

Parents and teachers on local school markets: Evidence from Sweden

Nihad Bunar, Professor

Department of Child and Youth Studies, Stockholm University, Sweden

nihad.bunar@buv.su.se

ABSTRACT

This article examines several major features of local school markets in two mid-sized municipalities in Sweden. Empirical material collected for the study consists of interviews with 81 school stakeholders and an extensive review of official documents, statistics and literature. Both parents and teachers interviewed in the study have reported several distinctly positive outcomes of school competition, such as pedagogical improvements, new profiles, increased communication and better cooperation between teachers and parents. However, they also described increased segregation, stress attached to making a choice, excessive time devoted to marketing and grade inflation as a way to improve a school's position in the market. I argue that a) even if independent schools appear to be winners, the organizational habitat of a school is not exclusively correlated with its position in the market and that b) a school's ranking is critically dependent on its neighborhood, the representation of highly educated parents, the number of immigrant students enrolled and the reputation and status of the school in the community. The overall conclusion is that the practical implementation of school choice policy in these two municipalities has both built on and continued to promote the socially unjust and segregating foundations of the educational system.

Keywords: *school market, school choice, competition, independent schools*

Introduction

School choice reform in Sweden was enacted almost 20 years ago, transforming Sweden's educational system into one of the most decentralized in the world (Blomquist and Rothstein 2000; Lundahl 2002; Blomquist 2004; Hartman 2011). Today, Sweden's school choice system has gained wide international recognition and considerable attention. The first major component of the reform included permitting organizations other than states and municipalities to run the schools. A number of private, semi-private, for-profit and corporative organizations were allowed to open schools. These schools are labeled "independent" or "free" to indicate their independence from local government, but they are obliged to follow the national curriculum and time schedules for each subject in the same way as public schools. Furthermore, these schools are subject to inspections by the National

School Inspection, which has the authority to close down an independent school if it does not meet curriculum standards or if some severe misconduct has been discovered. By contrast, the National School Inspection does not have the authority to close down a public school. The second crucial part of the school choice reform was the adoption of a universal voucher, which was administrated by local municipalities, for all children, irrespective of whether they choose to attend a public or an independent school. Thus, the competition between public and independent schools, as well as among them, was established, accompanied by the high expectations attached to the policy performance. Decreased social and ethnic segregation, which are consequences of housing segregation and attendance zone principles, as well as higher achievement and lower costs were and are still among the most anticipated outcomes. These are also among the most frequently debated and contested topics in school choice reform. Twenty years later, we know that the costs of the Swedish educational system have not decreased, that grades in elementary and upper secondary schools are steadily declining and that Sweden has lost ground in international comparative studies, such as PISA and TIMSS (OECD 2010). A number of scholars have identified school choice as a propelling force behind this decline (Gustafsson 2006) while others refer to generally lower quality standards and fuzzy pedagogical models as an explanation (Sandström and Bergström 2005; Lindbom 2007). Whether segregation has decreased or increased as a result of students' right to choose a school other than the nearest one has produced even more conflicting results (Bunar 2009, 2010). One of the confusing elements in the debate has been a lack of empirical studies at the local level, where the policy and its high ambitions are being transformed into daily practices and thereby prompt various patterns of reactions from school stakeholders. We know a great deal about how the educational market in Sweden is conceived, and we have access to a number of statistical exercises concerning its operations and outcomes at national level, but we do not know how local school markets are conceived, defined, envisioned and put into operation, nor do we know the outcomes. This article intends to make an empirical-analytical contribution to our knowledge of the operation of the Swedish educational market on the local level. Because many other countries are currently looking to the Swedish model and attempting to copy it, such knowledge is important for both researchers and policy makers far beyond the Swedish borders.

The overall aim of this study is to examine some major features of local school markets in two mid-sized Swedish municipalities, Gävle and Västerås, in terms of their structures, the nature

of competition both between and among public and independent schools and the practices of parents and teachers in relation to school choice policy. To achieve this overall aim, I intend to identify and explain several key organizing principles of the emerging local school markets in these two municipalities, and then, I will describe, analyze and discuss how parents and teachers position themselves in relation to the increased competition and the changing tides of student flows.

Settings, method and material

Gävle is a municipality with approximately 95 000 inhabitants, located 200 kilometers north of the capital Stockholm. Elementary schools are organized in 8 units containing 32 schools. There are 6 independent schools in the municipality with various pedagogical profiles and sizes. The number of students in elementary schools in the 2009/2010 academic year was 8600, with 7032 attending public schools and 1568 attending independent schools.

Västerås is the sixth largest municipality in Sweden with approximately 138 000 inhabitants and is located 100 kilometers west of Stockholm. Västerås has 44 public elementary schools and 16 independent elementary schools with various pedagogical profiles, sizes and histories. The public schools are divided into four regions and a public business-like company, accountable to the local government, called ProAros governs all of the schools. In the 2009/2010 academic year, Västerås had a total of 13 052 elementary school students—11 084 in public schools and 1968 in independent schools.

