Teaching schools to compete: the case of Swedish upper secondary education

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Abstract

Significant efforts have been made to promote competition in public service sectors, expanding the reach of competition into non-economic fields. Surprisingly little is, however, known about the process by which competition is introduced into such settings. We examine this process, focusing on a Swedish municipality’s efforts to implement competition for students among its schools. By incorporating recent theoretical advancements regarding competition as an organized relationship, and utilizing a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, we shed light on the organizational efforts undertaken by politicians and bureaucrats to teach their schools to compete. We find that introducing competition can be complex, time-consuming and that it requires substantial organizational commitment. We highlight the existence of varying perceptions of competition among different stakeholders following its introduction. These findings suggest the need for future research that addresses questions about the costs of, and interests behind, introducing competition, as well as questions about responsibility for the subsequent effects of competition.

Key words: competition; local government; organizational theory; public sector reforms; Scandinavia; welfare state


1. Introducing competition into non-competitive settings

There is a certain asymmetry in the literature on competition. Although much is known about the effects of competition on various organizational outcomes, and the ways that...
organizations strategically seek to handle these effects, less is known about how settings become competitive in the first place (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020, 2021). There is often—but not always—an assumption that competition emerges through mutual adjustment; for instance where two actors offer a similar thing and seek to trade with a third actor (e.g. Porter, 1980; Burt, 1992; Vickers, 1995). Although competition at times can result quite effortlessly (Aspers, 2021), an assumption that this is the common way for competition to emerge remains problematic for several reasons.

Where competition does require effort, an assumption of mutual adjustment leads scholarly attention away from such efforts, and their associated costs. Such an assumption also risks reinforcing an already (in some quarters) strong myth of a ‘hands-free’ economy (Lazonick, 1991; Polanyi, 2001 [1944]), where competition is seen as an obvious and almost inevitable phenomenon, as expressed in Joseph Schumpeter’s (2003 [1942], p. 84) ‘gale of creative destruction.’ In the end, this may lead us to underestimate the costs of competition, overstate its ubiquity and render it difficult to imagine its alternatives. Moreover, on a practical level it leaves those interested in introducing competition—a state, a municipality, or a large organization that wants competition among its subunits—without a clear understanding of where they have gone wrong if competition does not obtain.

In this article, we follow earlier work that has recognized that competition in markets may need organizational effort (e.g. Fligstein, 1990; Dobbin, 1994; Ingram and Inman, 1996; Dobbin and Dowd, 1997; Marginson, 2006; Deakin et al., 2008; Turner and Lourenço, 2012; Musselin, 2018), but in contrast to earlier work we focus on the efforts of introducing competition into a non-economic field. Drawing on the work of Arora-Jonsson et al. (2020, 2021), we extend earlier analyses of the introduction of competition by paying close attention to the different types of actors, and their roles, involved in this process. Concretely, we detail and analyze the efforts of the political leadership and the bureaucrats of a Swedish municipal education board who, over three decades, sought to teach the upper secondary schools in the municipality to compete for students.

The main findings of our study are two: (1) Competition can require significant efforts to obtain, even in settings where there are potential competitors and a regulatory framework in place. The entry of new schools on the municipal school market needed to be complemented by consequential organizational efforts for competition to result. Apart from illustrating the costs and uncertainties inherent in attempts at fostering competition, our finding offers an explanation for a common, but under-theorized, earlier finding of loose coupling between the number of schools and the perceptions of competition among principals (Levačić, 2004; Zimmer and Buddin, 2009; Waslander et al., 2010). (2) Once introduced, competition can be enacted and perceived in very different ways, depending on how it is organized. School principals enacted competition as an all-against-all or a group-versus-group activity, depending on the efforts of the municipal board bureaucrats. Competition is thus not singular, but organizationally contingent. Furthermore, our results show—in line with earlier work on competition in economic market settings (Chamberlin, 1933; Fligstein, 1990; Dobbin, 1994) that the organization of competition and its outcomes are endogenous to each other. Efforts to introduce competition among schools generated outcomes in one time period, which shaped the continued efforts at organizing competition in the next time period.

Our findings raise questions for our understanding of the role of competition in society. When competition requires organization it may be costlier than earlier thought. Apart from
costs of maintaining competition (for instance, regulation and control) there are costs of introducing it in the first place. In our case, the latter included extensive re-organization of the municipal school administration and the education of principals in how to compete. We currently only have a sketchy understanding of such introduction costs—financial and other—and it is an area that would benefit from further research.

Moreover, if competition is the result of organization and sustained effort, it is also pertinent to ask in whose interest there is competition? If competition is the result of the agency and interest of a particular group of actors—in our case, political parties—does a responsibility for the outcomes of competition also fall on these actors? Could they, and not ‘market forces’, be seen as responsible for the closing down of schools? These and more questions are important and need further illumination. Last, and seemingly contrary to what has been the espoused rationale of many Swedish (and other) public sector choice-reforms (Le Grand, 2009), our findings show that competition is not inextricably tied to consumer choice; every choice reform need not be a competition reform too. The education board bureaucrats were able to, for well over a decade, to organize student choice without having the schools interpret their situation as competition.

In the next section, we present the theory of the origins of competition that guides this article. Then, we describe Sweden’s educational choice reform and introduce our method for studying how this reform affected the ways that bureaucrats organized the local school sector and principals perceived their situation within a Swedish municipality. After this, we present our empirical findings: three time periods during which bureaucrats organized and principals constructed competition in different ways. Finally, we present our empirical findings: three time periods during which bureaucrats organized and principals constructed competition in different ways. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings, suggest a set of contributions and delineate future research avenues to continue developing new knowledge about the processes through which competition is introduced into non-economic fields.

