



School management, cultures of teaching and student outcomes: Comparing the cases of Finland and Sweden



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Two national cases of teaching cultures compared regarding management strategies.
- The logic of the market was embracing the cultures more in Sweden than in Finland.
- The logic of the profession had more impact in Finland compared to Sweden.
- These findings were related to international comparisons of school results.
- We questioned claims of efficiency of marketization and NPM in education.

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ABSTRACT

In this article we highlight the relation between school management, cultures of teaching and student outcomes in Finland and Sweden. We analyse how these two national cases of teaching cultures, as constituted by institutional logics, relate to alternatives in steering mechanisms by a reanalysis of a cross-national database. Our results show that the Finnish case embraces more of a professional logic and the Swedish more of a market logic. This is compared to the trajectories of the countries' PISA results, where the Finnish system is recognized as more successful. The identified patterns are discussed in relation to school management.

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1. Introduction

In this article we highlight the relation between school management, cultures of teaching and student outcomes. The paper can be seen as a response to the sometimes simplistic understandings of relations between teachers and student outcomes which is currently exerting world-wide influence.

In many national contexts, for example Germany and Sweden, schools are presented by mass media and policy-makers as being in crisis (see e.g. Ringarp & Rothland, 2010). This picture is based on declining results in international comparisons¹ carried out by

supranational organizations² and reports from consulting firms such as McKinsey (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010).³ However, we also find successful examples: for instance Finland is presented as having a high-performing system. These international evaluations have a great impact on policy and its rhetoric and thus become important for the governing of education (see, e.g. Adamson, 2012; Grek, 2009).

Many actors analyse these international differences in school results (see, e.g. Alegre & Ferrer, 2010) – researchers as well as others. McKinsey, one of the most influential consulting firms, comes to the conclusion that teachers and teachers' work – with a focus of the importance of recruiting the “right persons” – play a crucial role in the success of an educational system (Mourshed et al. 2010).

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¹ E.g. PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment (OECD); TIMSS: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (IEA); and PIRLS: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (IEA).

² E.g. OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; and IEA: The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

³ For a critical analysis of the McKinsey reports on education, see Coffield (2012).

In accordance with this, teachers' work is widely discussed out of context in policy and the media. This text, however, argues that such arguments are not adequate. We argue that teachers' work does not exist in a vacuum but is embedded in social, cultural and organisational contexts or as Hodkinson, Biesta and James (2007) put it “people are subject to structures even as they take agentic actions (...)” (Hodkinson et al., 2007:418). One of these important contexts is the use of school management strategies.

New Public Management (NPM) – business-like ways of organizing and governing – was introduced in education in the 1990s in order to increase efficiency and international competitiveness. This world-wide and highly influential movement is related to privatization and marketization in what can be called educational restructuring (Hudson, 2007).

Given this – the national differences in international assessments, the focus on individual teachers, the influence on policy from the market and consulting firms– it seems reasonable to study the context of teachers' work in relation to student outcomes. Here, we will see cultures of teaching as embraced by different management strategies in terms of institutional logics. We will study this variation and the relation to student outcomes as evinced in international assessments. It seems fruitful to do this in two countries with quite similar trajectories and characteristics but where the results in international assessments differ, so-called *Similar Systems with Different Outcomes* (Steiner-Khamsi, 2013). In this text we want to study these different outcomes in relation to differences in institutional logics at work, and for our purpose we use the neighbouring countries Finland and Sweden.

The national cases chosen have many similar characteristics – two Nordic Welfare State Education systems with similar reform movements since WWII and similar structures and policies (Johannesson, Lindblad, & Simola, 2002). The teachers' strivings for professionalism have differed somewhat in strength and origin, but the cases both have a long history of the logic of bureaucracy, and since the 1990s the logic of the market has been emphasized in both countries (Lindblad, Lundahl, Lindgren & Zackari, 2002; Lundström & Parding, 2011; Wiborg, 2013). Still, Finland and Sweden show different developments in terms of performance in international comparisons.

