Market Competition in Upper Secondary Education: perceived effects on teachers’ work

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ABSTRACT The development and expansion of market solutions is one of the most important changes in Swedish education in the last 30 years. The aim of the article is to describe and analyse how students and staff in upper secondary schools perceive the impact of market competition on teachers’ work. Three groups of actors in two Swedish regions were interviewed: students, teachers and principals. The interviews were carried out at eight schools in five municipalities, at both public and independent schools. The results show that competition relations are more complex than is often assumed. Intensification of teachers’ work is a common theme in the interviews. Traditional professional values and identities are challenged by the market competition and a market-oriented teacher is shaped – whether the teachers like it or not. The extension of teachers’ tasks is increasingly about marketing. A new type of service-minded and flexible teacher is created. Regarding the effects of competition on teacher performance, the results are contradictory. The quality discourse is problematised as there is no evident link between winners in the school competition and the quality of teaching and student outcomes. The Swedish case is interesting in the international literature as an example of a rapidly growing upper secondary school market which is closer to the logic of the market than many other nations’ school systems.

Introduction

Since the middle of the twentieth century, the Swedish education system has undergone major reforms and restructurings. The period has been dominated by social democratic governing characterised by a striving for inclusion, late differentiation of students and expansion of the education system, in order to promote equality and a more qualified workforce. The upper secondary school was radically restructured at the end of the 1960s and during the 1990s, and faces a new comprehensive reform (Ministry of Education, 2008) at present. Decentralisation and management by objectives and results are important changes that were implemented at the beginning of the 1990s. At the same time, new legislation was introduced to promote student choice and independent schools. Many of the recent changes are in line with international policy trends, while others are more specifically national. The development and expansion of market solutions is one of the most important changes in Swedish education in the last 30 years. At the centre of these school reforms and restructurings are the teachers, who are the largest occupational group who make education policy at the ‘street level’ (Lipsky, 1980). As the marketisation of Swedish schools is so fast and recent, it is relevant to examine how this trend affects teachers’ work and professional identities, which is the focus of this article. Furthermore, the Swedish system is now exported to other countries and education companies are expanding on education markets abroad.
The development of a competitive school market in Sweden was influenced by international policy diffusion. Neo-liberal ideology and management ideas made an impact on the public sector in the 1980s. This political trend paved the way for marketisation in education, in spite of strong critique from some educational researchers (Grace, 1997; Helsby, 1999; Ball, 2003; Codd, 2005; Ballet et al, 2006). The marketisation trend included neo-liberal ideology, free-market individualism and what Ball (2003, p. 219) calls ‘the new culture of competitive performativity’. Choice and quality discourses were adopted in the rhetoric of the Swedish government: ‘stimulating competition ... can contribute to higher quality and productivity in the school system’ (Government Bill, 1992/93, p. 27; our translation).

Several government decisions in the early 1990s resulted in a school market in Sweden, a market which is closer to the logic of the market than many other nations' school systems (Chubb, 2007). This development was facilitated by the decision to decentralise the school system and the introduction of management by goals and results as it implied management and accountability ideas. The allocation of resources was devolved to the municipalities, a voucher system was implemented and legislation created favourable terms for independent schools. Schools were allowed to be profit-making. The proportion of students in independent upper secondary schools increased from 1.7% in 1992-93 to around 21.7% in 2010. Today, 48% of all upper secondary schools in Sweden are independent schools (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010). In parallel with a boom in applications from new schools, the number of students aged 16-19 is expected to decline in the next few years in Sweden. As a consequence, both municipal and independent schools are inclined to compete over pupils and teachers. In the media, this competition is sometimes characterised as a ‘battle’, where students (and their vouchers) are the main target (Holm & Erixon Arreman, 2009).