Gävle and Västerås were chosen as typical examples of mid-sized municipalities because the majority of empirical research on school choice in Sweden has been conducted in three large cities, Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö (Bunar and Kallstenius 2007; Bunar 2009; Lunneblad and Carlsson 2009; Kallstenius 2011; Sernhede 2011). While there are general similarities between local school markets in the country, the structural conditions for school market operations are distinct in large cities given their size, numbers of independent schools, severity of housing segregation and the communication possibilities between neighborhoods due to well-functioning public transportation. The number of independent schools in Gävle and Västerås is relatively low, but among the independent schools, there are several major actors, including the International English School (IES) and Prolympia in Gävle and the Fryksellska-school and Kunskapsskolan in Västerås. The existence of such distinguished independent schools introduces a dynamic aspect to the configuration of and the competition on the local school markets. Finally, unlike Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, neither

Gävle nor Västerås contains any typical multicultural or impoverished neighborhoods or schools where virtually all of the students are of migrant origin and have poorly educated and unemployed parents. From previous research (Lucey and Reay 2002; Levine-Rasky 2008; Kallstenius 2011), we know that these circumstances tend to act as the primary choice parameter for parents, thereby overshadowing pedagogy, profiles and relationships between the schools and students' parents.

After contacting representatives for the Gävle and Västerås school authorities and after reviewing the school configurations, the research project identified one local school market in each municipality. Thus, 13 schools in total were included in the study, 4 public and 2 independent in Gävle and 5 public and 2 independent in Västerås. The major criteria for choosing these schools included the geographical proximity and/or substantial student movements between them; they are among the largest public and independent schools in the municipalities; and the perception among school authorities that they were mostly competing with each other. The main method for data collection was focus-group interviews with parents and teachers. Additionally, a number of individual interviews with principals, school administrators and local politicians were conducted. Students were not included because the project's explicit aim was to understand and explain how parents and teachers, and to a certain extent other stakeholders, position themselves and their institutions in relation to growing competition. In Gävle, 22 teachers, 19 parents, 7 principals, a chair of the politically appointed school board, the head of school department and one person with overall responsibility for school development in the municipality, or 51 individuals in total, were interviewed. Teachers and parents were selected in close cooperation with a person responsible for school quality development.

In Västerås, 10 teachers, 8 parents, 9 principals and deputy principals, one local school politician, the head of ProAros (also the head of a school department) and one person with overall responsibility for school development in the municipality, or 30 individuals in total, were interviewed. Here as well, teachers and parents were selected in close cooperation with a person responsible for school quality development. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. In addition to interviews with these 81 individuals, I have also thoroughly studied other local documents concerning school development, inspection and quality reports and have referenced locally and nationally (through National Agency for Education, NAE)

compiled statistics as well as other national and international research literature on school choice, school markets and competition.

Organizing principles of local school markets

The intrusion of market forces into the field of education has been a well-established policy in the majority of industrialized countries during the last two decades, resulting in a number of different models (Gewirtz et al 1995; Karsten 1999; Fiske and Ladd 2000; Aasen 2003; Benveniste, Carnoy and Rothstein 2003; Plank and Sykes 2003; Maile 2004; Merry and Driessen 2005; Ball 2007; Merrifield 2008; Ravitch 2010; Yoon and Gulson 2010). To understand the operations and outcomes of locally implemented variants of the Swedish educational market, we need to first review several of the markets' organizing principles. The organizing principles represent a set of basic conditions on the national and local levels that together provide a framework for shaping local school markets and the actors' practices. These conditions include policy regulations, socio-economic realities, demographic changes, municipality size, traditionally prevailing values, the local societies' class and ethnic structures and how the school actors understand competition.

Let me now consider two, in my opinion the most important, organizing principles of school markets in Gävle and Västerås.

Institutional belongingness

The first organizing principle of the local school markets is the institutional belongingness of schools in the sample. To put it simply, in Gävle, there is a dichotomy between the public (Soläng, Sörby, Stora Sättra and Nynäs Montessori) and the independent (IES and Prolympia) schools; the municipality runs the public schools, while IES and Prolympia are part of separate educational companies with school units across the country. The student distribution between the public and independent schools in Gävle has rapidly and dramatically changed over the last 8-9 years. The public school system in Gävle has lost 3000 students (nearly a third of its original enrollment), half because of demographic changes and the general student population decline in the country and the other half because of emerging independent schools. IES and Prolympia account for almost the entire independent school enrollment in Gävle and have emerged as formidable competitors to the public schools. It is remarkable that a newly launched school could enroll 540 students as IES was able to. According to the school

principal, IES was able to fill up all its classes from day one.¹ Prolympia was also able to grow and expand over the last four years, more than doubling its size. Presently, Prolympia offers classes for a complete elementary school, from year 1 to 9.