2. Theorizing the origins of competition

Various interpretations and meanings have been attributed to competition (Dennis, 1975; Gane, 2020), and its moral worth is a source of continuing debate (Hirschman, 1982; Ergen and Kohl, 2020). The concept of competition is, however, defined in a relatively coherent manner across various disciplines. Stigler’s (1987) conceptualization encapsulates most other definitions in suggesting that competition exists when several individuals or organizations strive to get something not all of them can have (our own paraphrasing). Georg Simmel (2008) similarly argued that competition was a form of relationship between individuals or organizations that take each others’ actions into consideration, yet Simmel was—like most other writers—not clear on how such a relationship comes into existence.

Earlier work is not devoid of ideas about the genesis of competition. The most common idea across economics, management and sociology suggests a fairly unproblematic origin; competition is assumed to emerge through a process of mutual adjustment when there is a buyer and more than one provider of comparable goods or services (e.g. Porter, 1980; Burt, 1992; Vickers, 1995). Given this perspective, mainstream scholarly attention has been directed away from questions of the origins of competition, to instead focus on how competition may co-vary in intensity with market structure, and on how this affects the survival and strategic behavior among organizations (Bain, 1959; Robinson, 1969; Porter, 1980; Barnett, 2008), and regulatory action by governments (Chamberlin, 1933; Chandler, 1990).
One stream of literature has problematized the maintenance of competition, particularly focusing on the ongoing organization of competition by various state actors (Fligstein, 1990; Dobbin, 1994; Dobbin and Dowd, 1997), social movements (Ingram and Inman, 1996), friendship and other networks (Uzzi, 1997; Ingram and Roberts, 2000), and even through the construction of shared managerial cognitive schemas (Porac et al., 1989; Cattani et al., 2017). This literature highlights the need for competition to be organized, and although some of it details the introduction of competition in market settings, its main focus is not on how settings become competitive to begin with.

A few studies investigate the organizing required for markets to develop (e.g. Zelizer, 1978; Fligstein, 2002; Aspers, 2011; Brunsson and Jutterström, 2018). Many markets are competitive, yet markets and competition are and should be, treated as distinct phenomena (Stigler, 1957). Markets are institutions that facilitate exchange, and they can be organized as competitive or non-competitive (Fligstein, 2002); competition is a fundamental human relationship (Simmel, 2008) that also characterizes a myriad of situations outside of markets. Although studies of market creation show the importance of institutional and organizational origins in shaping norms and standards that facilitate exchange (Ahrne et al., 2015), the origins of competition are likely to be different.

2.1 An expanded conceptualization of competition and its origins

We draw on recent theorizing that conceptualizes competition as a social construction (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020, 2021). This theorization follows Simmel, but expands his argumentation by explicating four elements that are necessary for competition to come about: actors (i.e. individuals or organizations that see themselves, and are seen by others, as autonomous and distinctive entities capable of taking action) in a relationship (i.e. actors who assess their options by considering other actors’ presumed or confirmed actions), which is centered on something perceived as scarce (i.e. actors believe, and believe that other actors also believe, the demand for something exceeds its supply) and desired (i.e. actors want, and sense other actors also want, this something).

Simmel and others (e.g. Stigler, 1987; Burt, 1992) have conceptualized competition as roughly encompassing these four elements, but their presence has been presumed and left unproblematized. A key argument of Arora-Jonsson et al. (2020, 2021) is that the presence of each element must be explained—rather than presumed—in order to understand the emergence of competition. This is of particular importance when seeking to understand the introduction of competition into non-economic fields, where some of the elements—for instance, an awareness of the scarcity of something and the idea that relationships can be competitive—often have been anathema. One way of understanding the emergence of competition is to approach it as a social construction; analyzing how, when and why competition arises thus means analyzing how, when and why the elements are (or have been) constructed. Earlier work is helpful here; actors are widely understood as socially constructed, and we know quite a bit about their construction in contemporary society (Meyer and Jepperson, 2000; Hasse and Krücken, 2013). The social construction of relationships (Podolny, 1993; Preda, 2021), scarcity (Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013) and desire (Goffman, 1951) is also well studied.

We note that this understanding of competition is a situated understanding; it defines how, when, and why specific subjects in particular subject positions experience their situation as competition. In our study, whether or not there is competition among schools at a
given point in time may look different depending on whose perspective is taken. Although not often made explicit, all definitions of competition are situated. Most often, competition is defined from the perspective of omniscient observers studying an industry, but competition has also been conceptualized from the perspective of managers leading a firm (Porac et al., 1989). It should not be assumed that competition is uniformly constructed in a social setting. Organizational population ecologists, for instance, distinguish between direct and indirect competition to differentiate between situations where an organization is or is not aware of being in competition (Hannan, 1988; Barnett, 1997). As we will show in our study, perceptions of competition can also differ among actors. At times, the bureaucrats of the municipal education board constructed the situation of schools as competition for students, whereas the principals of these schools did not construct the situation in the same way. At other times, however, the constructions of bureaucrats and principals were aligned with each other. When uniformly constructed, competition tends to be seen as more forcing; when it is not, there is often more room for questioning and avoiding competition (Arora-Jonsson et al., 2020, 2021).

If any of the elements of competition require construction, it is necessary to expand the set of actors studied in order to analyze the introduction of competition. Economists and management theorists typically focus on the (two or more) competitors as the main—and often only—actor type because competitors are those who are expected to mutually adjust to each other (Porter, 1980; Vickers, 1995). Sociologists (Burt, 1992; Podolny, 1993) have also incorporated users, buyers, or other adjudicators of competition as the ‘third party’. Without this party, Simmel argued, we would be dealing with conflict rather than competition. In addition to competitors and adjudicators, Arora-Jonsson et al. (2020, 2021) propose organizers as the ‘fourth party’ that plays a key role for the introduction of competition. The idea that there may be organizers of competition is not entirely new (Dobbin, 1994; Dobbin and Dowd, 1997; Fligstein, 2002; Beckert, 2009), but past literature has treated organizers in a rather limited role of re-shaping settings within which competition already exists. Our focus on the introduction of competition into non-economic fields points instead to the role of organizers in constructing settings as competitive to begin with. When a government organizes for competition among schools or hospitals, it is a fourth party that attempts to construct a situation where principals or chief physicians will start to perceive themselves and each other as competitors, and where students or patients will also begin to see themselves as adjudicators of this competition.

