*Can Multicultural Urban Schools in Sweden Survive the
Freedom of Choice Policy?*
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Abstract

The aim of this article is to describe and analyze how a number of multicultural urban schools in the Swedish cities of Stockholm and Malmö identify, understand and respond to the competition they have been exposed to on the emerging educational quasi-market. Based on interviews with school leaders and research on a wide range of secondary literature it is possible to identify three types of competitors: "white" schools, ordinary and religious/ethnic free schools and neighboring multicultural schools. The responding strategies vary from the logic of resignation and condemnation of parents for making "wrong" choices to a critical redefinition of pedagogical practices towards minority students and the equivocal alliances. I argue that the competition as an exclusive incentive for school development, as proposed by the neoliberal educationalists, only partly has proven its aptitude. If the education system is to maintain its transformative capacity then interventions are needed in the very basis of the structure of inequality that generates social differences; in the way the educational market is organized as well as; in the multicultural urban schools' daily operations and communications with their local communities.

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Freedom of choice in education, due to neoliberal[1] inspired policy changes, and increasing multiculturalism in classrooms, due to the constant inflow of immigrants, have been among the major topics on the agenda for policymakers, leading newspapers' editors, educators and parents throughout the West (Apple, 2006; Bunar, 2008a) over the last decade. In the corporatist welfare and traditionally ethnically homogenous society of Sweden (Esping-Andersen, 1990) freedom of choice, multiculturalism and, especially, their effects on the political ideas of social equity and integration have caused a fierce public debate. The main question is whether multicultural schools, that is, schools with immigrant children in the absolute majority among their peers, would profit or lose on the competitive market. According to the advocates, they could profit because of the expected leap in teaching quality and more cooperation with parents as a way of insuring the schools' existence and teachers' jobs. According to opponents, though, the drain of the best performing students with socially strong parents and a consequent plunge in school resources, status and reputation, will only increase the remaining students' isolation from mainstream society. Ultimately, it will lead to the closure of schools, depriving vulnerable neighborhoods of another vital institution, and thus deepening their crisis.

Research findings are scarce, statistically general or in the worst case drowned in ideological perspectives (Sandström, 2002), and are thereby questionable as a reliable provider of meticulous knowledge. Research that is more empirical is needed in order to illuminate how market forces operate in relation to multicultural milieus and with what outcomes. As Ball (2003) asserts, it is first when freedom of choice is observed in the local context with its social, demographic and symbolic characteristics and discussed with those who live it on a daily basis, that it becomes clear how the policy operates and with what effects for different groups and institutions.

The aim of this article is to describe and analyze how multicultural elementary schools (grade f-9)[2] in Stockholm and Malmö define, understand and respond to the competition they have been exposed to on the newly established educational quasi-market (Levacic, 1995; Barlett, Propper, Wilson & Le Grand, 1994). My leading question is as follows: Given the current mode of their positioning on the quasi-market can they survive the freedom of choice policy? Based on reviewing just a portion of the international literature I dare to claim this question as relevant for most industrial countries (see e.g. Whitty Power & Halpin, 1998; Rabrenovic, 1998; Karsten, 1999; Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Aasen, 2003; Beach, Gordon & Lahelma, 2003; Benveniste, Carnoy & Rothstein, 2003; Plank & Sykes, 2003; Maile, 2004; Merry & Driessen, 2005).

The empirical material comes from my fieldwork conducted in seven multicultural urban neighborhoods in Stockholm and Malmö during the last five years as a part of different research projects. Education, segregation, governmental policies and urban development are some of the key phenomenon and concepts examined in my research (Bunar, 2001; 2004; 2005; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; Bunar & Kallstenius, 2007). The material that will be of particular focus for this article comprises 20 interviews with principals, deputy principals and heads of Local School Departments (LSD)[3] as well as a wide range of secondary sources: research literature, public records, governmental proposals and media reports. For many years I have also been involved in practical work supporting the majority of multicultural urban schools in Sweden by giving lectures and holding seminars for the staff and students, something that has given me valuable insights into their way of perceiving and dealing with the difficulties and opportunities they are facing.[4]