In Gävle Soläng has, because of its high status and reputation, managed to uphold its strong position in the local market after initially losing approximately 50 students to IES. Evidently, students in other parts of the municipality had been waiting for open availability at Soläng. Stora Sättra has suffered the most from the success of the independent schools, losing almost half of its students. Sörby has similarly lost nearly 120 students. Nynäs Montessori appears to be holding steady in the market, but this maintained enrollment is not due to its ability to attract students from other catchment areas but primarily because it merged with another nearby school. This merge resulted in 50 new students who, according to the principal, were not aware that they were enrolled in a school with a Montessori profile. Clearly, IES and Prolympia are “taking” students from all over Gävle and not just from public schools in the sample. A number of public schools in Gävle have since closed down because of insufficient student enrollment.

In the Västerås sample, there is a cluster of independent (Fryxellska and Kunskapsskolan) and public (St Ilian, Rönby, Nybygge, Viksäng and Tillberga) schools. The student distribution between the public and independent schools in Västerås has been dynamic but not as dramatic or sudden as in Gävle. The number of students in independent schools was considerable at the beginning of the 2000s, which was due in large part to the more than 700 students enrolled at Fryxellska. The Västerås public school system has lost 2000 students over the last eight years, but the number of students enrolled in independent schools during the same period can only account for 500 students. Thus, the number of students enrolled in independent schools in Västerås was not particularly large, especially if compared with Gävle’s 1500 students leap and the fact that Gävle has about 5000 fewer elementary school students.

In examining the student distribution across Västerås between 2002 and 2010, only St Ilian stands out as a school in decline, even after they downsized the organization from years 4-9 to 6-9. Tillberga, by contrast, moved in the opposite direction, expanding their organization to offer the entire elementary education under one roof, which gave the school about 200 additional students, although since then about 100 have opted out. According to the school principals, most of the students left for independent schools while others left for other public

¹ According to the principal, interviewed in December 2010, the school had 1070 students and was the largest independent school in Sweden for academic years 6-9.

schools. Kunskapsskolan, Nybygge and Viksäng have expanded with about 100 students each during this period, while the enrollment in independent Fryxellska and public Rönby has been more or less constant. According to the principals here, both schools have a long waiting list and could easily expand, but for the time being, the principals do not deem expansion to be in the best interests of school quality. Even the principal of Kunskapsskolan reported that the school had 150 children on the waiting list, while the school needed (and planned) to take in only about 110 students in the 2011/2012 academic year. Clearly, these three schools are oversubscribed.

To conclude, one organizing principle of the school markets in Gävle and Västerås is a basic managerial distinction between the public and independent schools operating here. The establishment of independent schools nurtures competition and ultimately creates local markets. We have seen that the markets have developed in differing ways in Gävle and Västerås, as evidenced by the number of students enrolled in the independent schools as well as in the pace of that development. All four independent schools considered here have been winners in the market, managing to initially attract students, expand over time and maintain a high level of enrollment. However, a number of public schools in the sample have also performed well. Thus, while important, the organizational habitat of a school is not exclusively correlated with its position in the market. Other organizing principles have to be considered as well.

Socio-geographic and symbolic principle

In both Gävle and Västerås, public schools included in the sample still attract most of their students from the surrounding neighborhoods. Therefore, they reflect the social and ethnic composition, as well as the status and reputation, of their local communities. According to many of my interviewees, the housing market in both municipalities is segregated, generating segregated schools. Independent schools recruit their students from all over the municipality, but there are typically more students of middle-class backgrounds enrolled in the largest independent schools.

In Gävle, three clusters of schools emerge when examining schools by socio-geographic and symbolic principles. In the first group, which consists of the schools with superior reputations whose students come from high socioeconomic backgrounds, we find public Soläng and

independent IES. According to analytical tools SALSA and SIRIS², the average education level of the parents of IES students has been the highest in all of Gävle for the last seven years. Seventy percent of parents with children in this school have post upper-secondary education, compared with a municipality average of 51 percent and a 48 percent average in Gävle public schools. Approximately 24 percent of all students in the 2009/10 academic year were of immigrant origin³, which is comparable to the national average and 10 percent higher than the municipality average. During the interviews with 51 school stakeholders, I heard long and persuasive stories concerning the school's excellent reputation and its status as a "really good school with engaged parents who care about their children's education". In Soläng, 63 percent of all parents had post upper-secondary education in 2009/10, and 11 percent of students were of immigrant origin. Soläng was similarly referred to in the interviews as a very good school with a high status and a good reputation.

At the opposite side of this imagined spectrum we find two public schools, Stora Sättra and Nynäs Montessori. Stora Sättra enrolls children from the surrounding working-class neighborhood (38 percent of parents have post upper-secondary education). One-third of the students are of immigrant origin, and the number of new arrivals (mostly refugees from Somalia) is substantial. According to the school's principal, the reputation of the school is somewhat tarnished, referring to problems with criminality and youth gangs that tormented the area 20 years ago. She further states that the local community, with the exception of a smaller middle-class area, is encumbered with social problems. Nynäs Montessori enrolls mostly working-class children and those of immigrant origin. Sixty-two percent of all children are of immigrant origin, and the number of highly educated parents is the lowest in the entire municipality, with 34 percent of parents having post upper-secondary education. The school's status and reputation are not very distinguished, to put it mildly.

