

## Research note:

# Teacher careers and professional dispositions in a diversified school market

### Abstract

The marketization of the Swedish school system in the early 1990's has led to an increased social segregation and organizational and pedagogical diversification, in terms of profiling, of Swedish schools. These differences are growing more visible and important for the teachers' labour market since the teachers synchronise and incorporate professional dispositions and skills of only local validity and therefore only work in limited sectors of the school market. Thus, what seems like an extension of possibilities, through more diverse options, has transformed into a narrower and possibly more segregated labour market.

*Keywords:* professional disposition, school market, school profiling, school segregation, teacher careers

## Segregation and diversification in the school system

By allowing pupils to choose their own school and connect this to a voucher the Swedish school system transformed into a school market in the early 1990's. The correlation between free choice in schools and increased social segregation in terms of socioeconomic and ethnic background (pupil composition) as well as school-results is an internationally observed pattern (Wilson & Bridge 2019). The differences between schools are, however, not only a matter of segregation. In a market system the schools on a local level become each other's competitors. The competition, in turn, is an incentive for pedagogical profiling (e.g., age integrated teaching or digitization). These two differing dimensions are more or less present in different local school markets but will be equally important in our analysis of the teachers' school market mobility.

So, we know a lot about how freedom of choice contributes to how pupils, and their parents, affect and structure the Swedish school market (e.g., Brandén & Bygren 2018; Forsberg 2018). Less is known about how teachers' labour market situation and careers are affected by the transformed, marketised Swedish school system. The research presented here is an attempt to fill this gap by focusing on how the transformation

to a segregated and diversified school market has affected the teachers' careers and professional orientation.

The research was conducted through individual interviews with 42 lower secondary schoolteachers in two different local school markets in Sweden. BigTown is a big and highly segregated school market while MiddleTown is smaller and much less segregated. The interviews focused on job changes, opinions about different schools and the teachers' professional approach. In order to obtain information on the specific nature of the local school markets, additional statistical data on the schools' average grades and their pupil composition were collected from Statistics Sweden (Statistiska centralbyrån) and the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket).

### Increased differences

The increased segregation resulting from the free choice reforms is a well-established form of diversity. We noticed, however, that MiddleTown's less segregated school market was characterized by another type of diversity that was almost absent in BigTown, i.e. pedagogical profiling. The school market thus seems to produce differences between schools along at least one dimension.

In the highly segregated BigTown, the incentive of active profiling is relatively low, and the few examples that can be observed are found in the middle segments of the school hierarchy. At the top the schools are profiled by their good results while at the bottom the schools are dealing with bad results and social problems that makes pedagogical profiling complicated and unusual. One interviewee illustrates the problem by saying:

We had some pretty hardened criminal types. They had bullet-proof vests, lots of things happened. Nasty things. Sometimes we had fires. They threw bangers indoors. We more or less stood outdoors daily because of fire alarms. We actually had a real fire, in my classroom. One of my colleagues had to spend three days in hospital.

This is not an environment where pedagogical profiling is prioritized. The differences between the schools in BigTown are visible and well-known independent of a potential pedagogical profile. The interviewees discuss the local school market and are aware of the differences between schools in terms of what can be expected in relation to the general educational and socioeconomic background of the pupils and their parents.

I don't want to work in that direction [high resource area] because a great many parents there have a lot to say about things.

I usually say that there are two types of school: one school where the parents chase you, and one where you chase the parents. So, you just have to make up your mind, what kind of teacher am I?

Thus, the schools have a visible position on the local school market and there is less incitement for active pedagogical profiling in order to differentiate the school.

In MiddleTown there are only small differences between schools in terms of school results and pupil composition. This makes it both possible and desirable to elaborate pedagogical profiles in order to highlight the uniqueness of the individual school. Half of the investigated schools in MiddleTown have some kind of pedagogical profiling, compared to one out of fifteen in BigTown.

It could be argued that reluctance or indifference in relation to profiling fits in with the tendency towards diversity. The “traditional school” is now a visible, and shrinking, category in a field of different pupil compositions, and pedagogical ideas. Differences between schools are perceived regardless of their basis in stratification or pedagogical profiling.

### Teacher careers and synchronization

The teachers make their career choices while aware of the differences. In the case of the assumed typical teacher career, first described by Becker (1952), it is argued that teachers in segregated school systems strive towards schools with high-performing students. This drains schools, populated by low-performing students, of experienced teachers (e.g., Feng 2010).