Educational quasi-market in Sweden

Compulsory education in Sweden has been historically organized on the attendance zone principle, with children usually enrolled into the nearest school. Virtually every school in the country, prior to the beginning of the 1990s, were financed and governed by the state and/or municipalities, with the exception of a small number pedagogically profiled entities such as Waldorf, Montessori and Reggio Emilia (Bunar, 2008a). This principle for allocating children had several functions, from an attempt to establish strong links between schools and their local communities to a more practical approach in terms of commuting and timesaving. Concurrently Swedish schools, as in many other countries (Rivkin, 1994; Roosens, 1995; Anyon, 1997; Monkman, Ronald & Théraméne, 2005; Wilson & Taube, 2006), faced the same problems and suffered from the same shortcomings as their neighborhoods, since they replicated the ethnic, social and symbolic composition of their communities. Housing segregation on a social and ethnic basis (Andersson, 1998) gave the impetus to school segregation on the very same basis including effects such as low performance, bad reputation, low expectations and discrimination. Disconnecting the organic links between the quality of housing and education was and is still one of the strongest arguments for imposing and maintaining the freedom of choice policy. In order to avoid a local school, which for some reason does not function very well or does not provide a desirable pedagogical or instructional model, a student would be granted the right to choose another either municipal or free (independent) school.[5] Yet the right is not absolute, and it has always been up to school's principal to decide whether a student belonging to another attendance zone will be accepted. Since every student is equipped with a voucher there is also an expected significant impact of competition on the schools' quality and performance. Today around 10% of all students in elementary schools and around 17% at the upper secondary level attend a free school (Skolverket, 2007). There is also significant competition and ensuing student flows between public schools, but there are no national figures revealing how comprehensive this might be. However, figures from the municipal level show that in the urban regions of Stockholm, Malmö and Gothenburg between 20% and 25% of students choose another public school than the nearest one to their home (Bunar, 2008a).

The overall map of the traditional education system based on attendance zone, community school and social equity principles has been redrawn once and for all. A new system, the educational quasi-market, has begun emerging as an answer to the

challenges facing a postindustrial society (Blomquist & Rothstein, 2000). This new system is firmly anchored in four steering principles. The first principle is in accordance with Friedman (1962), and postulates a distinction between the government funding welfare institutions and the government providing them. The government has retained the overall responsibility for ensuring the education system has sufficient funding, because it is perceived as being in everyone's interest and of the public good. But, according to Friedman, there is no reason for the government to maintain its monopoly on providing education. It is even counter-productive since monopoly inevitably leads to passivity, lack of development, higher costs and declining performance. The second steering principle is an attempt to force schools to restructure their organizations and way of thinking (Douglas, 1986) towards a more management-like model (Beach et al., 2003; Daun, 2003). Key words under this rubric are competition, effectiveness, accountability, outsourcing, downsizing, advertising and customer orientation. The third principle represents a trust that all parents are capable of making "right" choices (Reay, 2004: Ladd, 2003), based on the ideological belief that they possess a sufficient amount of resources (time, money, information) in order to choose a school that will best benefit their children. Defining factors for what is considered a good or bad school are not just what Ball (2003) calls "cold knowledge" – the average grades, properly educated teachers, resources, supplementary programs, inspection reports – but also "hot knowledge" in terms of a school's status, reputation, the relative strength of social networks etc. Finally, the fourth principle is a series of steps undertaken by the government ensuring that the diverse community of education providers lives up to national quality standards and curriculum aims. A new national inspection authority was launched in 2008 and schools in socially vulnerable and immigrant-dominated urban areas have received a relatively large amount of external resources as a part of an integrational and/or urban development policy (Axelsson & Bunar, 2006). The government also has retained the right to frequent political interventions in sensible questions such as the fate of religious and ethnic schools or earlier assessment in the form of grades, evaluations and standardized test scores.

New actors in the educational arena, an ideological trust in parents' ability to make "right" choices and a still relatively strong state presence (funding) and control (inspections) are thus major distinguishing principles of the accruing educational quasi-market in Sweden today. It is within this market that multicultural urban schools are expected to compete (for students and their vouchers) with other public schools placed

in economically better-off areas, with Swedes in majority; with free schools of different pedagogical profiles, from high-ranking natural and computer science programs via modern languages to religious (Muslim and Christian) and ethnic (Finish, Arabic etc.) profiles, and; with neighboring multicultural schools.

Multicultural urban schools

Multiculturalism has together with social class become a defining reality for a number of urban areas and their elementary schools. But the reality of multiculturalism in this context is far from utopian theoretical discourses and optimistic ideological beliefs about the global village in our neighborhoods, transnational networks and problem-solving diversity (Borevi, 2003). Yes, such aspects do exist as well, but the lived multiculturalism of Husby, Rosengård or Gårdsten, just to mention some of the widely known and infamous neighborhoods in Stockholm, Malmö and Gothenburg, do not really mirror the utopian and optimistic theoretical and ideological expectations. Rather, they mirror the social and symbolic position that immigrants, especially when concentrated in certain neighborhoods and schools, hold in Swedish society today (SOU, 2006:79). Thus, multiculturalism has become a synonym for many immigrants, which in political and public vocabulary is a synonym for segregation. Segregation is perceived as a threat and a challenge since long-term separation could undermine the very fundamentals of a welfare society: tolerance, solidarity and the principle of economical burden and wealth sharing. Segregation and thereby even multiculturalism in the form of milieus and institutions is in other words a social problem, a subject for a well organized bureaucratic apparatus working on "fixing the problem" (Hosseini-Kaladjahi, 2003).