The development of the Swedish school market competition poses questions regarding its impact on teachers' work. In their capacity of being the most important occupational group for student achievement as well as educational policy implementation, it is relevant to explore their understandings of this new work context. There are reasons to believe that their professional role and work are affected. During the last decades, the international literature has examined the marketisation discourse, but recent research literature on the effects of competition and marketisation on teachers' work and professional identities in the partly unique Swedish case is lacking. With this article we intend to contribute to a deeper understanding of teachers' work in this situation of fast and radical change, whose effects are mostly unknown. Furthermore, the public debate is often polarised regarding the marketisation of schools, which gives reason to problematise the trend. In light of the above-described background, the aim of this article is to describe and analyse how students and staff perceive the impact of market competition on teachers' work.

**Theoretical Framework**

This article draws on aspects of profession theory and the literature on teachers' work and educational change. We use the concept ‘profession’ in a pragmatic way, in line with Freidson (2001, p. 13), ‘in order to avoid the pretentious, sometimes sanctimonious overtones’ associated with the concept. With the aspects and critique of different professional theoretical perspectives in mind, we assume that professionalism implies ‘a sense of common experiences, understandings and expertise, shared ways of perceiving problems and their possible solutions’ (Evjets, 2006, p. 134). The core of a traditional view of professions is a professional knowledge base and ethics, and considerable autonomy. Furthermore, a commitment to clients (students) is crucial. Goodson & Hargreaves’ (2003) new moral professionalism, which emphasises moral and social purposes, discretionary judgment, collaborative cultures and care as crucial values – in opposition to the role of a managed, service-oriented worker in a business context – is part of our view of professionalism as well.

The intensification of teachers' work is a result of changes that, during more than two decades, have imposed new demands and workloads on schools. Hargreaves (1994) connects this intensification to the rapid pace of change and to administrators' colonisation of teachers' time by way of continued top-down implementation of changes. Codd (2005) and Ballet et al (2006)
describe the intensification as a result of market-oriented education policy and a neo-liberal management and performance culture.

Ballet et al (2006) provide an overview of research on intensification, and point out the link between a market-oriented educational policy and the intensification of teachers’ work. The effects of intensification are, in sum, ‘less “down time” during the working day’, which means less time for preparation, reflection and professional development, ‘a chronic and persistent sense of work overload ... negative effects of the quality of results ... [and] diversification of expertise makes teachers become more dependent on external specialists, creating doubts about one’s own competence’ (Ballet et al, 2006, p. 210).

Barlett (2004) shows that work overload is connected to extended teacher professionalism. The concept of ‘extended teacher professionalism’ implies teachers researching their own work and the development of learning communities (Stenhouse, 1975), which is assumed to enhance teachers’ knowledge building and school development. Our study poses questions regarding the definition of ‘extended work tasks’ in a school market.

As discourses carry ideology that may become taken for granted in day-to-day work life (Fairclough, 1995), there is reason to analyse the discourses critically. One example is the concept of quality. It is crucial and often taken for granted in the market discourse (Liedman, 2008), which makes it important to examine it in the everyday practice of schools. Uncertainty has been an issue in the literature on the teaching profession and teachers’ work (see, for example, Rosenholtz, 1991), often connected to ‘the absence of a common technical culture’ (Lortie, 2002, p. 73). This regards the professional knowledge base and, in the case of teachers, the assumed uncertainty concerns both the status of the profession and the expected results of their work. In this article, we will discuss other possible causes of teacher uncertainty than an inadequate knowledge base.

**The Interview Study and Its Research Context**

This article is part of an ongoing larger research project, Upper Secondary School as a Market, financed by the Swedish Research Council (2008-10). The project is based on a broad range of data (for example, statistical data, policy documents, questionnaires, interviews, etc.) focusing on the manifestations and effects of marketisation in upper secondary schools subjected to varying degrees of competition. In the present article, we use data from interviews with upper secondary school teachers, students and principals to highlight how market mechanisms may affect teachers’ work and identity in school in various ways. The aim of the article is to describe and analyse how students and staff in upper secondary school perceive the impact of market competition on teachers’ work.

**Method and Selection**

The interviews were carried out in eight upper secondary schools in five municipalities representing high and low levels of urbanity, and high and low levels of school competition. The study was directed at principals, teachers and students in five public and three independent upper secondary schools, located in two regions in the northern and southern parts of Sweden.