2. Conceptual framework: cultures of teaching and institutional logics

Like many others, we argue that no single factor determines student outcomes, and therefore agree with e.g. Coffield's criticism of the McKinsey report presented above (Coffield, 2012:132). In accordance with Goodson (2003) we regard teachers' work to be politically and socially constructed (Goodson, 2003:52), and we therefore want to widen the discussion of the importance of teachers by studying contextual aspects of teachers' work in our chosen national cases.

We use the concept of *teacher cultures*,⁴ which includes convictions, values and ways of acting (Hargreaves, 1994). Here we analyse differences in cultures of teaching in terms of *institutional logics*. These logics have been described and used by many researchers (e.g. Freidson, 2001; Scott, 2000; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). According to Thornton et al. (2012) an institutional logic perspective is:

a metatheoretical framework for analyzing the interrelationships among institutions, individuals, and organizations in social systems. (...) Institutional logics represent frames of

Table 1

Characteristics of institutional logics as frames of reference conditioning actors' choices.

Institutional logic	Characteristics
The logic of the market	Competition, customers. Assumes there are sellers and buyers who know the value of the goods on the market. Much information in order to make well-informed choices. Competitive prices and acceptable quality follows.
The logic of bureaucracy	Transparency, stability, hierarchical structures, rules and formal procedures. High degree of standardization. Often in the public sector.
The logic of professionalism	The workers themselves rule their work. Long education and training. Autonomy. Competence and experience as the base for decisions. A boundary toward other groups is common.

(Freidson, 2001; Blomgren & Waks, 2015).

reference that condition actors' choices for sensemaking, the vocabulary they use to motivate action, and their sense of self and identity (Thornton et al. 2012: 2).

Coburn (2001) sees institutional theory as a framework that “offers a broader cultural lens. It seeks to understand the persistence or change of structures, norms and patterns of social relationships in organizations by highlighting the ways in which they are linked to organizations' broader social and cultural environment.” (Coburn, 2001:4) and she further argues that (...) Most studies have focused on the influence of the institutional environment on school structures and organization, largely neglecting the relationship between the environment and teachers' work (Coburn, 2001:4).

In accordance with the above ideas on frames of reference conditioning actors' choices, we are using a theory of institutional logics. Freidson (2001) identifies three kinds of institutional logics – the market, bureaucracy and professionalism. These logics are seen as ideal types, i.e. they do not exist in their pure form (Freidson, 2001, p 2). Two ideal types are well known: the logic of bureaucracy and the logic of the market. However, Freidson argues for a “third logic” – the logic of professionalism. Professionalism here is not about following the typical classifying of professions or “seeking to find a general pattern or ‘essence’ of professionalism” (Freidson, 2001:4), but a way of steering and organizing work. It provides a fixed model to compare and use as an analytic tool.

In Freidson's words professionalism refers to “the institutional circumstances in which the members of occupations rather than consumers or managers control work. ‘Market’ refers to those circumstances in which consumers control the work, and ‘bureaucracy’ to those in which managers are in control” (Freidson, 2001:12). Institutional logics are here conceived of as framing the teachers' ways of acting and points of reference see Table 1 (Freidson, 2001).

These logics include material and symbolical parts, concrete structures as well as ideas (Blomgren & Waks, 2015). Different management strategies are based on different institutional logics. We see the connection between them as reflected in the cultures of teaching, where these, sometimes conflicting, institutional logics are regarded to exist in parallel and to interact in different ways.

In this text we will focus on two of the logics: professionalism and the market of which NPM is a part. Our interest mainly centres them since they are the “challengers” to the more traditional logic of bureaucracy. Leicht & Fennell, 2008, argue that “the rise of neo-liberal political and economic ideologies has threatened the expert claims of professional groups and the logic of professional organization as an alternative to and protector of client and public

⁴ ‘Cultures of teaching’ is used synonymously here.

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