Generally speaking, there are three distinguishing aspects of multicultural urban schools. The disadvantaged social background of their students, by large tied to the quality of the residential areas, represents the first one. Public estates erected during the golden age of the Swedish industrial boom in the 1960s and 1970s due to "white-flight" (O'Connor, Tilly & Bobo, 2001) and negligence have become a backyard of the welfare society catering to the working class with or (sometimes often) without jobs. Multicultural schools are exclusively an urban phenomenon embracing not only the nation's biggest cites (Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö) but even the urban municipalities of middle size (Gustafson, 2006). Although some studies (SOU, 2005:29) have arrived at the conclusion that around 100 statistically and administratively defined

neighborhoods in Sweden are considered vulnerable, not all of them are multicultural. Many socially deprived non-multicultural areas are to be found in the sparsely populated north and north-west parts of the country, where impoverished and the poorly educated Swedish working-class are stuck after the layoffs of big industries in the past decades. The second distinguishing aspect of multicultural schools is their ethnic composition. According to the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs there are 112 (out of 4826) elementary schools in the country where the number of children of immigrant origin[6] is 50% or more (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2008). Among these, there are around 50 schools where the number of children of immigrant origin is between 90% and 100%. Among the biggest nationalities are those from Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Kurdistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Chile and Poland. The third aspect is the symbolic position multicultural schools hold on the educational field (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) pertaining to their reputation and status. Stigmatization has conflated with changes in the local population's ethnic and social configurations. The more working class and ethnic minorities moved into the areas and attended the local schools the more their symbolic status plummeted. One distressing consequence is that multicultural urban schools have become "known" (Ladd, 2003; Ball, 2003) as "bad" irrespective of the actual results they achieve. Success here is perhaps not measured in terms of grades (they are notoriously low), but in terms of inspection reports, awards and the fact they have a constant inflow of newly arrived refugees (Skolverket, 2004; SOU, 2006:40). Additional problems are created by the lack of trust in the pedagogical content and the education standards as well as the low expectations teachers in the upper-secondary schools have toward students with a background in a multicultural school (Finn & Cox, 1992; Nelson, Palonsky & McCarthy, 2004; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). A direct connection between, per definition, illusive symbolic status and tangible social practices is obvious.

Thus, the social and ethnic background (migration status) of the students entailing low achievement, and low symbolic status entailing bad reputation, together with lack of trust and low expectations are some of the main distinguishing aspects of multicultural urban schools in Sweden. Of course, there are other and more positive aspects that could be brought up and discussed, such as native language teaching, supplementary programs and diversity, just to mention a few. Important as they are these more positive examples are still subordinated to the three distinguishing aspects mentioned above because they still have not proven the capacity to balance the power of social, ethnic and symbolic

predicaments in which multicultural urban schools find themselves. An additional predicament seems to have emerged during the last decade manifested in the neoliberal vocabulary and policies demanding more competition and freedom of choice.

Multicultural urban schools on the educational quasi-market

Between 1991/92 when the freedom of choice reform was carried through and the end of 1990s when the number of free schools began rapidly increasing and more students began choosing between public schools, the impact of the market forces on the Swedish education system was virtually non-existent. Very few educators found competition a problem or a threat, or a possibility for that matter (Kjellman, 2001). The reform and its intentions were by and large ignored or at best considered as a picturesque contribution to the diversity of the Swedish education model (Bunar, 2008a). There are some key reasons for this decade-long lag: a relatively stable number of students being allocated across the nation's schools; few free schools in operation due to unclear regulations and uncertainty as to whether the ruling Social democratic party who ideologically opposed their expansion would further deteriorate their financial conditions; virtually no competition between public schools since they had a sufficient number of students and therefore no incentive for active recruitment from other schools, and; a kind of organizational culture embraced by teachers and principles where market, profit and competition represented a backward class dividing and inequality maintaining dynamic rather than a new way of thinking and "doing" education.

The order of things started changing at the beginning of the new century and has accelerated during the second half of this first decade. In part, a diminishing number of students and a simultaneously growing number of free schools, after they managed to politically stabilized their position (Bunar, 2008b), produced a classical market disparity between demand (number of students) and supply (schools). A domino effect was the increased competition between public schools for students and their vouchers. Two additional forces were propelling this development. The first was an upsurge in negative media reports on the crises in Swedish schools getting more parents to resort to opting out for "something new", which in turn created a demand for more free schools. This was a development that many educational corporations willingly responded to.[7] The second force was comprised of two, broadly speaking, social groups' similar but also, to a certain extent, contradictory ambitions. In one corner were middle-class parents and their engagement in children's education as a part of their reproduction strategies

(Bourdieu, 1990). To examine this component, engagement should not be solely understood as support with homework, encouragement and the amount of cultural capital, but also as the intently following what is happening in the local school, who are the other students, who are the incoming ones and from where, are there any changes in the school's status and reputation, have any other schools "known" to be good with high-status profiles emerged lately, what are the reactions of other middle-class parents etc. (Ball, 2003). In the other corner are the impoverished working class and minority parents wanting to give their children the best possible options for the future by using the education system as a vehicle for social transformation (Nechyba, 2001). For many minority parents concentrated in vulnerable multicultural urban areas – lacking the ability to assist their children with information and support – the choice of another school with middle-class and ethnic Swedes in the majority is, per definition, considered as an investment in children's future (Fusarelli, 2003; Bunar & Kallstenius, 2007). Making this essential choice fulfills many ideas about what it means to be responsible parents.