The rest of the schools are positioned somewhere in between these two poles and include the independent Prolympia and the public Sörby. In both of these schools, the proportion of parents with post upper-secondary education is about 50 percent. What distinguishes these two schools is the representation of children of immigrant origin: 6 percent in Prolympia and 23 percent in Sörby. Furthermore, girls represent only 31 percent of the student population in Prolympia. According to the principal, this portion of girls results from the school's sport

² SALSA (Working tool for local correlation analyses) and SIRIS (The Internet-based result and quality information system) are databases provided by the National Agency for Education containing statistics for each school in the country.

³ Children of immigrant origin, in this statistical sense, are either born abroad or born in Sweden with both parents born abroad.

profile (e.g., ice hockey), which mostly appeals to (Swedish) boys. The principal cited the implementation of some changes to even out the gender and ethnic balance, including offering horseback riding and promoting the school through ethnic associations. The status and reputation of these two schools, according to my interviewees, is good but not the highest in the municipality.

The school market is a bit more widespread in Västerås. I believe four classes of schools may be distinguished on the basis of socio-geographic and symbolic principles. In the first class, we find the independent Fryxellska school. In the 2009/10 academic year, Fryxellska had the highest representation of parents with post upper-secondary education, 76 percent, compared with 53 percent in the entire municipality and 51 percent in the public schools. Fourteen percent of all students were of immigrant origin, and 62 percent were girls. According to the principal and other interviewed school officials from Västerås, Fryxellska could be considered an educational role model and a flagship for the entire municipality. This distinction is due to not only the positive results achieved by the school and its high status and excellent reputation but also to its wide acceptance among various school stakeholders and political actors in Västerås. The school is likely accepted because it was once run by the municipality but was transformed into an independent school at the beginning of the 1990s. In contrast with, for example, independent Kunskapsskolan (another big player), Fryxellska is not considered a business-style organized and top-down governed school but a genuine product of the teachers, children and parents of Västerås. As one teacher from the public St Ilian school stated in the interview: “New independent schools don’t have the same sensitivity for children as Fryxellska.” Another teacher from the public Nybygge school asserted: “Fryxellska has been here for such a long time, and we don’t see it as competition. But, it is the new schools that pop up, they get a lot of marketing.”

In another class, we find independent Kunskapsskolan and the public schools Rönby and Viksäng. The common denominator for these three schools is the high representation of parents with post upper-secondary education (about 69 percent on average), the low number of students of immigrant origin (about 10 percent on average), good reputations and a significantly high level of student achievement.⁴

⁴ At Kunskapsskolan’s webpage there is a table comparing the student results for the entire Västerås municipality at the end of the academic year 2009/10. According to this list, Kunskapsskolan had the highest average level of achievement in Västerås accounting for 249.3 points in average (out of 320 possible), which put the school “ahead of Fryxellska school, with the average point of 237”. Source: www.kunskapsskolan.se/skolor/vasteras (accessed 20 February 2011).

The third class is a cluster of two public schools, Nybygge and Tillberga, which recruit heavily from working class families (about 47 percent on average). The difference between these schools is the number of students of immigrant origin, 35 percent at Nybygge compared with only 3 percent at Tillberga. Tillberga is located approximately 10 kilometers out of the city center and primarily recruits students from small countryside communities⁵.

Finally, in the St Ilian school, 38 percent of parents have post upper-secondary education (a 38 percent difference from Fryxellska). Fifty-eight percent of all students are of immigrant origin, compared with 3 percent at Tillberga or the 22 percent average in the municipality. According to many of the interviewees, this school has a low status and a bad reputation, though, according to the school's two principals, such stigmatization is completely undeserved and unfair.

To conclude, the socio-geographic and symbolic principle—or what could be called educational geography after Gulson and Symes (2007; see even Butler and Hamnett 2007; Gulson 2011)—is one of the most important principles in defining a local school market and the subsequent competition between schools. Markets in Gävle and Västerås are configured on the basis of fundamental differences between schools concerning socio-geographical and symbolic factors. More than formal organizational attachment to local municipality or a private company, location of the school, the representation of highly educated parents, the number of enrolled students of immigrant origin and the reputation and status of a school in the community are important. Moreover, status and reputation are often directly correlated to students' social and ethnic backgrounds.

Do the actions of principals and teachers matter, given the strong impact of the organizing principles? This question will be further explored in the next two sections.

Parents and choice

After interviewing 26 parents from Gävle and Västerås public and independent schools and asking them what they appreciate in choosing a school and what factors affect their position in the market, I discovered a pattern of responses that could be divided into several categories of the desired features. Often there is not one single deciding factor or feature but a combination of several, and some factors are more important to individual families than others. Therefore,

⁵ This school was included in the sample because a growing number of their students are commuting into the central part of Västerås and to some of other public and independent schools in the sample.

the presentation below is not organized according to the features' hierarchical order of importance but rather the order in which they were mentioned during the interviews.

The *first* category represents a set of basic values, or school culture. These values may have been intentionally established at the beginning, as is the case with IES in Gävle, or they may have arisen from a long tradition of catering to a local community with little mobility, as in the case of Viksäng in Västerås. Among the most important factors here are clear hierarchies (in terms of who is doing what), tranquility in the classroom, clear goal-orientation, enthusiastic teachers and high expectations. Of course, a school has to find effective communication channels to communicate these values to parents. The internal school culture can also serve as a powerful negative factor when parents find it dissatisfactory because of bullying, violence and general disarray.