The conceptualization of four elements (i.e. actors, relationship, scarcity and desire) and three actor types (i.e. competitors, adjudicators and organizers), suggests that competition can be constructed differently, and that these constructions also may vary in the degree to which they are shared across actor types. For example, actors can be constructed as more or less potent competitors; what is seen as scarce and desired may differ or its scarcity may be contested; and the intensity of competition can be variously perceived among competitors and organizers. Theorizing competition this way opens up for analyses of successful and unsuccessful attempts to introduce competition, highlighting that the introduction of competition into a field is not always a foregone conclusion.

We use this expanded conceptualization to analyze the construction of competition from two vantage points in a Swedish municipality. Our analysis traces how the politicians of a municipal council and the bureaucrats on a municipal board of education acted as organizers of school competition for students through efforts that, in our interpretation,
sought to create the four elements that constitute competition. We detail when and why such efforts led principals at publicly owned upper secondary schools (grades 10–13) to perceive themselves and each other as competitors. We do not study if and how adjudicators—students (and their parents)—constructed their schools as competing. This is an important question—it should not be presumed that students share the construction of bureaucrats and principals—but it remains beyond the scope of our study.

3. Reforming a public education system

The initiative to introduce competition among Swedish schools came from the conservative government through its 1992 valfrihetsreform (‘freedom of choice reform’) that encompassed the entire schooling sector: pre-schools, compulsory grades 1–9 and voluntary upper secondary schools grades 10–13 (Government Act: Prop. 1992/93:230). This reform should be understood against a background of similar efforts by governments across Western Europe that—from the 1980s onward—sought to introduce competition in the delivery of public services as part of an efficiency-seeking, market-inspired set of reforms aimed at reducing the costs of large welfare states. Reforms like these have later been grouped under the umbrella term New Public Management (Hood, 1991, 1995; Christensen and Lægreid, 2002).

As in many other European countries, schooling in Sweden is—almost without exception—publicly funded and free to the students. The freedom of choice reform featured a student voucher system, and allowed private education providers to enter the school sector (Björklund et al., 2005; Holm and Lundström, 2011). Voucher systems and private providers are characteristic of ‘quasi-markets’ for public services (Cutler and Waine, 1997; Le Grand, 2011; Dickinson et al., 2021), where citizens are expected to act as (publicly financed) customers. The Swedish voucher system was supposed to make individual schools responsible for their own funding by attracting students along with their vouchers (Böhlmark and Lindahl, 2015)—a system that significantly departed from pre-reform times when schools were allocated financing based on forecasted numbers of students. In post-reform times, all students receive a voucher that is funded and administered by their home municipality, although they can use this voucher to attend any publicly or privately owned school throughout Sweden. Schools included in the voucher system (i.e. virtually all) cannot levy any other fees on students.

The revenue model of Swedish schools is thus a per-student capped-fee model, where financial incentives are solely based on minimizing educational costs (Epple et al., 2017). To limit gold-bricking among schools (i.e. shirking their responsibility to educate), there are national student tests, and schools with poor performance can be sanctioned or closed by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. Studies of other capped-fee models—in, for instance, Chile—have shown that schools may be incentivized to ‘cream-skim’, meaning that they seek to attract the most gifted students because these are the cheapest to educate (Hsieh and Urquiola, 2006). Similar skimming tendencies have also been noticed in Sweden; although student entry selection is not allowed, privately owned schools systematically seem to avoid enrolling students from low socio-economic strata (Holmlund et al., 2019). Publicly owned schools are, however, mandated per law to ensure all students receive an educational seat.

In contrast to most other countries that include private education providers in publicly funded systems, Sweden allows all forms of privately owned schools: foundations, for-profit multi-unit corporations and other non-governmental actors (Björklund et al., 2005). The conservative government assumed that competition would mean that both publicly and
privately owned schools would strive to improve the quality of their education in order to remain attractive among students (Böhlmark and Lindahl, 2015; Epple et al., 2017). While labeled a choice reform, the government’s ultimate goal was to ‘...break up the public school monopoly ... because stimulating competition among different schools ... can, over time, also contribute to higher quality’ (Government Act: Prop. 1992/93:230: 26–27 [our translation from Swedish]).

3.1 To study the introduction of competition
Our study is set in a Scandinavian welfare state, where the public sector has been continuously challenged and increasingly privatized since the early 1990s (Blomqvist and Rothstein, 2000; Svallfors and Tyllström, 2019; Skyrman et al., 2023). Following a decentralization reform in 1991, each of Sweden’s 290 municipalities was vested with the administrative and budgetary responsibility to supply a wide range of services, such as all education (apart from higher education). There is a national law and curriculum regulating the core content and provision of education, but municipalities are responsible for ensuring that schools are operating. Municipalities can also decide on how students are allocated to schools.

Swedish municipalities are governed by elected assemblies, primarily comprising local chapters of the seven national parties. As in the national elections, parties often need to form coalitions to govern on the municipal level. Since 1994, the municipality we studied has primarily been governed by socialist/green coalitions (21 years), interspersed with periods of center/right coalitions (8 years). While socialist/green coalitions in Sweden have typically adopted a lukewarm stance toward privatization and competition in the public sector, the social democratic party has, from the early 1990s, become increasingly supportive of this privatization and competition (Jonsson and Lounsbury, 2016; Skyrman et al., 2023).