As I mentioned previously, there are some contradictions between middle-class and impoverished working class/minority groups in the pursuit of their reproductive/transformative goals. The point is that middle-class parents perceive the mere presence of working class and minority kids as capable of lowering a school's status, reputation and education standards thereby jeopardizing these middle-class parents' social reproduction project (Ball, 2003; Apple, 2006). If there are "too many of the others", the risk could be perceived as imminent and "freedom of choice" is then used to move children to another school containing a more socially and culturally recognizable environment (Skawonius, 2005). Working class and minority parents consider the mere presence of middle-class and ethnic Swedes in a school as a guarantee of quality and a channel for accessing strong networks, proper Swedish language, the "right" codes of conduct, values and norms (Gruber, 2005). Or expressed in the political vocabulary, socially and ethnically mixed schools are regarded as a channel for achieving educational excellence and political integration. Leaving segregated schools by using freedom of choice is thus a process of huge importance for working class and minority families.[8] But the effects of this thinking and acting have also been detrimental for multicultural urban schools, not only because of what kind of competition they have been exposed to, but also because of how they have defined, understood and handled its propelling forces.

Let us now turn to the position that multicultural schools currently hold on the educational quasi-market. Who are the competitors? How and with what outcomes do multicultural schools position themselves in relation to growing pressure from their competitors?

The logic of resignation – competition with "white" schools

Anna (principal): They go to more, so to speak, white schools.

Carina (head of LSD): We have a lot to offer in the educational context, but we can never offer the Swedishness. I also do understand the yearning and will to get better access to the Swedish society and have these relations.

Peter (principal): Some are opting for pedagogical profiles such as drama and football. And others move because they think there are too many immigrants here.

There is a legitimate chain of explanation, which I choose to call the logic of resignation that the leading administrators from multicultural urban schools deploy in order to define, understand and respond to the nature of competition they are being exposed to from other public schools, especially from those in better-off parts of the cities ("white schools"). The logic of resignation comprises three elements.

The first element is based on the simple observation that many students (in some schools up to 40% from the catchment area) use the exit strategy (Hirschman, 1970), and opt for schools that, in their opinion, offer one single commodity they cannot compete on – the presence of more middle-class Swedes. In the opinion of the leading staff, students do not flee because of poor quality in education, but because they want to realign the social and ethnic composition of their classrooms with what is politically defined as a desirable integration. Market forces do not "work properly" in this case since the competition is not about the core issues that schools can affect and improve (teaching, learning), but about social and ideological circumstances (how many middle-class Swedes) shaped by housing segregation.

Interviewer: What are parents looking for when they enroll children in, for example, inner-city schools[9]?

Ingrid (principal): They believe it's better of course.

Interviewer: In what way is it better?

Ingrid (principal): Yeah, it's the Swedish language, it's a Swedish school, one speaks Swedish there and there are Swedish students.

Interviewer: Is it only a matter of language or is there something more?

Ingrid (principal): They feel they can learn more. They distrust this school. They distrust school since students here don't speak good Swedish. That's what I believe.

Having more ethnic Swedes is apparently assumed as a capital necessity for acquiring proper Swedish. Proper Swedish is assumed to be a prerequisite for any kind of integrational attempts by immigrants (Gruber, 2005). A prevailing line of thought appears to be that in order to learn proper Swedish, as it has been defined somewhere and by someone else, and gain all other of its intrinsic benefits, students of immigrant origin need to enroll in schools where children with Swedish as their native language are in the majority. Student exodus is thereby not a response to educational shortages in multicultural urban schools, but rather a response to the deficit of the majority population ("they have more Swedes"), and that is what partly causes the feeling of resignation.

This argument is even more accentuated by the second element of the logic of resignation. The professionals are confident they are doing an excellent job regarding teaching, developing new instructional models for working with bilingual students as well as with newly arrived refugees, communicating with parents and the surrounding community and participating in various courses on diversity, multiculturalism and antidiscrimination. There is a tangible feeling of pedagogical superiority ("we are so good") especially in relation to "white schools" and their ability to cater properly to immigrant children.

Leif (principal): I'm thinking about what you're asking, what these kids get here. They get teachers highly competent in teaching students with other ethnic backgrounds, in teaching Swedish as a second language.

Elsa (head of LSD): Generally, I believe we have a really good education…children here get a good education, I can guarantee that.

Underachievement is explained as an outcome of high turnover among students and many newly arrived refugees and immigrants enrolling their schools. Thanks to government sponsored projects they have received considerable resources to build up their libraries, buy new equipment, renovate parts of buildings and send their teachers to competence enhancing courses (Axelsson & Bunar, 2006). Other public schools are, according to the interviewed professionals, not even close to this level of development. Anyway they are losing students to exactly those inferior schools, which causes the feeling of resignation.