The *second* category concerns the school's proximity and reputation, sometimes in combination and sometimes perceived separately. Having a school close to the home, either within walking distance or easily reachable by bicycle, is important to parents. A number of parents have claimed that they refrained from choosing another school or redefined their demands when it became clear that opting out would imply daily commuting. However, Gävle and Västerås are not very large municipalities, and all schools within the more urban areas are accessible by local transportation. Consequently, while important for lowering transportation costs (Reay 2004), the physical proximity factor may be less important to parents considering the bad reputation and/or general dissatisfaction with the social climate or pedagogical work at the school.

The *third* category consists of parents' perceptions of school principal and the salience that they tend to ascribe to his/her characteristics. It was noteworthy how significant a principal's enthusiasm and active and frequent communications were in determining parents' satisfaction with the school and their decision to stay or to opt out. Below are a few excerpts from the interviews that better illustrate this category.

I wanted to have trust in the school, so I met the school principal and asked about his visions for the school. (Mrs. Stolt, one child in public Tillberga school in Västerås)

Interactions with the headmaster are frequent, and it is important for the school to have a leader there. (Mrs. Gund, one child at independent IES in Gävle)

I like the headmaster of grades 7-9 at the English school. He is fantastic. He has such a charisma and energy... (Mrs. Gustafsson, two children at independent IES in Gävle)

Yes, he is waiting for the kids at eight o'clock in the morning in the rain and shaking your hand. He knows the names of most of the children... You know if something happened to your kids at the English school that you get a phone call within ten minutes. (Mrs. Gustafsson)
If there is a problem you can always get in contact with the schools and they take it seriously.
When my children were at public school you never saw the headmaster, never. (Mrs. Gund)

To put it simply, the parents appreciate visible principals and tend to positively value schools with such leadership.

The *fourth* category includes the pedagogical practices exercised and publicly displayed by the schools. All independent schools and strongly profiled public schools were in particular distinguished by their profiles as a major reason for choosing them.

The *fifth* category deals with a changing notion of positive parenthood and peers as strong factors affecting parents' and students' actions in a market. The notion of positive parenthood has shifted in accord with neoliberal changes to include close observations of student flows at the local schools, including information regarding the incoming students, those who are opting out, and any substantial changes in school reputation and status (Taylor and Woolard 2003). A number of parents told me how they were experiencing pressure to choose another school (often a strongly profiled independent school such as IES, Prolympia and Kunskapsskolan) when so many friends of their children were doing so. Furthermore, they experienced the peril of feeling as the leftovers while "everyone else is choosing". For a potentially positive peer-effect, a number of important factors were emphasized by the parents in the sample: parents showing interests in their kids' education, a non-violent and anti-bullying environment, social (middle-class) proximity, ethnic proximity (Swedes in the majority) and cultural proximity (in terms of sharing values and norms). Naturally, the perception or representation of these factors is as important as their actual occurrence.

The *sixth* category considers the significance of the institutional classification of a school, whether independent or public, to the parents. On the basis of my empirical material, I argue that independent schools appear to be more associated with positive values regarding school structure and culture, teachers' and principals' enthusiasm, innovative pedagogical approaches and instructional models as well as communication with parents.

Teachers in independent schools give you much more feedback than teachers in public schools. They care much more about the kids. We tried to influence the teachers in public

schools but they said “we have no time, no resources”; nothing was possible. (Mrs. Gustafsson, one child at independent IES in Gävle)

Our experience is that there are generally more entrepreneurial spirit and more enthusiastic teachers at this English school than there was in the public school. There were a couple of teachers that were very good in the public school as well, but the general level was not that high. Entrepreneurial spirit and enthusiastic staff is very important for teaching the kids. (Mrs. Gund, two children at independent IES in Gävle)

It is the same for Prolympia. They focus on teaching, more than in the public schools. (Mr. Larsson, one child at independent Prolympia in Gävle)

However, I have also noticed substantial parental mobilization in the public schools, with parents trying to assist the staff in managing numerous problems to improve the school and its image and thereby save it from being closed down. In these cases and others, I could identify what Raveaud and van Zanten (2007) referred to as a tension between being a good parent and being a good citizen or member of the local community. Being a good citizen implies sending one’s child to the local school even if it is not the best one either to prevent the school from being closed or to uphold the school’s social and ethnic diversity (which is considered an important political aspect of education). Being a good parent, in this context, means that one simply moves his or her child to the best possible school, which are often socially and ethnically homogenous, thereby solely focusing on what is the best for the child without considering the broader consequences of these individual pragmatic actions (Bell 2007; Noreisch 2007).