Municipal political leaders influence the operation of schools by instructing non-political bureaucrats on the education board. As with members in all types of organizations, bureaucrats vary in their enactment of instructions (Malbon and Carey, 2020). In terms of Arora-Jonsson et al.’s (2020, 2021) actor types, we identify two organizers of competition: politicians that work indirectly to introduce competition, and bureaucrats that work directly to introduce competition. Our primary focus lies on the bureaucrats, but we also analyze how they were influenced by instructions from the politicians.

We study a municipality categorized in the top-range of mid-sized Swedish municipalities (i.e. 50,000–250,000 inhabitants). Municipality size in terms of inhabitants is a relevant selection criterion for our study as the entry of privately owned schools after the 1992 reform largely followed municipal size (Sebhatu and Wennberg, 2017). In a first wave of entries between 1992 and 2000, privately owned schools mostly established in Sweden’s three major cities: Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö. Our municipality was part of a second wave from 2000 onward, when privately owned schools expanded into mid-sized municipalities. In 2017, 13% of Swedish municipalities had less than two upper secondary schools, and 45% had no privately owned schools. The municipality we studied had twenty-seven upper secondary schools in 2017, out of which half were privately owned.

3.1.1 Data collection and analysis
To examine the process of introducing competition among schools in our municipality, we built a longitudinal case study from qualitative and quantitative data covering the time from 1992 to 2019.
Our qualitative data includes retrospective interviews and public and archival documents. We conducted fourteen retrospective interviews with former board of education bureaucrats (i.e. our direct organizers) to understand how they sought to introduce competition among the upper secondary schools. In addition, we carried out ten retrospective interviews with past and present principals of municipally owned schools to grasp if—and, if so, when and why—these principals perceived their setting as competitive. Our twenty-four interviews were conducted between 2016 and 2019, and we focused on decisions and events spanning between the mid-1980s to the late 2010s. The interviews—which we recorded and transcribed—lasted from 0.75 to 2.25 h, and averaged 1.25 h. All bureaucrats and principals gave a formal consent to our use of their respective interview, and we have subsequently anonymized all identities.

Limitations of retrospective interviews include the risk that respondents create excessive order among historical decisions and events. Such decisions and events, however, often crystallize as parts of meaningful processes when individuals make sense of their perceptions in hindsight (Hernes, 2014). We complemented our interviews with 5,261 pages of public and archival documents, including municipal council proceedings, education board records, political motions and academic reports from 1992 onward. In addition, we read the published memoirs of a former municipal bureaucrat. These documents allowed us to triangulate many decisions and events that were raised during our interviews as well as to follow several lengthy debates concerning the organizational efforts through which competition among schools would be constructed. Table 1 contains an overview of our qualitative data.

We coded our interviews with bureaucrats in an open-ended manner to trace their efforts at introducing competition among principals, as seen through the construction of the four elements of competition. Our interviews with principals were openly coded for whether—and, if so, when and how—they perceived their setting as competitive. Throughout our analysis, we privilege the perceptions of competition held by principals. This is a scope condition of our analysis, and we cannot guarantee that just because principals see/do not see their situation as competitive, all other actors will perceive it the same way. We believe this constitutes a reasonable choice, nevertheless, as principals are central to the effects of competition on school quality (Holm and Lundström, 2011), and whether or not they perceive there is competition will define any competitive actions taken by schools (Levačić, 2004).

One of our early findings from interviews with principals was that they were quite unanimous in their perceptions of when there was competition or not, and that such perceptions changed over time. We thus employed a strategy of temporal bracketing (Langley, 1999) to create a chronology of events and decisions that formed three post-reform phases: competition-free school choice, all-against-all competition, and group-versus-group competition. Each of these phases featured a relative ‘... continuity in the activities within each period and ... certain discontinuities at [the respective] frontiers’ (Langley, 1999, p. 703). We gradually refined our chronological presentation by continuing to code our subsequent interviews and documents. Table 2 displays events and decisions associated with each of the three phases. To appraise the plausibility of our evolving findings, we took several precautions, including repeated rounds of ‘peer debriefing’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1985) with colleagues, and multiple ‘member checks’ (Locke and Velamuri, 2009) with bureaucrats and principals.
In order to supplement our interviews and documents, we gathered and arrayed quantitative data from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate statistics on students’ school and program choices, and on schools’ respective student enrollment shares, spanning between 1992 and 2017. Data on student enrollment shares is typically used to identify market structures that may generate or describe competition (cf Bain, 1959; Porter, 1980; Barnett, 2008). We use these data as a baseline against which to gauge bureaucrats’ organizing for competition, and what effects such organizing had on principals’ perceptions of competition. The question we asked was thus: Given the number of schools in operation, what decisions and actions were required by bureaucrats for principals to construct their situation as competition?

Next, we establish a baseline for our analysis by describing the Swedish pre-reform school sector.

### 3.2 The pre-reform school sector

Prior to the 1992 reform, principals did not think of their schools as being in competition for students. As Principal 7 told us, ‘… we had never thought about that before’. Before the reform, Sweden’s educational system was not organized to allow for competition. After ninth grade, students chose an educational program from a number of nationally defined programs, and then municipalities allocated students to the closest school offering their chosen program (Böhlmark and Lindahl, 2015). This ‘proximity principle’ is slightly different from catchment areas employed to allocate students in many other countries, as students in Sweden would be bussed to a relevant school if their chosen programs were not available at the most proximate school.