The size of the selected schools varied between 100 and 2000 students, and between 10 and 170 teachers. In all, 38 group or individual interviews were carried out with 143 individuals (58 teachers, 77 students and 8 principals). In Table I, we present the selection of schools and respondents in detail.

**Perceptions of Competition**

In this part of the article, we present some results from the interviews. We use quotations from the interviews to illustrate themes which are created from crucial findings in the empirical material. In the references, we use the abbreviations ‘P’ and ‘I’ for ‘public’ and ‘independent’ schools, respectively – for example, Teacher I.

According to the interviews, there are several elements in the local conditions that contribute to a variety of competition relations. Perceptions of competition are not directly connected to the
dichotomy of public–independent schools. The geographic location of the school is described as
decisive or influential. Some schools compete primarily with other schools (both independent and
public) in the same municipality or city, while others primarily compete with schools in other
municipalities. Internal competition between teachers or programmes within schools occurs as
well. Even though the perceptions of the strength of competition vary, the respondents tend to
describe the effects of competition in quite similar ways.

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Table I. Schools, interviewees and interview method.

**Intensification**

There is almost a total agreement among the respondents that competition results in an
intensification of work for teachers due to an increased workload. To a large extent, the
intensification of work is caused by an extension of the professional role. In one way or another,
teachers, as well as other staff and students, seem to be engaged in the marketing of their schools –
for example, in presenting and promoting their programmes and schools at annual exhibitions and
‘open houses’. Many of the respondents claim that these tasks take both time and energy:

> Our staff spends a lot of time arranging these things [marketing]. (Teacher P)

> Since no new money has been added, the costs and energy need to come from elsewhere.
> (Teacher I)

Other tasks – for example, participation in meetings and more intensive interaction with parents
and other actors – are also common features of the teachers’ stories. Since schools need to recruit
students, teachers are expected to spend time creating new programmes and profiles that seem
attractive to students:

> You have to adapt to the teenagers and what they want – perhaps do a bit of selling as well,
> like run a course that you might think doesn’t give that much but might attract teenagers.
> And if you can make them learn others things, it might be worth running a class on styling,
> make-up, spa, or whatever you call it. (Teacher P)

Many teachers regard marketing as distracting from the core activity of teaching but they do it
anyway since they feel they have no choice. In fact, some teachers’ employment is directly
dependent on the success of marketing and recruitment:

> We need to recruit good students because if we don’t, you can lose your job. (Principal P)

> If you lose students, someone else will get your job. (Teacher P)
The intensified advertising campaigns for recruiting students are not only described as hindering school staff in their work, but also risk distorting ‘objective’ information for the students. ‘Flashy’ marketing is not regarded as serious.

**A New Market-Oriented Professional Role**

The intensification of work implies not only an increased workload, but a clash with teacher identity as well. The marketisation trend is described as influencing teachers’ working conditions – it threatens their employment and changes their tasks and relations to other actors, not least their relationship with students. Attitudes towards a school market and competition vary, but regardless of their attitude, most teachers’ professional lives are influenced. As mentioned, several respondents emphasise the fact that the extended work role involves tasks they do not consider teachers’ work – for example, marketing. These are tasks that have taken over much of the teachers’ time, which otherwise could be used for what they regard as the ‘core’ of the teaching profession:

> Marketing and such things have taken over. We spend a lot of time planning these sorts of activities. I think that pedagogical development and other things that the school organisation is meant for sometimes get pushed aside. (Teacher P)

> Yeah, it’s hard to find time for that ... since you have your continuous work, correcting exams, planning and classes, and so on ... You’re not always up for it, you have so much else to do in school. (Teacher I)

Another aspect of the effects of competition is the emergence of ‘entrepreneurial thinking’ in the organisation. In this sense, the teachers in our study can be described as becoming more market-oriented. Some teachers maintain that the role of the school has changed from being an institution with a focus on pedagogical issues to a more businesslike arena:

> Back then, the school was an institution where you worked with education. But now it feels like the school has become a business world where only the strong survive. And if you take your job for granted and don’t do that well – well, you might not remain there. So that’s been sort of a shift; that there are new tasks to work with, quality enhancement strategies and control. And we have to inform them [students] of what we do so that they can be attracted. This is something new, I think. (Teacher I)