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The third element of the logic of resignation reinforces the second one ("we are so good") by providing some empirical examples for the feeling of superiority. The professionals argue that children opting for "white" public schools are going to pay a high prize with exclusion, marginalization, lower grades and perhaps bullying, partly because of difficulties in attaching themselves to new networks and partly because of the lack of proper support by teachers in new schools ("our students will encounter problems there"). No other aspect arouses so many arguments and apparently awakens so much frustration as this one.

> Carina (head of LSD): Those who are going to lose in this game are students. I don't think schools they get enrolled into are suitable for them. They are deceiving themselves by thinking the Swedishness is the most suitable or that one can quickly acquire the Swedish way of communication.
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> Maria (principal): Of course there are parents who want their kids get integrated, having Swedish peers, to learn Swedish faster. For some it works very well, but it's not so easy if you're coming from this place, to enter a new classroom and be an odd figure, which they will be if they come to a class with only kids with Swedish as their native language. It feels hard; they sometimes get back here pretty badly knocked about.
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> Elsa (head of LSD): It's not unusual they are coming back. Pretty often, as I mentioned, our teachers have a high competence in working with bilingual children. They don't have it in the inner city or in those schools. They are not even aware of the problem.

A deep rift between, on the one hand, confidence in their own superiority in relation to "white schools" and, on the other hand, the fact many students are leaving for exactly those schools is apparently the source of the resignation. It is like a professional boxer being beaten time after time by a boy next door who never visited the gym.

To conclude, I have claimed that multicultural urban schools define public schools with middle-class ethnic Swedes in the majority as one of their primary adversaries, although the whole idea of competition can be discarded as unfair and impossible since the problem is not about the educational core issues but about something else. An upshot of this comprehension is the development of a set of legitimate and coherent explanations among the professionals, which I have labeled as the logic of resignation containing three defining elements: they have more Swedes; we are so good, and; our students will encounter problems there. Defining their education standard as superior, the student outflow as based on pedagogically trivial matters and difficulties facing their students in new schools as insurmountable, an image constantly confirmed and reinforced by the fact some are returning, the professionals from multicultural urban

schools cannot see any particular reason as to why and how they should respond to the competition from "white schools". In the concluding section I will return to the consequences of this seemingly plausible, but perilous and paralyzing way of defining, understanding and responding (or staying passive) to the competition.

From resignation to condemnation and self criticism – competition with free schools

The vast majority of free schools do not organize their daily activities on the basis of a particular pedagogical thinking, as did some of the early free schools (i.e. Waldorf and Montessori). In all important parts, from organization and pedagogical content to relations with parents and student achievements, they have become more like public schools (Skolverket, 2007). But there are some exceptions. Free schools with religious and ethnic orientations have after some initial hesitation managed to attract around 10% of all students attending free schools.[10] Still subject to a hefty public debate on the place religion and ethnic particularity should have in a secular and democratic society where universal citizenship rights are widely espoused, these schools have slowly but ambitiously corroborated their position on the educational quasi-market. Not surprisingly, a number of Muslim and Arabic free schools have popped up within or in the vicinity of multicultural urban neighborhoods since their presumptive clientele are to be found there. Together with ordinary (without any particular profile) free schools, they have come to pose a serious challenge to multicultural urban schools by actively recruiting their students.

Defining, understanding and responding to this competition depends on to what extent the logic of resignation is being deployed. Here we can distinguish two different patterns of response toward ordinary and religious/ethnic free schools, respectively.

In spite of a pretty aggressive campaign aimed at recruiting their students – with phone calls, leaflets, community meetings, offering computers, bus cards and annual passes to hockey games (Lund, 2006) – the reactions to competition from ordinary free schools were not a "counter-offensive" by, for example, promoting some practical elements of the logic of resignation ("we are so good"), but something else, actually quite unexpected. The multicultural urban schools leaned back on the entire paralyzing logic of resignation and, as in the previous case, discarded the competition by referring to a mindset of "they have more Swedes, we are so good and our students will encounter

problems there". Furthermore, the logic of resignation was accomplished in this case with two additional elements. On the one hand, the professionals firmly believed that the students they had lost to ordinary free schools would have gone somewhere else, sooner or later, probably to "white" public schools. On the other hand, they regarded many ordinary free schools as not being serious actors on the educational arena and the expectations were that students and parents eventually would discover their low standard and turn back. Additionally, the expectation was that many simply would vanish after their strongest capital, representing something new, had dried out. The major pattern of response to the competition from ordinary free schools, against the background of the logic of resignation, appears then to be this: wait till their weaknesses float up and the students will turn back.