Principals did not make decisions concerning available seats, programs or resources in schools; such decisions were made by bureaucrats on the municipal board of education. To
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Events and decisions in our case municipality</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Competition-free</strong></td>
<td><strong>choice (1992–2001)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>• National choice reform features publicly funded vouchers for students. Vouchers credited to local upper secondary schools chosen by students. Hesitant board of education continues to allocate students through proximity principle.</td>
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<td>1994</td>
<td>• Seventeen programs defined at national level to regulate course packages offered by local schools across Sweden.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• National reregulation allows municipalities to abandon proximity principle because students now choose schools and programs. Proximity principle relaxed in case municipality. But students essentially choose schools because most programs offered at only one school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>• Board of education still decides allocations of programs to schools.</td>
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<td><strong>All-against-all</strong></td>
<td><strong>competition (2002–2005)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>• Conservative and leftist politicians with different appreciation of choice reform share control of municipal council.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>• Politicians agree on ‘purchaser-provider model’ for public services. Board of education becomes sole ‘purchaser’ of schooling, and new production committee gathering all municipally owned schools becomes largest ‘provider.’</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Business-like vision with production committee pictured as agile, responsive and consumer-focused organization. Municipally owned schools portrayed as competitors on internal market for students.</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>• Schools afforded possibility to profile programs.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Board of education in case municipality launches annual fair through which schools present programs and profiles to prospective students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>• Municipally owned schools cultivate strong ‘brands’ through program profiling.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>• Increasing presence of privately owned schools curtails financial possibilities for board of education to ‘even out’ resource differences among municipally owned schools.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Board of education brings municipally owned schools together into coordinated municipal group.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• New municipally owned ‘academic’ school for top students is launched.</td>
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allocate seats, programs and resources for the term beginning in September, board bureaucrats relied on program choices made by students in January. In our municipality, all schools but one were municipally owned. The exception was a small, faith-based school that enrolled less than 1% of the students. As Principal 10 recounted, ‘… we did not see this faith-based school as a competitor, and only as a complement. It offered something we did not want to or were allowed to offer’.

Although there were several municipally owned schools, there was no perception of competition. This could—in terms of Arora-Jonsson et al.’s (2020, 2021) framework—be explained by pointing to how several elements required for competition were missing. Schools were not constructed as actors that took initiative to alter the number of students; instead, schools were agents that fulfilled various duties given by the municipality (cf Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). Moreover, there existed a desire among principals to have many students, but it was a generalized desire that was not connected to or seen as being affected by similar desires of other principals. They expected a steady stream of students to educate every year, but principals could not do much about this. Also, because seats and programs were matched with sufficient resources and seats according to demographic forecasts, principals did not view students as scarce. Finally, to the extent that schools upheld relationships with one another, they concerned shared student counseling services and common part-time teacher pools. Principals did not regard such relationships as competitive.

4. Organizing for competition among upper secondary schools

A close reading of much economist competition literature would—in line with earlier work on educational reforms (Waslander et al., 2010; Epple et al., 2017)—raise questions about why principals did not perceive themselves as competitors, given that students already could

<table>
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<th>Period</th>
<th>Events and decisions in our case municipality</th>
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| 2008   | • Conservative politicians gain majority in municipal council.  
       | • Proximity principle is discarded.  
       | • Board of education in case municipality launches exercise allowing autonomous schools to operate outside of municipal group. |
| 2012   | • Board of education discontinues autonomous school exercise.  
       | • Increasing presence of privately owned schools reaches plateau.  
       | • Forecasts point at decreasing numbers of students during upcoming years.  
       | • Two municipally owned schools closed. Board of education restricts establishment of almost all new private owned schools. |
| 2019   | • Coordinated group of municipally owned schools remains relevant.|
choose among schools. From our perspective, principals did not experience their situation as competitive because they did not see schools as actors or students as scarce. We now begin tracking the process through which schools were constructed as actors and students as scarce, starting with national-level decisions, and then continuing with the actions undertaken in our municipality.

The national reform introduced student vouchers, which can be seen as an attempt to generate a perception of students as a valuable and scarce resource. There was nothing in the national reform, however, that boosted the actorhood of schools and principals. As we came to understand from our interviews, the reform was a necessary—but not sufficient—condition for principals to regard their situation as competitive. Administrative decisions on how to allocate students, efforts to strengthen the notion of principals as actors, and the introduction of the idea of individual schools as profit centers were also needed.

It was, in addition, evident from our interviews that different ways of organizing actorhood and scarcity engendered different perceptions of what competition was. Principals were virtually unanimous when they spoke of post-reform competition as differing across three periods: an initial period of school choice without competition, followed by a short and intense period of all-against-all competition, succeeded by an extended period of group-versus-group competition. Figure 1 overlays our temporal bracketing with structural features of the local school sector, including the number of municipally and privately owned schools (left-hand scale), and the percentage of students attending privately owned schools (right-hand scale). As can be seen, the number of schools is only loosely coupled to perceptions of competition among principals—something that has also been observed in earlier studies in the USA and the UK (Levačić, 2004; Zimmer and Buddin, 2009).

To better understand this loose coupling, we juxtapose our observations of principals’ perceptions with bureaucrats’ organizational efforts throughout the sections that follow.


The 1992 choice reform formed part of several reforms directed at either municipalities or the education system. Municipalities were, for example, still implementing the 1991 kommunaliseringslag (‘municipalization law’) (SFS 1991:900) through which they received the responsibility for public education and other public service provision. Upper secondary schooling was also standardized in 1994, resulting in seventeen national programs with defined course packages (Lpf 1994). The principals we spoke to stressed that ‘… upper secondary schooling was being remodeled’ at this time, and ‘… the whole decentralization of schooling to municipalities was also happening’, so ‘… there was a lot going on…, and the freedom of choice reform kind of disappeared’ (Principal 2). Principal 3, among others, told us that ‘… not much happened [in terms of competition] throughout the 1990s’. From the vantage point of principals, little had changed when it came to what would define the situation as competitive: students could choose among programs, but schools could not act to attract students. Students were still allocated to their program of choice based on proximity to schools offering that program. The first post-reform period is thus best described as school-choice without competition.