At one of the independent schools, entrepreneurship constitutes the core of its pedagogical approach. For example, some of the members of staff have been sent to Stockholm for an in-service course on entrepreneurial learning. These ideas ‘are supposed to permeate our work’, as the principal puts it. Consequently, some teachers at that school are more positive about the effects of competition than most of the other groups in the study. They emphasise their flexibility, the ‘flat’ organisation and cooperation with the surrounding community. A few of them, at least, seem to have adopted the entrepreneur culture as part of their professional identity. At other schools, there is a noticeable resistance to market-orientated values. However, there are no descriptions in the empirical material of any sort of organised reflection on what values the market orientation implies or what meaning the staff would make of these changes. But there are plenty of spontaneous, individual expressions of unwillingness to conform to such values. In spite of such opinions, however, most teachers feel obliged to work hard to make their school competitive in the school market.

With the purpose of recruiting new students, the teachers show an increased consciousness of the importance of promoting the school in various ways and contexts. The respondents maintain that they have been keener to present a positive picture of their school, even during their leisure time:

> I think more and more teachers have it as part of their job to promote the school and speak well of it when they’re not here. Back then, I think ... we teachers complained about the misery of it all. Now you hold your tongue when you’re at a party having a glass of wine and such, because it is important for everybody to maintain the good reputation. (Principal P)
We’re sort of encouraged to speak well of the school. I mean, it’s not so strange. We’re a company, so to speak, and we want students from other municipalities. (Teacher P)

The increased market orientation also includes the aspect that teachers need to demonstrate what they actually do in school and their work to the outside world. School projects and students’ products are presented in the media, at conferences or on the Internet, which is a type of marketing that has become a more frequent phenomenon during the last few years. One of the teachers tells us that nowadays there are even books which teach you how to ‘profile your school’. This kind of new literature proves the importance of profiling a school, he argues. Other respondents discuss the increased outward-looking orientation of schools in this way:

You’re always supposed to show off what you’re doing. Doing is not good enough, you have to show people that you do good deeds. It could be things like publishing on the Internet, telling your friends, telling each other at conferences, and so on. Inviting the press ... I think many teachers think, ‘Aha! This might be a good way of promoting us!’ (Principal P)

I guess that’s what today’s society really is. It’s supposed to be viewed from the outside. There has to be a nice surface and it should be big and grand, and your own things should be prioritised, like, ‘I’ve made this’. (Teacher P)

The increased outward-looking orientation of schools seems to demand a specific kind of teacher. Since you are required to act outwardly, be service-minded, flexible and social, there is no longer room for deviating or ‘odd’ teachers:

It feels like the demands on us teachers have risen prominently step by step. And it feels as if odd teachers don’t fit in anymore. Back then, there could be really special teachers, but they don’t have a place in the system anymore ... That old lecturer who knew everything about his teaching subject but was not very competent socially has no place anymore ... sometimes social competence means more than subject-specific competence ... I think this has something to do with marketing. (Teacher P)

One consequence of increased market orientation mentioned by the respondents is that teachers have become less autonomous in relation to school management. Since teachers are expected to promote the school and be loyal to their employer, it is harder to complain or criticise outside the school. To a higher degree than before, internal conflicts need to stay internal. Some teachers perceive that these restricted conditions have become a reality in public schools:

We are part of the municipality. We have the right to say what the F we want to, talk [to the media] as we wish to, but at the same time we know we can’t do this ... It’s not accepted as it used to be ... It’s more restricted now when it comes to schools ... I think it’s become more of a business thing, a part of your employment is to speak well of the company. (Teacher P)

There is also a shift in the relationship with students, which implies a strengthening of the students’ position at the expense of teachers’ professional autonomy. Each student receives an economic value due to the voucher system. One consequence of this is that teachers feel obliged to maintain good relations with their students (customers), even if they do not find that this is motivated from a professional point of view. If they are not sensitive to their students’ wishes, there is a risk that the students will complain to the principal or say bad things about the school and give it a bad reputation. Or worse, they might leave the school. Some teachers describe this as a balance where you have to choose between your employment and your ideals:

I think the students have too much influence ... In one way, they are aware of their rights ... so it can be hard to resist ... as a teacher you are very vulnerable if they feel dissatisfied ... I mean, they go the principal and complain about the teachers ... you can choose for yourself ... do I want to lose my job or stand up for what I think as a teacher? It’s a slippery slope. (Teacher I)

Furthermore, statements from the students confirm an awareness of their powerful position in relation to their teachers:

We make demands on the teachers which they have to fulfil. If they don’t, we’ll demand even more. (Student I)
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There are also indications that teachers’ ambitions to recruit students in some cases lead to an increased competition between teachers or programmes at the same school. This might be shown, for example, in denigrating talk about other programmes in front of students or in striving to be ‘more of a friend than a teacher’ in order to improve one’s reputation. One student describes it as follows:

I think the teachers at school are competing for the students. Many teachers prefer to be more of a friend than a teacher to improve their reputation among the students. Then the students choose that teacher. (Student I)

Stress and Uncertainty

Feelings are crucial in a teacher’s work and there are many emotions implied in the interview material, even if they are not always explicitly expressed. From a teacher’s perspective, the most apparent effect of an increased workload is stress. Also, fear of losing one’s job and the frustration of performing a task that is inconsistent with one’s professional beliefs results in stress and insecurity:

To participate in a competitive market may result in severe consequences. If it’s not a popular school it might be closed down or people get fired. (Teacher I)

The service or sales role implied in the market-orientation perspective is a source of frustration for some teachers, who perceive it as degrading their professional identity. As mentioned above, sometimes teachers feel obliged to leave aside their professional beliefs or ideals in order to preserve good relations with students and prevent them from leaving the school. Some teachers argue that the media increases their stress since it often reports on decreasing numbers of students and increasing numbers of upper secondary schools to choose from. Reports on school assessments and ranking lists occur as well. One of the effects of this external pressure is that the school staff are engaged in what in business economics is called benchmarking. They examine and relate themselves strategically to competitors. One of the teachers describes how her work team maps out the schools they are in competition with:

We often discuss who our competitors are and we analyse how they work and how they present themselves at the annual school exhibitions. (Teacher I)

While some of the interviewed teachers seem to be more competitive and sharpen their elbows, others express feelings of resignation. This is especially apparent among the staff in the depopulated municipality of our study. They describe it as being hard to find the ‘energy and enthusiasm’ to carry on. Others describe market thinking as stressful since you have to keep it in mind at all times:

Even if you don’t think about marketing every day, nevertheless you have it sort of programmed inside your head, that you will do it as well as possible – every day, all the time. (Teacher P)

You have a pressure to be like an advertising sign. It’s hard to ignore. There are two aspects: the pressure from teachers and management to do a good job and recruit students, but also you put pressure on yourself. You like your job and you want to keep it. So, of course, this is a stress factor for teachers, and it increases when the number of students in the municipality is declining. (Teacher I)

Pressure to promote the school is also described as resulting in feelings of uneasiness and a guilty conscience since

[you] could have talked more to that student, convinced another student more successfully, been more committed. You could have done it all better. (Teacher I)

Similar feelings are experienced when students drop out of school, and the teachers describe it as if the schools sometimes strive too hard to convince the students to stay. Since every student is linked with a certain amount of money, it is very important to fill the classrooms and prevent students from dropping out. Notably, these opinions are expressed in quite similar ways by the teachers employed both in the public and independent schools:
There is a moment of uncertainty around these students that I think is negative. You try to keep them in school, sometimes in somewhat far-fetched ways. It’s extremely important to fill up the classrooms. There is an amount of money that we lose with each student who drops out. (Teacher I)

We want to keep the students at all costs, which means that sometimes we work almost too hard to make them stay. We are very eager to keep them here, because the loss of one student costs money... Our managers are always on at us about seeing to it that the classes are full all the time. (Teacher P)

The pressure to fill the classrooms and save the school economy is described as ending up in a situation where ‘all students who apply are accepted’. In addition, with a substantial freedom of choice, this tends to result in a large number of students switching schools or programmes during the school year. The effects are described as an increased workload for the teachers, since the late-arriving students often have varying knowledge levels and need extra help. As programmes and schools differ with regard to planning and course design, individual study plans must be cancelled and reconstructed when students move on to another school or programme.