Another important consideration in this category—let’s call it a responsible taxpayer perspective—is the attitude of parents with children in independent schools toward the profit-generating purpose of the schools. Independent schools in the Gävle and Västerås samples have fewer teachers per 100 pupils than do public schools, and some parents have complained that their children do not receive adequate support and assistance. Nevertheless, no parent had objections to the fact that the owners collected profit from the school every year. The standard response to this issue was that the most important concern was that the money was spent on the appropriate expenditures in the schools.

To conclude, there are a number of factors that determine parents’ perceptions of the local school market and their subsequent actions. Some of the most important considerations have been accounted for above. Thus, it is clear that parents consider the type of internal culture

and structure teachers and principals craft and promote, how these individuals communicate with parents and what pedagogy and instructional models they provide. All of the interviewed parents, and those of students in independent schools in particular, endorsed the idea and policy of competition, claiming that they have gained more power in relation to the schools and have become more engaged in their children's education. Furthermore, according to parents from public schools, the educational quality has increased as a consequence of the competition. Or as one parent expressed, "they have sharpened up". Many public schools have launched profiles and begun to increase parental and local community input. On the negative side, many parents agreed that social segregation in the Gävle and Västerås schools has increased and that school choice represents a stressful decision, especially for children with so many options at hand and the feeling that the choice will definitively shape and determine one's future.

Teachers, competition and marketing

How have the establishment of school markets and competition affected teachers' daily practices and the pattern of relations with parents?

Ranking lists, easily accessible statistics, increased media attention and competition have transformed grading into something much more than a representation of students' knowledge in mathematics or geography. The average grades and the number of students eligible for national programs in upper-secondary education are closely linked to a school's reputation and its ability to attract students by displaying quality and position in the market. I showed earlier how Kunskapsskolan presented a table of the average grades for all elementary schools in Västerås that listed Kunskapsskolan at the top and then emphasized, "We have higher grades than Fryxellska". However, teachers from public schools and Fryxellska question these good results, ascribing them to grade inflation and lower grading standards. One teacher even claimed that Kunskapsskolan's budget from its company's headquarters is proportional to these results. The higher the grade average, the more money is budgeted, which allegedly would be an incentive to relax grading criteria, according to this teacher. The principal of Kunskapsskolan vehemently rebuffed allegations of this kind and pointed to the clear structure, focus on knowledge acquisition and individualized approaches to student learning as the secrets behind the good results.

According to a comparison between students' scores on national tests in Swedish, Mathematics and English and the students' grades in these subjects, Kunskapsskolan indeed

tends to produce higher grades. In Swedish, students' grades were 32.5 percent higher than their test scores, while in Mathematics and English, the discrepancy was 36.2 and 8.2 percent, respectively (Skolverket, SIRIS 2011). However, similar discrepancies exist for many other public and independent schools in the sample as well. In other words, no firm conclusions could be drawn concerning differences in the quality and accuracy of student grades between independent and public schools. This point has been contested in the public debate alluding to independent schools' need to attract students and please parents with higher grades. Instead, it seems obvious that both public and independent schools share the problem of properly assessing the attained knowledge of their students. During the interviews, many teachers from both public and independent schools indicated that they were experiencing pressure to give higher grades, thereby raising a school's reputation, although they never made it explicit who (principals, parents, owners, heads of local school departments) exerted that pressure. One plausible interpretation is that the combination of competition, vouchers, ranking lists and the politics of "naming and shaming" (Reay 2004) is unintentionally driving teachers toward a somewhat distorted grading criteria.

When discussing their relationships with parents, many teachers have also reported that parents have become more demanding, better informed and more aware of their rights. The interviewed teachers argue that this increased participation of parents is due in part to competition and the possibility of choosing another school, which has definitely empowered parents in relation to the schools. Moreover, the socially strongest parents are keen to exercise this power. This development is also due to general changes in society, with more individualization; increased mobility (both physical and social), which makes it easier to change not only schools but also the city; access to information and long-term analyses concerning the type of knowledge that children need to acquire to establish themselves in the future labor market; and so forth. These reasons are also cited for when discussing how daily pedagogical work is affected by parents' and students' roles as customers equipped with vouchers and the right to choose between many service providers. According to teachers, they are more open and inclined to seriously consider parents' suggestions regarding pedagogical practices and equipment, for example, and they do regard parents as customers (although not the students). Regardless, the interviewed teachers underlined that this shift in the relationships with parents is primarily a consequence of increased openness, transparency and the encouragement for cooperation between institutions and citizens, as well as between service providers and service consumers, that engulfs the entire society.

Many teachers have also propounded the importance of reputation and marketing. One of the most applied models of informing the local community and presumptive customers about a school's profile and pedagogy is to organize open houses and gatherings for parents and students (and hopefully media). Some schools send letters to students in their catchment area, some to all children in certain age group in the municipality and some advertise in the local press, although this does not seem to be frequently employed. Generally, teachers from both public and independent schools claimed that independent schools are much better at advertising and offering incentives to attract students. In Västerås, teachers from public schools argued that the public-owned company ProAros, which runs all the public schools in the municipality, did not allow them to send letters to students outside of their catchment area and thereby directly advertise their academic product to the target group. On being questioned why, teachers from public schools responded: "because we are supposed to both compete and not compete with each other" and "because we have a strange system here". Obviously, teachers had difficulties comprehending and grasping the system that frames their ability to compete. Thus, they experienced the school market as deeply unfair and advantageous to independent schools.