This slow pace of change was partly due to a lack of attention to the competition reform among the bureaucrats, and partly due to ambiguous local political support for the reform. The organization of education was hotly debated in the municipal council, and political
parties were not uniformly positive to the notion of schools competing with each other. Bureaucrats explained in interviews that the idea of competition conflicted with long-established educational values and norms, such as the right to equal quality schooling. ‘Our idea had always been that all children should have access to equally good education’ (Bureaucrat 2).

These municipal debates echoed other national debates in the wake of neoliberal-inspired reforms of public services that were becoming increasingly popular (Green-Pedersen, 2002; Blomgren, 2003). ‘Competition plays a crucial role in neoliberal ideology’ (Amable, 2011, p. 5), but introducing competition often implies ‘… desacraliz[ing]’ institutions that had formerly been protected from the forces of private markets’ (Mudge, 2008, p. 704). The desacralizing of education was contentious. Debates in the municipal council featured hard criticism from local leftist politicians, as well as from some social democrats, who charged against what they called a neoliberal organizing of schooling based on competition. Such debates notwithstanding, the conservative parties were a majority in the municipal council between 1990 and 1994, and board of education bureaucrats plainly stated that ‘… schools shall face competition in the municipality’ (Board of education records, 1994, p. 10).

Introducing competition among schools also meant desacralizing education among principals. Most principals of municipally owned schools were familiar with an approach in which schooling was a duty and social mission rather than a competition for students and resources. Most of the principals expressed initial skepticism about the idea of competing for students, as illustrated below:

There was some kind of transformation where they [politicians and bureaucrats] started talking about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ students, certain programs costing more than others, and so on … It [schooling] was to become customer-oriented in the sense that we should make adolescents or their parents choose us … But are the students for us, or should we [as a school] be there for the students? (Principal 3).

Such concerns about how competition would affect core norms and values in Swedish schools likely made it more difficult for principals to perceive their situation as competition.
Although a key component of the reform was to facilitate student choice, the board of education decided to not fully enable such choice. The proximity principle was retained, meaning that students could not choose a school to attend; students chose a program, but bureaucrats allocated them to the closest school offering that program. The board also decided what programs schools should offer, and—based on forecasted demand—how many seats each school would offer per program. The actorhood of principals, in terms of their ability to act strategically to attract students, thus remained limited.

In 1994, a new national reregulation encouraged, but did not mandate, municipalities to abandon the proximity principle so students could choose programs and schools (Bet. 1992/93: UbU17; Rskr. 1992/93:406). Many neighboring municipalities abandoned the proximity principle, but the board of education in our municipality did not. Students were still restricted from choosing a school to attend, but the bureaucrats decided that students would be guaranteed a seat on their chosen program. This decision relaxed the proximity principle slightly, as students could now indirectly choose a school when it was the only provider of a particular program. But, because most programs were offered at all schools, students generally continued to choose programs rather than schools. Bureaucrats still ‘... decided beforehand how many classes, as well as what programs, [would] be distributed among different schools’ (Board of education records, 1998, p. 2). The potential for principals to be actors that influenced their schools’ attractiveness had not changed much.

Entering the 2000s, students could exert certain choice, but principals still did not consider their situation as competitive. In our analysis, this is because there was yet no sense that students constituted scarce resources, and principals did not perceive themselves as actors who could increase the attractiveness of their schools among students. Attracting students ‘... was still a matter of just sitting and waiting, and then the kids sort of came’ (Principal 8).

4.2 The second post-reform period (2002–2005): All-against-all competition
The education board took multiple decisions during the early to mid-2000s that can be understood as ways to strengthen the four elements of competition, leading principals to begin sensing at this time that their schools ‘... had to be better than other schools to keep students coming’ (Principal 9). Or, as Principal 5 told us, ‘... you could no longer expect them [students] to come when every school tried to scream that they were the best’. Yet another principal described this period, explaining that

There was actually quite a bit of competition. But it was internal competition among all municipal schools. We [principals] fought like wildebeests for our schools. [X and Y] were our competitors. That was the way it was for some time (Principal 2).

This ‘fighting’ among schools led us to label the second post-reform period as all-against-all competition.

By 2002, there were two almost equally strong political camps in our municipality, with different appreciation for the choice reform. Politicians from the Social Democratic, Green and Left parties were doubtful, while politicians from the Liberal, Conservative and Christian Democratic parties approached it with enthusiasm. In 2003, after lengthy municipal council debates, an agreement was reached to reorganize most municipal public services—including education, healthcare and public transport—along the lines of a beställar-utförarmodell (‘purchaser-provider model’).
Where a single municipal unit had earlier been responsible for planning and delivering services, the purchaser-provider model meant that pairs of oppositional units were devised within the municipal organization. For every service, one municipal unit would act as the purchaser of the service, and another unit would bid to become a provider of this service. The idea was to create an internal market for public service provision on a contractual basis (cf Blomqvist and Rothstein, 2000). The purchasing units were allowed, and often encouraged, to contract beyond the municipal organization if external private providers offered better service bids than internal municipal providers. When it came to schooling, this new model split the board of education into a beställarnämnd (‘purchasing committee’) that would procure services from a produktionsnämnd (‘production committee’), which coordinated all municipally owned schools as providers. The principals saw the purchaser-provider model as a stark transformation:

Quite suddenly, we [the schools] were expected to come up with offers, to go into negotiations, and all that kind of stuff that came with acting as providers … There would be conflicts between purchasers and providers, but I also remember how suspicions surfaced among providers themselves (Principal 3).