We spend a lot of time on these dropouts. (Teacher P)

If we didn’t have a competition situation, we wouldn’t have allowed them to change so late. But now we let them in as quickly as possible, just to get the voucher. (Teacher I)

Since we need the money, we allow students to come in February, regardless of pedagogic and educational considerations. (Teacher P)

The late arrival of students is described as especially problematic in the independent schools, since they seldom have resources in terms of special teachers, student welfare staff, etc. Some of the teachers say that they feel obliged to handle these tasks, even if they do not have the specific required competences.

Quality

Quality in teaching, education and student results has been a crucial aspect of the freedom-of-choice rhetoric. The empirical material of this study includes several expressions that can be connected to such a discussion. This is not a clear-cut picture, but rather very complex. In sum, there are two trends. On the one hand, there is a picture of a work overload with stress and frustration over a devalued professional role. Extended assessments, marketing and restructuring tasks take time and energy, at the expense of teaching duties. As some of the teachers put it:

You have to be very flexible and it takes both energy and strength away from your pedagogical duties. (Teacher I)

The quality of my teaching would have been better if I didn’t have to do other tasks as well. (Teacher I)

On the other hand, there are also some positive elements in the relatively dark picture of the teachers’ perceptions of competition effects. They concern better performance, a strengthened consciousness about what is good about the school and improved efforts to express this publicly. The opinion is expressed in most respondent groups that competition implies improvements, since teachers need to ‘be on their toes’ (Teacher P) or ‘strive even harder to be as good as possible’ (Student I). Others express it as follows:

Maybe it triggers you to exhibit what you do and improve yourself. (Teacher P)

Competition makes people and schools do their very best to deliver good results. (Teacher I)

Furthermore, some principals maintain the opinion that competition might improve school development and discussions about quality in teacher groups:

Of course, there is a reverse side to competition, but on the other hand it makes people think about the basis of it all. Why are we here? ... We discuss quality in a different way.
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Now it’s on the agenda how we make quality improvements for the students ... So there is a positive side in this too, and I don’t believe in going back. We have to live with market forces, and you need to take advantage of this. (Principal P)

The two trends discussed above seem contradictory regarding the effects on teachers’ work and its possible influence on students’ performance. It could not be concluded from this study what the actual impact amounts to at the end of the day. This ambiguous situation can be illustrated by the following statement:

For some people, it might be an incentive and some might wake from their slumber. Some think it a direct threat to school development. So the opinions are different. (Principal P)

Also, the quality aspect might be related to the recent trend that some schools have grown at the expense of others and some schools have been forced to close. In some interviews, this is interpreted as working in line with the ‘survival of the fittest’. One of the principals describes the trend in this way:

When competition gets tougher, the schools that don’t stand up to the requirements won’t get as many students ... so naturally, the worst schools will be closing down. So hopefully the good schools will remain. (Principal I)

However, it is notable that in other interviews the link between quality and loser/winner schools is not as clear. There are many possible reasons for a school’s popularity or unpopularity which cannot be defined as related to quality. For example, the school’s geographic location is mentioned as one of the most influential aspects when students choose upper secondary schools. There is a trend for students to prefer schools in larger and more expansive municipalities or cities, which is a trend that seems particularly apparent in depopulated municipalities or in schools in less popular suburbs. The importance of a school’s geographic location is discussed in this way by one teacher:

The fact that the school is located in the city centre is not to be underestimated. That’s what happened with this reform of independent schools. It was like placing a bomb in the schools on the outskirts ... No one wanted to go there anymore. And those who remained, it was a negative selection ... the municipal schools on the outskirts had no chance to survive. And this trend continues all the time. (Teacher P)