Many public schools with grades 6 to 9 (ages 12-15 years) are trying to cultivate stronger connections to their feeder schools (preschool to grade 5) and inform parents about the school. Another important channel for informing parents about their choices of schools and what type of programs various schools offer is the information collected at the municipal webpages in both Gävle and Västerås, which include links to the schools' own webpages. Marketing is important, many teachers agreed, but at the same time, they voiced some criticism, citing the time and money it takes away from teaching.

If you ask how that has affected our work, imagine that you are a teacher and suddenly you are put on the market and have to consider what you can do to be more popular, which is in a way good. It pushes me; I'm always in the situation where I have to do really well, but at the same time, it takes time that I would like use in school improving for my students. I have to dedicate some of that time to market our school for the parents. (Maria, teacher at public Soläng in Gävle)

The importance of open houses and webpages notwithstanding, the most important channel for promoting or deprecating a school is "hot knowledge" (Ball 2003) concerning its

whereabouts—in other words, the school’s reputation and what students and parents are informally telling each other about its social climate, teaching quality, grades, the amount of homework, discipline, extracurricular activities, and so forth.

Concluding remarks

Local school markets in Gävle and Västerås, including the pattern of competition and student allocation, are configured around two axioms. First, within the sample, six schools in Gävle and seven in Västerås are positioned in relation to each other *horizontally*, based on managerial, size and pedagogical differences. Second, they are positioned *vertically* based on the social group from which the majority of a school’s students are recruited; location of the neighborhood containing the school; the number of students of immigrant origin as well as their country of origin; and the amount of symbolic capital possessed (reputation, status). At first glance, it appears that practical outcomes of horizontal relationships do not have any decisive impact on a school’s market position. In other words, whether a school is public or independent, whether it offers ice hockey or dance, or whether it enrolls 1500 or 300 students does not seem to affect a school’s competitiveness or its attractiveness to students and their parents. What affects are characteristics imbued in vertical relationships (“immigrant” or “Swedish” school; “good” or “bad”; positive climate or “nobody cares”), underpinned by advertising and informal communication to primary target groups. Some public schools have barely changed anything in their approach to pedagogy and relations, but their position and status remains untarnished. Others have been part of countless projects and attempts to improve but have failed. This failure is not necessarily because of the quality of the academic products offered, but rather because of how the service producer (the school) and the majority of its users (parents and students) are perceived, through “hot knowledge”, in the community.

Nevertheless, the opportunity generated at the intersection between horizontal (i.e., a vision of a particular school culture) and vertical (i.e., middle-class students) axioms to promote their position in the market is best recognized and used by independent schools. These schools can, from the outset, choose which groups and their educational priorities to address by virtue of shaping the particular culture, pedagogy and dissemination of signals. Simultaneously, the disseminated message, through formal and informal channels, deters members of other groups from even thinking about applying. It is here that the real but invisible selection process is occurring, which is why independent IES, Prolympia, Fryxellska and Kunskapsskolan are in

fact selecting their students. Student selection occurs not after the application has been submitted, because the principle of non-discrimination is one of the pillars of the educational market in Sweden, but occurs at the stage before. We also know from previous research (Ball, Reay and David 2002; Ball 2003; Bell 2007) that the socially strongest groups are the most active players in the school market. That is how independent schools, on average, have acquired stronger position in the market, better reputations and higher grades. Hence, the overall conclusion is that the practical implementation of school choice policy in these two municipalities has in fact built upon and further confirmed the socially unjust and segregating foundations of the educational system (see also Yoon and Gulson 2010).

I do not argue that the new pedagogical strategies and internal reforms are in vain. Indeed, I have shown above what parents appreciate, expect and demand from teachers and, in particular, from principals. Those requirements are plausible and feasible to address. Here, we find an opportunity for practices that can result in tangible changes. I have also presented the obstacles and possibilities that the new system has brought as experienced by teachers. Student flow, marketing, reputation, the peril of succumbing to the grading pressure exerted by ranking lists, increased freedom, less bureaucracy and closer relationships with parents are just some aspects mentioned by teachers. A paramount challenge for policy makers remains thus to find a way to reconnect individual schools' successes with the improvement of the entire system and to minimize the negative effects of school choice policy while simultaneously ensuring its benefits are allocated to all taxpayers' children. That is not the case today in Gävle, Västerås or, for that matter, in all of Sweden. Rather, the current configuration of local school markets contributes to the reproduction of social and ethnic inequalities between schools and the further division of Swedish cities.

Acknowledgment

The present study was undertaken as a part of an international research project lead by OECD on the structure and operation of local school markets in Europe. Therefore, I would like to thank my colleagues in the project for their cooperation and support throughout my fieldwork. I would also like to thank the Swedish Research Council and the National Agency for Education for their generous support to this project.

