals’ professional values of what the core tasks of education are and of what could be regarded as education quality. The logics of the market imply “convincing arguments” that can hardly be opposed since the threat of losing students may result in redundant staff or closing down of the school. Thus, the impact of marketisation changes the institutional logics and reduces the principals’ discretionary power – an essential trait in the logics of professionalism. Previous research claims that the “leadership function is threefold: setting the direction for the school, empowering teachers and organising the school” (Moos 2009:402). These functions are affected by the market logics as they imply compelling demands to prioritise tasks such as marketisation and being competitive. Therefore, even if traditional bureaucratic and professional values and tasks are still crucial in the principals’ work, they can be characterised to a large extent as technicians of transformation in the new culture of competitive performativity in line with Ball’s (2003) formulation.

Representatives of new institutionalism claim that pressures from the organisation environment result in a “startling homogeneity of organizational forms and practises” (DiMaggio & Powell 1983:148), which aims more to provide legitimacy than improve performance. The findings of our study both confirm and oppose this claim. There is no doubt that a common transformation is going on: schools as traditional public institutions have changed into market-competitive organisations. At the same time, this development illustrates that what previously could be regarded as a relatively homogenous school culture is now split up. The schools’ organisational identities are under negotiation both in relation to their local context and to international as well as national policy trends. Further, the increased attention to profiling themselves may contribute to even more diversity. For example, Regional Public mainly sticks to its organisational identity as a modern, integrated public school as it is marginally affected by competition. But City Public inserts the traditional high-status public
school identity into the logics of the market as it works as a high-status brand in the market. North and South Independent clearly cultivate an enterprise culture while City Independent emphasises its pedagogical profile. This development is more in line with observations in new research which shows that institutionalisation is not always homogenous; organisational and professional responses to external pressures shape practice in various ways (Powell & Colyvas 2007).

The logics of the market and professionalism both imply a service ideal, yet with different meanings. Examples from the interviews show that the principals need to take a stand between these competing logics. Should they stick to a professionally based judgement or should they be compliant with customer satisfaction? The literature on professional and organisational identity emphasises the value of creating shared meaning within an organisation/profession (e.g. Brunsson 1996, March & Olsen 2005, Wenger 1996). The principals’ position in the tension between the conflicting logics shown in our study speaks of the need for support to find shared meaning and new directions in this new educational landscape. However, there are no indications in our material that such systematic meaning-making is going on. This is a question for further research. As “the position and actions of the principal can act as a bridge between external demands and school staff” (Ballet et al. 2006:215), it seems crucial that principals’ actions are based on deep, shared and systematic reflections.

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