A striking image or a popular profile might also be regarded as attractive by students. This is described as a problem for some of the larger schools since they are often diversified and therefore hard to grasp in a single concept. Moreover, student peer pressure labels some schools as ‘in’ and popular and others as ‘out’ and unpopular. One of the principals describes that students can even be motivated in their school choices by the presence of a popular shop in the neighbourhood. What the school defines as quality is not always the same as the students’ preferences, which might lead to more superficial advertising:

Sometimes you can feel like you don’t focus as much on education but more on popular things to attract students. And if the knowledge level and education is good, it is not as important in this context. It’s more a thing that it has to be popular. (Teacher I)

It’s the superficial values that decide school choices. We sell a product to 16-year-olds ... and if we’re not competitive, it’s almost as if it doesn’t matter what we think about the school, because that’s irrelevant. Because we think we’re great but the 16-year-olds don’t ... and then they choose something else. (Principal P)

Several respondents emphasise that they regard incentives like laptop computers and gym cards as superficial. They think that this sort of marketing has gone too far and say that the school should speak up about its good teachers and other things that are important for education instead. On the one hand, a common aspect in the staff and student interviews is an unwillingness to believe in superficial marketing, but on the other hand, there are extensive descriptions of such activities. There seems to be a need to say that ‘we’ are not at such a trivial level, while ‘they’ are.
Discussion

The study shows the need to problematise issues such as competition relations, changes in teachers’ tasks and professional identity, and the concept of education quality. An overall impression is that traditional professional values are being devalued. The teaching profession is being weakened as teachers lose control of their work to market actors and management. Professional autonomy is circumscribed by demands from competition which have a different agenda, in which professional discretion and judgement are not prioritised.

The upper secondary school market situation is apparently more complex than previously considered in some research and public debate (Andersen & Serritzlew, 2007; Bergström & Sandström, 2007). It cannot be reduced to a straightforward independent versus public school description of competition. Local conditions contribute to a variety of competition relations, not least the geographic location of the school or municipality. This contributes to a more complex work context as there are more actors and factors that can influence the daily work in schools compared to 30 years ago when there were hardly any other actors at all to consider.

There is almost a consensus among the interviewed staff with respect to the opinion that competition results in an increased intensification of teachers’ work. Marketing, benchmarking, the development of new programmes and extended assessments/evaluations represent new tasks that take time and energy. These results support the quite substantial descriptions in the research literature of the intensification of teachers’ work, and the view that it is a result of market-oriented education policy and a neo-liberal management and performance culture (Hargreaves, 1994; Ball, 2003; Codd, 2005; Ballet et al, 2006). Previous evidence of work overload and loss of time for what teachers regard as core activities in teaching is confirmed as well.

Work overload has been connected to extended teacher professionalism (Barlett, 2004). Our study puts the concept of ‘extended professionalism’ in a new light. Originally, it referred to teachers researching their own work and the development of learning communities (Stenhouse, 1975), which is assumed to enhance teachers’ knowledge building and school development. In a market-oriented school, such as the ones we examine here, the extension of teachers’ work contains something else: an adaption to what the market demands. This would, from a professional theoretical point of view, imply a restriction of professional discretionary decision making as the teachers are forced to give priority to concerns other than pedagogical and professional judgements.

Some teachers claim that these new tasks do not belong to what they regard as teachers’ tasks. They want to focus on what they perceive as good-quality teaching. This shift of focus represents an element of change of teacher identity, from traditional professional values to more market-oriented considerations. The construction of new, marketable programmes is one example. Another example of this clash between a market orientation and professional values is the need to retain students who want to change school by all means possible, or to welcome students who have changed school at such a late point of their education that it is difficult to reconstruct their study plans without large deficits. The distinctions between more or less market-oriented teachers in our empirical material are not primarily connected to school ownership. Rather, the most decisive factor seems to be local competition relations.