In defining, understanding and responding to competition from religious and ethnic free schools the professionals from multicultural urban schools also show traces of the logic of resignation. Although the key-element ("they have more Swedes") is not applicable here, the other elements ("we are so good" and "our students will encounter problems there" and even "they are not serious") are even stronger. A sheer condemnation of parents for making a "wrong" choice and caring more about their own religious preferences than about the future of their children, supposing that Muslim and Arabic schools (most dominant) cannot provide children with a sufficient standard of knowledge, was the initial reaction. Dealing with parents who are often socially marginalized, without employment and are recently arrived refugees from war-torn countries such as Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan, the professionals straightforwardly denounced the choice of these parents as not based on rational and pragmatic deliberations. Rather, it was acknowledged as an outcome of cultural and religious conservatism exacerbated by the social exclusion in Sweden (Gerle, 1999; Gustafsson, 2004). Guided by the paralyzing logic of resignation, enhanced with the condemnation element, the competition with religious and ethnic free schools for a long time has not entailed any changes in the way of working with, e.g., Muslim children or communicating with, let us say, Somali parents. Students kept leaving, some were coming back and the professionals kept accusing parents for conservatism and parents started accusing teachers for racism and inattention to their particular needs (Bunar, 2001; Runfors, 2003; Bouakaz, 2007).

However, that is not the end of the story. Lately there has been a growing insight among the professionals that the student outflow may not be solely an effect of parents'

cultural conservatism and that the logic of resignation may be a wrong and potentially disastrous response strategy.

> Carina (head of LSD): One large group here is the Somali group; they are the latest arrivals. Many of them change to ethnic preschools. It's very much about the fear of the unfamiliar, something you don't know about… During my meetings with Somali parents, I realized they had opinions about how we were disparaging them, Somali youth and children: we were not investing in them enough, they were second-class citizens, and we did not care about their youth and children. And I thought maybe if we had met them differently, they would not be having these views.

While embracing a painful, but a necessary explanation that something may be wrong in their schools' approach to minorities, the professionals acknowledged one of the roots of the problem multicultural urban schools are facing (Ascher, 1988; Epstein, 1995; Searle, 1997). One obvious consequence has been a set of initiatives to open up the schools to the surrounding communities, inviting parents, ethnic associations and local businesses to use them as a community center, to come together and inform each other about obligations and expectations. In a number of areas, productive home-school alliances have emerged as a new political force galvanizing school development as well as the local institution of social citizenship (Bouakaz, 2007; Young, 1990).

To conclude, ordinary and religious/ethnic free schools are another group of competitors that multicultural urban schools need to deal with. In relation to ordinary free schools basically the same logic of resignation, as in previous case with "white" public schools, were deployed as a legitimate explanation for why their students choose to go there. The reasons were placed elsewhere than in the organization of and in the daily operations of multicultural urban schools themselves. Subsequently, no redefinition of the pedagogical or communicational skills or strategies was undertaken. In other words, virtually nothing happened despite the lost of hundreds of student vouchers. In relation to competition from religious and ethnic free schools, they have begun redefining their position, from a unilateral repudiation of Muslim parents' choices to adopting a critical view on their own way of working and communicating with Muslim parents and students. Therefore, they have also to a certain extent improved their shaken position on the educational quasi-market.

The equivocal alliances – competition with neighboring multicultural urban schools

This competition category should not exist at all. But, it is not only highly present; it is even a source of frustration, new alliances and broken promises. Many principals and deputy principals have witnessed how they informally agreed with their colleagues from neighboring schools (sharing the same problems and the same definitions of the problems) not to compete with each other, or as they expressed it "not to try taking kids from each other". As long as someone wants to choose another school, that should be made possible, but not encouraged and definitely no students should be subject to an active recruitment policy using direct information or offering benefits. The main aim is, according to the professionals, to diminish turbulence and economic uncertainty among the schools in the area. Since they did not consider competition as an incentive for development and an increase in education standards, the agreement was adopted smoothly.

> *Interviewer: Are you competing with each other?*
> Rita (principal): We are not supposed to do that; we don't take students from each other.
> *Interviewer: Have you decided not to compete on the municipal level?*
> Rita (principal): We are going to try. We are not supposed to compete, but if the choice stands between either enrolling another local school or leaving the area altogether, then it's clear. We've said in that case it's better we help each other and we'll take that kid.

Neoliberal economists would probably discard this fragile agreement as making a cartel in order to narrow choices for the customers and to maintain schools' monopoly position on the market (Friedman, 1962; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hoxby, 2001; 2003; Sandström, 2002). An interesting question is why students still fluctuate between multicultural urban schools, and how the dynamic is defined, understood and responded to, when there is no competition and the logic of resignation is obviously not applicable here. One possible answer lies is the occurrence of an obscured but apparently powerful rivalry between schools. All the professionals emphasized minimal but extremely important distinctions in schools' status and reputation. The greater the physical proximity and similarities in social and ethnic configuration, the bigger the need to draw boundaries and load them with over dimensioned symbolic connotations. One trivial example is a school's name. Schools with the worst reputation often shared the name with their local community (Husby-school, Rosengårds-school, Fittja-school and so

forth), even if there were no substantial dissimilarities in the students' background, achievement, or the teachers' skills with other local schools. But the shared name was sufficient to form and maintain a local distinction based on an avowal that some schools simply are better because they have a better reputation for the simple reason that they do not share the name of their stigmatized and low-status community.