Not long afterward, the production committee sought to become increasingly business-like by recruiting top managers from private sector companies. Following these recruitments, a business-like vision statement was also released in which the committee claimed it would be transformed into an agile, responsive and consumer-focused organization that provided schooling with ‘…optimal knowledge development [among students]’ (Municipal council proceedings, 2003: 2). The language for steering and evaluating schools also changed. This vision was enacted through strategies, marketing plans, performance indicators and strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats analyses, largely mirroring private sector practices, but now applied to municipally owned schools. Through training sessions and seminars, principals were re-educated to see their schools as separate profit centers competing for students on an internal market constituted by the municipal group. This flurry of organizational efforts made a difference. As Principal 6 mentioned, ‘… we tried to help each other at the time … But we were also competitors. Let’s face it. I could think for myself that, in certain aspects, “my school is much better [than other schools]”’.

The production committee—which coordinated the municipally owned schools—was initially contracted to provide almost all upper secondary education; privately owned schools provided less than 4% of the seats in 2003. In line with the idea of an internal market, however, the production committee acted as if there was competition. Principal 3 agreed with several principals in stating that top managers pretended that ‘…this was “Municipal School, Inc.”’.

Soon, the production committee reinforced its vision of competition by allowing municipally and privately owned schools to profile their programs. A school could now ‘…differ from the rest through its program profiling’, and such differentiation would ‘…clarify the school’s distinctive characteristics’ (Board of education records, 2004, p. 1). This meant schools were allowed to customize any of the seventeen national programs. Social science programs could, for instance, be offered with a media profile by adding classes in journalism and communication, or natural science programs could be infused with language
profiles by adding classes in French, German and Spanish. Eventually, as Principal 9 explained, ‘… all schools were using the possibility to profile their programs... It was crazy, there were so many profiles’. Most importantly, although it was not clear to what extent profiling affected student flows, principals began to view schools as actors that could increase their attractiveness through distinct and unique profiles.

In 2004, the board of education launched an annual upper secondary school fair that became a salient arena for schools to display their new-found distinctiveness. This fair was targeted at ninth graders about to choose their upper secondary schooling. One principal rhetorically asked: ‘What was the point of participating in the educational fair? Well, it was market thinking ... We [principals] stood there, trying to scream that our school product was the best’ (Principal 5). In economic theory, fairs are often seen as platforms that foster collusive relationships (Vogel, 2018). But principals did not need the school fair for such relationships; all municipal principals met every month under the auspices of the production committee. As schools could not alter the price or geographical scope of their offering, opportunities for collusion were not significant. A possible parameter of collusion was the profiles. However, as noted in the previous quotes, we did not see any collusive tendencies in this period. The fair instead became a setting in which competitive relationships took tangible forms (cf Moeran and Strandgaard Pedersen, 2011; Dahlstedt and Harling, 2017). Principals, jittery ninth graders, slick ‘student ambassadors’, and elaborate pop-up booths with fancy ornaments and give-away candy bags transformed the fair into a bazaar-like event where competition among schools was reflected in very material ways.

Looking back, board bureaucrats highlighted how ‘… enormously difficult it first was to get principals into thinking about market shares, student numbers, and that these [other municipally owned schools] are competitors’ (Bureaucrat 1). But, by 2004, principals appeared to be taking competition seriously. As Bureaucrat 7 mentioned in connection to program profiling, ‘… they [principals] were almost like businesspeople ... Those who sat with a bad hand of cards [ie, not attractive programs] were left with a bad hand, and people [principals] hid stuff from one another’. Several principals emphasized the prominence of branding: ‘ ... some individual schools were so strong that they marketed themselves, and, already by the end of 2005 or so, it felt as if their own brands were more important than the municipal [brand]’ (Principal 7). Through a fair, a purchaser-provider model, and a business-like vision statement, coupled with re-education and profiling initiatives, bureaucrats had organized the local school sector so that principals constructed their situation as a competition among all schools.


By 2006, the number of privately owned schools, and their total share of students, had increased significantly (see Figure 1). This increase led many principals to reconsider how they viewed the situation in which all municipally owned schools competed against one another:

> There was no dialogue; we hardly knew what other municipal schools planned, and that was surely problematic in itself ... But I think this became very clear when the private schools eventually started growing and taking students (Principal 2).

Several principals recounted how the success of privately owned schools changed their thinking. As Principal 8 said, ‘... we went from battling for our own school to seeing that
municipal schools could collaborate to thwart the private schools... Those schools were our common... well, not enemies, but competitors.' This shift in how competition was constructed suggests a third post-reform period that we labeled group-versus-group competition.

Eight new privately owned schools were established between 2005 and 2008. In 2005, privately owned schools attracted about 10% of the students, and by 2008 the share of these schools had risen to approximately 25%. The effect of these changes on how principals viewed their competitive situation was mediated by administrative decisions. For a long time, the education board had been evening out the financial performance across their schools, redirecting surplus resources from successful municipally owned schools to less successful municipal schools. The idea behind this redirection was to provide equal quality schooling to all students; schools that were unattractive could spiral downward if losing students meant losing too much resources. With a quarter of the students choosing privately owned schools by 2008, a quarter of the associated financial resources became unavailable for redirection among municipally owned schools. Many principals stressed how student scarcity, at this point, turned into a palpable question of resource scarcity for schools struggling with their attractiveness. One principal illustrated this question by mentioning that

Before, we [municipally owned schools] had just competed among each other for students. But now there were new actors with new possibilities and offerings. We quickly noticed that competition became much sharper than before (Principal 7).

Another principal emphasized that

Up until 2005 or so, I felt as if we had many programs in safe hands... But that changed when several private schools advanced their positions, and they actually managed to do it really well (Principal 4).

As privately owned schools advanced their positions, several municipally owned schools were forced to cut profiles to increase class sizes and reduce teacher-led hours. A few municipal schools even merged with each other. The growing market shares of privately owned schools were not altogether unexpected, as similar developments had taken place in neighboring municipalities earlier.