Our results, however, indicate that school stratification is too narrow to capture the mechanisms behind teacher mobility. The analysis of the interviews showed that when teachers changed employer, they tended to move to schools similar to the school where their professional approach was formed (the first school where the teacher had a longer employment period), which means there are teachers moving towards all levels of the hierarchy and not just towards the top. This is similar to a less explored career type described by Becker (1952) which shows that teachers stay at the same school (in our case the same type of school) and develop skills and principles of only local validity. Parding, McGrath-Champ and Stacey (2017) states that different schools demand different, context-specific, skills from teachers. Thus, the differences between schools are important for the teachers but more in terms of qualitative differences than a generalized order of preference. Teachers with different professional experiences prefer different schools, which means that the teacher’s mobility becomes a part of the increasing segregation.

This behaviour indicates that teachers are or have been involved in a process of *synchronization* where subjective professional beliefs blend with the material and ideological conditions that organise the school. The outcome from the process of synchronisation is teachers with incorporated, slow-moving, institutionally formed *professional dispositions* that affect and restrict their mobility on the labour market to schools adjacent to their formative school. To quote Bourdieu (2020[2015]:79), the teachers’ mobility pattern “does not mean to be a plan, but only a kind of bizarre harmony between a person’s dispositions and their position.”

## Professional dispositions

Professional dispositions can be described as socially incorporated professional principles and actions which assist, but also limit, the teacher when navigating on the labour market. It is thereby subjectively expressed but embedded in such specific institutional logic that characterises, and is recognized and acknowledged at, the teachers' *formative school*. Three types of professional dispositions were identified from the interviews:

1. The composition of pupils (parental nationality, education and income) forced the teacher to act *pragmatically* to control the pupils or please their parents. Central governance documents and regulations were subordinate to the working methods and conditions demanded by the structure of pupil composition. A pragmatic professional disposition was visible at the top and bottom levels of the local school hierarchy in BigTown. At the bottom level one interviewee illustrated the pragmatic disposition by saying "So, here the teaching profession might not look as one might expect. [...] you're a mother, a big sister, a cop, a counsellor, a security guard." while a teacher at the top of the hierarchy described how her work was circumvented by parents who imposed "enormous pressure and opinions on the school and the teaching".
2. In idea-driven schools, synchronisation mainly related to the pedagogical ideas that characterised the school. This produced an *idea-driven* professional disposition. One teacher described the demands placed on new teachers at the school she worked at: "You can't do what you've always done or what you feel like doing here.". This type was particularly evident in MiddleTown where the differences in the schools' material conditions were less pronounced.
3. A *traditional* professional disposition was observed in schools not based on pedagogical profiles and was mainly found in the middle of the school hierarchy in schools with an organisational history older than the market reforms. It was mainly expressed as concerns about how consequences of the school market risk changing habitual working conditions at the school. Structural changes entailed a risk of an influx of "pupils that we were not at all used to dealing with" as one interviewee put it, or the teacher that "switches off when it reaches the height of stupidity" when modern pedagogical novelties were implemented.

The local structure of the school market affects how different professional dispositions occur and develop, but lock-in effects on the labour market develop whether or not the market is socially segregated or compressed. Teachers in both local contexts were synchronised to work in a specific type of school, which means that their actual labour market shrinks as differences increase, regardless of what these may involve.

## Conclusion

When the Swedish school market is discussed, the focus is usually on the segregation of pupils. Our study indicates that the teachers, too, are being segregated, and this is reinforced by the tendency of school markets to magnify the differences between schools. Differences between different types of schools are so significant that teachers synchronise and incorporate professional dispositions and skills of only local validity, which therefore only work in limited sectors of the school market. When teachers developed such skills, transferring from one school type to another was considered a risk (Parding, McGrath-Champ & Stacey 2017:124) or as presenting difficulties in terms of accepting, or adapting to, a new structural environment or new pedagogical ideas.

This produces a kind of “immobile mobility” since the teachers do not move in a specific direction but stay close to the formative school even when they change schools. It locks teachers into a limited sector of a labour market that is formally accessible but informally structured by mechanisms that make several sectors inaccessible for teachers with the “wrong” professional disposition. This restricts labour-market mobility and risks causing certain types of teachers to accumulate in certain types of schools while at the same time being absent from other types of schools.

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