References

- Aasen, P. (2003) What happened to Social-Democratic progressivism in Scandinavia? Restructuring education in Sweden and Norway in the 1990s. In M. Apple (Ed.), *The state and the politics of knowledge*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Ball, S. (2003) *Class Strategies and the Education Market*. New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Ball, S. (2007) *Education plc – understanding private sector participation in public sector education*. London: Routledge.
- Ball, S. Reay, D. & David, M. (2002) Ethnic Choosing. Minority Ethnic Students, Social Class and Higher Education Choice, *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 5: 333–57.
- Bell, C. (2007) Space and Place: Urban Parents' Geographical Preferences for Schools, *The Urban Review* 39: 375–404.
- Benveniste, L. Carnoy, M. & Rothstein, R. (2003) *All else equal – are public and private schools different?* New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Blomquist, P. & Rothstein, B. (2000) *Välfärdsstatens nya ansikte*. Stockholm: Atlas.
- Blomquist, P. (2004) The choice revolution: Privatization of Swedish welfare services in the 1990s, *Social Policy & Administration* 38, no. 2: 139-155.
- Bunar, N. & Kallstenus, J. (2007) *Valfrihet, integration och segregation i Stockholms stad*. Stockholm: Stockholms Stad.
- Bunar, N. (2009) *När marknaden kom till förorten*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Bunar, N. (2010) The Geographies of Education and Relationships in a Multicultural City: Enrolling in High-Poverty, Low-Performing Urban Schools and Choosing to Stay There, *Acta Sociologica* 53: 141–159.
- Butler, T. & Hamnett, C. (2007) The Geography of education: Introduction, *Urban Studies*, 44(7), 1161–1174.
- Gewirtz, S. Ball, S. & Bowe, R. (1995) *Markets, choice and equity in education*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Gulson, K. & Symes, C. (Eds.). (2007) *Spatial theories of education*. London: Routledge.
- Gulson, K. (Ed.). (2011) *Education policy, space and the city*. London. Routledge.
- Gustafsson, J-E. (2006) *Barns utbildningssituation*. Stockholm: Rädda barnen.
- Hartman, L. (Ed.). (2011) *Konkurrensens konsekvenser. Vad händer med svensk välfärd?* SNS Förlag.
- Kallstenius, J. (2011) *De mångkulturella innerstadsskolorna*. Stockholm: Stockholm University Press.

- Karsten, S. (1999) Neoliberal education reform in The Netherlands, *Comparative Education*, 35, 303-317.
- Levine-Rasky, C. (2008) Middle-classness and whiteness in parents' responses to multiculturalism: A study of one school, *Canadian Journal of Education* 31(2), 459–490.
- Lindbom, A. (Ed). (2007) *Friskolorna och framtiden*. Stockholm: Institutet för Framtidsstudier.
- Lundahl, L. (2002) Sweden: decentralization, deregulation, quasi-markets – and then what? *Journal of Education Policy*, 17, 687-697.
- Lucey, H. & D. Reay. (2002) A market in waste: Psychic and structural dimensions of school-choice policy in the UK and children's narratives on 'demonized' schools, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 23(3), 253–266.
- Lunneblad, J. & Carlsson, M. (2009) De kommer från nordost – Om skolkonkurrens och elevidentitet i ämnet svenska som andraspråk, *Utbildning & Demokrati*, 18(2), 87–103.
- Maile, S. (2004) School choice in South Africa, *Education and Urban Society*, 37, 94-116.
- Merrifield, J. (2008) The twelve policy approaches to increased school choice, *Journal of School Choice*, 2(1), 4-19.
- Noreisch, K. (2007) Choice as rule, exception and coincidence: Parents' understandings of catchment areas in Berlin, *Urban Studies*, 44(7), 1307–1328.
- OECD (2010b) *PISA 2009 Results: Changes in student performance since 2000*. Volume V.
- Plank, D.N. & Sykes, G. (Eds.). (2003) *Choosing choice – school choice in international perspective*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ravitch, D. (2009) *The death and life of the great American school system*. New York: Basic Books.
- Reay, D. (2004) Exclusivity, Exclusion, and Social Class in Urban Education Markets in the United Kingdom, *Urban Education* 39: 537–60.
- Raveaud, M. & van Zanten, A. (2007) Choosing the local school: middle class parents' values and social and ethnic mix in London and Paris, *Journal of Education Policy* 22, 107–124.
- Sandström, M. & Bergström, F. (2005) School vouchers in practice: Competition will not hurt you, *Journal of Public Economics*, 89, 351-380.
- Sernhede, O. (Ed.). (2011) *Förorten, skolan och ungdomskulturen*. Göteborg: Daidalos.
- Skolverket, SIRIS. (2011) *School statistics*. Available online at: www.skolverket.se (accessed 25 Februari 2011).

- Taylor, A. & Woolard, L. (2003) The Risky Business of Choosing a High School, *Journal of Education Policy* 18: 617–35.
- Walford, G. (2003) School choice and educational change in England and Wales. In D.N. Plank & G. Sykes (Eds.), *Choosing choice – school choice in international perspective*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Yoon, E-S. & Gulson, K. (2010) School choice in the *stratilingual* city of Vancouver, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 31(6), 703-718.