It is notable that most teachers could be described as (more or less) market-oriented. They engage in the marketing of their school, make efforts to be liked by their customers (i.e. students and parents) and are more loyal to their company (i.e. school) than before – whether they like it or not. The shared work culture which characterises a traditional view of professionalism (Evetts, 2006) is challenged by the demands from marketisation. Some teachers adopt the trend while others oppose it (even if they feel obliged to perform the tasks that are needed in a competition situation). It is a development which seems to split the profession into two cultures, in which the teacher’s attitude to market orientation is the dividing line: the enthusiastic and the reluctant market-oriented teacher. This is another example of what Ball (2003, p. 217) calls ‘the struggle over the teacher’s soul’.

The risk of a split in the teachers’ work culture highlights an important result of the study: the lack of common reflection and critical examination of what values and taken-for-granted beliefs underpin the market orientation. There does not seem to be any attempts to create space, support or an infrastructure for deepening the understanding of these changes in schools. The literature on
organisational and occupational change emphasises that a deep understanding of the meanings of change among staff, and an infrastructure to create and enhance collective reflection about the reforms are prerequisites of successful change (Fullan, 2001). Furthermore, this lack of ideological analysis makes it possible for market values to become naturalised, or common sense, in the everyday practice of schools (Fairclough, 1995).

Emotions are crucial in teachers’ work (Hargreaves, 1994). The results of this study are in line with Ballet et al’s (2006, p. 218) statement that ‘intensification and growing workload are often associated with negative feelings of stress, insecurity and guilt’. This, together with the challenged professional identity, seems to result in uncertainty. As teachers’ uncertainty in the research literature has been connected to teachers’ lacking knowledge base (or what is called ‘common technical culture’; see, for example, Rosenholtz, 1991; Lortie, 2002), our findings add another aspect to uncertainty. The pressure of school competition probably contributes to uncertainty rather than certainty, which, as a consequence, drains energy from promoting student achievement (Rosenholtz, 1991). This issue is connected to education quality.

Our study poses crucial questions regarding the quality discourse – a discourse which is fundamental in the rhetoric of school market competition. There is a need to problematise the link between quality and school choice. It is a frequent belief in our empirical material that there is no direct link between winners in the school competition and the quality of teaching and student outcomes. Factors such as geographical location, the reputation of the school, marketing and trends among students regarding what is ‘in’ at that particular time are mentioned as being decisive. At the same time, it is quite common for the interviewees to express uncertainty regarding what actually attracts students.

Neither is the link between competition and an increase in quality apparent. Teachers’ work is affected in contradictory ways: competition is perceived as stressful and energy-consuming on the one hand, and as positive pressure on the other. At an organisational level, the results show that competition implies both opportunities and obstacles. This contradicts unreservedly positive expectations of competition effects, as, for example, summarised by Chubb:

“To use resources more rationally, focus more on results, create a better environment for the teachers and increase the quality of the education by way of natural selection, where good schools flourish and get followers while bad schools improve or close. (Chubb, 2007, p. 52; our translation)

It is not a focus of this study to examine to what extent the school market functions in line with Darwinistic ‘natural selection’. Some interviewees express opinions of that kind; however, as mentioned, several believe that there are factors other than quality which determine school choice. Furthermore, our study contradicts Chubb’s statement as it shows that improvements such as a more rational use of resources, better focus on results and a better work environment are effects of competition that cannot be taken for granted. Some interviewees express an opposite view of their work.

It also seems to be more problematic to market a large school with several programmes of different kinds, as such a broad and diverse approach is difficult to capture in a striking profile. A smaller school facilitates the creation of a clear-cut profile which is easy to communicate. Schools with many different kinds of programmes, both vocational and academic, are the result of at least a 40-year political quest for integration and equality. We cannot assume that teaching and student performance at these schools are of low quality, even if they lose students to schools with a more striking and marketable profile.

The quality discussion and several other issues are of interest from a professional theoretical perspective. The market trend implies a devaluation of traditional assumptions of a profession’s role and position. There is a pressure on teachers to be receptive to the demands of the market at the expense of professional judgement, ethics and autonomy. Competition and the voucher system constitute conditions which force teachers to focus on attracting and retaining students in schools – even if this implies conflicts with professional judgement. The receptiveness to students’ individual wishes seems rather to be a matter of customer service than the growth of democratically responsible and knowledgeable students that is prescribed in the curriculum.
References


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