> Interviewer: Are there any kids coming from other schools in this neighborhood?
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> Anna (principal): Yes, mostly from Kyragaard.
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> Interviewer: Why are they doing that?
>
> Anna (principal): Because we have a better reputation. Its got to be that.
>
> Leif (principal): What has concerned me most and the hardest of all was that students change from this to Potok-school located just a few minutes walking distance from here. Talking about Mehaby-school, about our reputation… I think it's not fair. That was unfair. People believe our neighboring schools are better only because of everything they read about our school.

A plausible step by a number of principals was then to try changing the name of their schools. No one succeeded, partly because their informal proposal awoke local nationalism (Back, 1996; Sernhede, 2007) and ridicule from associations based in the neighborhood suggesting there was nothing to be ashamed of and that schools instead should be proud of catering to such a diverse community. Rather than facing such views, the principals withdrew their name-changing proposals. Other distinctive factors used to strengthen a multicultural urban school's position in relation to their competing neighbors were, just to mention a few, stressing a school's geographical position (physically a little bit closer to the surrounding communities), adoption of fancy pedagogical profiles (football, basketball, IT), and the purchase of new leisure equipment (pool-tables). Differences are exaggerated according to the principle that "their weaknesses are the source of our strength". Thus, the practical maintenance of the informal non-competing agreement does not always go so smoothly. Promises are being broken when it suits a single school's interests causing a great deal of frustration, anger and potential "retaliations" among their partners/competitors.

> Ingrid (principal): We have decided not to try taking kids from each other, not trying to attract them. That's exactly what happened this spring. A letter was sent by the neighboring Borrby-school to our students in grade 6. Despite the agreement between our principals not to do that.
>
> Interviewer: How do you view what they did?
>
> Ingrid (principal): That's not good. I mean, if we agreed on one thing you should stick to that. If students want to choose, that's okay, but you shouldn't sent a letter to students if you know they attend this school.

To conclude, the third group of competitors that multicultural urban schools need to deal with is their neighboring schools. Sharing students with a similar social and ethnic background who live in the same low-status and stigmatized areas and are facing similar consequences concerning the student outflow to "white" and free schools, the internal struggle for students appears to be the last thing multicultural schools want and need right now. Indeed, they have informally agreed not to compete or to try taking kids from each other. The non-compulsory nature of the agreement, however, makes it extremely fragile, not least since there are some, although artificially generated, status distinctions and rivalry between local schools. Emphasizing these distinctions could be a possible source of new students and new vouchers for some schools. Doing this at the expense of their neighbors with whom they have an informal "gentleman's" agreement does not seem to bother them too much. Subsequently, the schools appear to be more engaged in maintaining the symbolic boundaries and even in upholding the agreement (including mutual accusation on who broke it first) than in changing the pedagogical content, instructional models, organizational structures or modes of communication with parents.

Conclusions

I started this article by posing the question: Can multicultural urban schools in Sweden survive the freedom of choice policy? The origin of the question and the concern imbued in it is a development within the Swedish education system for the last 15 years. A new order, which I, after Levacic (1995; see even Barlett et al., 1994), have called the educational quasi-market, has been established determining the nature of relations between some of the major actors on this field: educators, students, parents, local communities, media etc. The key terms adopted in the policy shift have been decentralization, competition, management, accountability and voucher. New actors (free schools) have been allowed and have been tax-financed to establish "their business" and challenge the public schools' monopoly. Public schools have also practically been forced out onto the market and encouraged to compete with each other. The idea behind imposing market principles into the world of education was the expectation that efficiency would rise, the costs would plummet and democracy would be vitalized since making a decision about such an important question would now be put into the hands of individuals and families. Public debate and research about the reform's effects has been and is still mainly oscillating around the dichotomies of

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segregation/integration in the society, more expensive/cheaper education, and higher/lower average grades (Bunar, 2008a). Research results are mixed and the ensuing public debate has become confused and ideologically colored. Therefore, and in accordance with Ball's (2003) suggestion that the practical operations and outcomes of market forces best could be assessed and discussed in relation to a local context, I have conducted a study among multicultural urban schools in Stockholm and Malmö about how they define, understand and respond to competition on the emerging educational quasi-market.

On the basis of empirical observations on which school types mostly attract their students, three types of schools are in various degrees defined as competitors. So-called "white" schools in better-off parts of the cities with middle-class and ethnic Swedes in majority; free schools with (ethnic and religious) and without (ordinary) a particular pedagogical profile, and; neighboring multicultural schools with a similar social and ethnic student composition, status and reputation. Underlying this study is the key fact that student outflow in some schools has reached 40% (Bunar & Kallstenius, 2007). Further, I have distinguished three ways of understanding and responding to the nature of competition: the logic of resignation in relation to "white" and ordinary free schools, partial resignation and partial condemnation and self-criticism in relation to religious and ethnic schools, and the equivocal alliances with neighboring schools. Passivity and a virtual non-responsive strategy to "white" and ordinary free schools is based on the understanding that the competition is not about the educational core issues but about the physical proximity to the social and ethnic mainstream as a part of living up to the overall integration aims. I am not claiming that multicultural urban schools do not develop their organizations or instructional models at all; I am claiming that they do not undertake development strategies as a direct answer to growing competition from "white" and ordinary free schools. A gradual shift from passivity and unilateral condemnation of parents for making "wrong" choices is based on an increasing awareness that catering to minority children requires a cultural and social sensitivity to the needs of their families (Rankin & Quane, 2000). Changing attitudes, modes of communication with parents, observing religious holidays as well as the partial implementation of the idea of community school, are among some of the responsive strategies of this shift actively involving school in the life of their communities (Bunar, 2001). A closer relationship with parents, giving them direct access to the information about school's daily work and future plans, can also be used as an effective competing

strategy in relation to religious and ethnic free schools. The equivocal alliances strategy is based on the understanding that competition merely is an additional burden, and the implemented developmental strategy concerning such matters as teaching practices and native-language learning would have been deployed anyway (however, a few miss the opportunity to "snatch" students from neighboring schools). Indeed, in relation to each other, multicultural urban schools do not act at all, actively agree on not reacting, or act in such a way that does not promote educational excellence, but rather principals' marketing skills. Neither of these modes of reaction contributes to considerably improving their overall position on the educational quasi-market.

So can they survive? Evidently, the only form of competition that generates tangible positive changes in schools' internal work is attached to religious and ethnic schools. This is also the only, although the smallest, competitor that directly and openly challenges schools' way of dealing with minority children. Other competitors challenge their social and symbolic position in relation to ideological proclamations about integration and multiculturalism. Social predicaments and the symbolic status of their students and communities have, together with falling into the logic of resignation, condemnation and the equivocal alliances, enclosed multicultural urban schools into a vicious cycle of, first, losing students on pedagogically irrelevant matters, then non-reacting/wrongly reacting, then impaired development, and finally losing more students. The risk of being laid off is apparent and imminent and many schools have already disappeared. Singling out and criticizing only one of these factors (segregation, the unfair market or lazy staff) has become a problem on its own, thus obscuring the complexity of the matter.

In order to survive as a pedagogically effective and strong institution catering to a diverse community, multicultural urban schools need more support to reshape their curriculum and educational practices so they better can work in the interests of their minority students. Structurally, as Henig (1994) argues, the education policy has to be reconnected to other policy domains such as welfare, anti-discrimination, housing and the labor market, if it is going to maintain its transformative capacity. Furthermore, the very basis of the educational quasi-market needs to be reorganized by decentralizing the power over policy shaping and implementation from the national level to the level of municipalities. Different municipalities have different histories and social realities to deal with, and I hope this article clearly has shown how powerful and potentially detrimental these realities, irrespective of ideological proclamations and ideas, can be.

Notes

[1] Bob Jessop (2002, p.461) defines neoliberalism as: "*Neoliberalism* promotes market-led economic and social restructuring. In the public sector, this involves privatization, liberalization, and imposition of commercial criteria in the residual state sector; in the private sector, deregulation is backed by a new juridicopolitical framework that offers passive support for market solutions." According to Gordon, Lahelma and Beach (2003, p.2-3): "Neo-liberalism in education implies: more exact evaluation, competition, individualization, increasing choice and criticism against social democratic politics for inflexibility, inefficiency, increasing costs and falling standards."

[2] Swedish compulsory education starts at the age of 6 with attending a preschool class (*förskola*) and ends at the age of 15 with grade 9. More than 98% of students enrol in the ensuing upper secondary education (*gymnasium*).

[3] These informants will be labelled as the professionals in the rest of the article.

[4] For the last five years (2003-2008) I have held approximately one hundred lectures, seminars, round table talks and courses for the staff from multicultural urban schools across the country.

[5] Free or independent (sometimes even called private) schools in Sweden are run by e.g. private interests, ethnic and religious organizations and business companies. They are obliged to follow the national curriculum and are forbidden to take fees from their students. They are, as are their municipal counterparts, completely financed by tax-payers.

[6] The immigrant origin, in the Swedish public vocabulary, means either born abroad or with both parents born abroad.

[7] According to The Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket) there are today 635 free schools in the elementary level (out of 4826 in total) and 359 (out of 889 in total) in upper secondary level in the country. Although the number of students is falling and is expected to do so in the near future the number of applications for setting up new free schools is continuously rising, which is an indication that they count on "taking" students from, on the first hand, public and secondly from other free schools.

[8] Consequently, it is not surprising that freedom of choice has such strong support among the public. According to some surveys up to 90% of Swedes endorse the policy, despite the perils of increased segregation and the widening gap between classes and ethnic groups (Skolverket, 2003).

[9] The inner city is in the Swedish context often one of the wealthiest parts of the city, with high-status and high estate prizes, dominated by the middle and upper middle-classes. Ethnic Swedes are in the overwhelming majority.

[10] In total, around 10 000 students across the country.

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