In response, the education board coordinated municipally owned schools much more tightly than it had done before. In practice, this meant curtailing the newly gained actorhood of principals by incorporating their schools into a coordinated municipal group. Bureaucrats spoke in terms of an ‘educational corporation’ that featured municipally owned schools as subsidiaries. Although the bureaucrats expected municipally owned schools to continue seeing one another as competitors, Principal 1 recounted that internal competition ‘... was not the main focus anymore, and we turned our attention to the private schools instead’. Another principal elaborated on this theme:

Municipal schools were now designing strategies together to find different niches and attract various student segments, collaborating to cover as many of those segments as possible. And that would benefit all of us [municipally owned schools], even if some principals initially complained (Principal 3).
In another response, the municipality started a new school in 2005 with an ‘academic’ profile, aimed at attracting the best students. This was an unusual initiative considering the strong emphasis on equal schooling opportunities in Sweden. The new school, however, required considerable sacrifice from other municipally owned schools. In a typical corporate strategy move, several of these other schools were asked to make room by identifying and pursuing alternative student segments. As Principal 2 lamented, ‘… the new school offered almost the same programs and profiles as my school, but I was supposed to accept that … Our student segments almost disappeared.’ The board of education asserted that such sacrifices were required for bureaucrats to organize a ‘responsible’ and ‘mature’ (Principal 7) approach to competition.

After the 2008 elections, the municipal council was dominated by a conservative majority that sought to intensify competition among schools once again, and this was expressed through several organizational efforts. First, education board bureaucrats entirely discarded the proximity principle, so that students applied to a specific program and a specific school. Second, the bureaucrats also discontinued the system of guaranteeing seats in programs. If there were more applicants than seats, students with higher grade point averages from the ninth grade would be prioritized, thus creating competition among students as well. And, third, they experimented with significantly increasing the actorhood of a few municipally owned schools by letting them operate autonomously outside the municipal group. Autonomously operating schools were given ‘… more freedom and independence’, but they would also have more ‘… responsibilities, compared to traditionally run school units’ (Board of education records, 2008, p. 1). As autonomous schools, they were not required to incur any sacrifices on behalf of the municipal group, but neither were they eligible for extra financial support if needed.

Most principals described ‘… the autonomous municipal school experiment’ as haphazard and perfunctory. Principal 2, for example, characterized it as ‘… a costly initiative that only the most successful schools appreciated, and it almost brought us back to the wild program profiling days’. Within 4 years, by 2012, the experiment had been scrapped. This coincided with other events and decisions that affected how principals would come to perceive competition. The number of privately owned schools reached a plateau in 2012, and demographic forecasts indicated decreasing student numbers throughout the upcoming years. To stabilize the competitive situation, the bureaucrats closed two municipally owned schools, and restricted the entry of almost all new privately owned schools by drawing on a contentious clause in Swedish educational law. This clause allowed municipalities to veto privately owned schools from establishing if local education board bureaucrats could demonstrate that new entries would generate negative consequences for the school sector. Since 2012, the total number of schools, as well as the respective student shares held by municipally and privately owned schools, has remained stable (see Figure 1).

During the third post-reform period, principals saw themselves as competing, but they enacted competition differently than in the prior period. Students were still perceived as scarce and desired, but competitive relationships were primarily constructed between two groups of schools: the municipally owned and the privately owned. Principals continued to regard themselves as actors that could undertake initiatives to attract students. However, principals were treated as members of a municipal group, and this implied their actorhood had been significantly reduced in comparison with the all-against-all period; principals now needed to consider how any initiatives would impact the municipal group.
5. Discussion

Our article offers two main findings: (1) Competition can require significant organization. It does not necessarily emerge when there are several providers of a similar good or service. This finding contrasts with what could be expected from a mutual adjustment perspective on how competition emerges (Porter 1980; Burt 1992; Vickers 1995). The problematic emergence of competition is possibly linked to the setting we studied: the introduction of competition into a non-economic field. Several of the elements required construction and education needed to be desacralized for the idea of competition to take hold among the principals. (2) Competition can be organized in different ways, which can lead to it being enacted and perceived differently. We described three post-reform periods in our study that were marked by no competition, all-against-all competition and group-versus-group competition, respectively. It may therefore be misleading to speak of competition in the singular (Jarzabkowski and Bednarek, 2018); it is best understood as a relationship that can be seen in different ways, and that can give rise to different outcomes. We also note that the organization of competition and its outcomes are interrelated. The organization of competition generated outcomes in one time period, which subsequently shaped the continued organizing of competition in the next time period—a feedback dynamic that has also been noted in earlier works (Chamberlin, 1933; Fligstein, 1990; Dobbin, 1994; Dobbin and Dowd, 1997).

The introduction of markets and competition into non-economic fields has been treated in the literature on ‘quasi-markets’ (Cutler and Waine, 1997; Le Grand, 2011; Dickinson et al., 2021), where competition is seen as a mechanism for governing the delivery of public services. Our findings point to the organized nature of competition as a governance tool, in particular in settings where the institution of economic markets has been missing or weak traditionally. In what follows, we elaborate on these findings, and how these enhance our understanding of competition in society.

5.1 Competition as organized

Competition is, at times, an organized phenomenon, rather than a spontaneous development following from the structural features of certain settings. Several implications follow from this insight. One implication is that in settings where competition does not develop spontaneously, its costs are likely to be greater than commonly thought. The societal costs of competition are typically conceptualized in terms of the costs and effects of regulatory oversight, such as antitrust law aimed at maintaining competition (Jorde and Teece, 1990). Our study indicates that, on top of such maintenance costs, there may also be significant costs associated with introducing competition. Some of these costs are operational and hold financial implications. Before and during its introduction, municipal politicians and bureaucrats debated and implemented several changes to the local school sector, and principals needed to be educated through workshops and seminars. Other costs are less easily quantifiable. Part of this was the change in how the politicians, bureaucrats and principals viewed education; from something that should even out social differences and foster citizens, to a market where students are resources to be fought over (Ball, 1993; Woodset al. 1998; Erixon Arreman and Holm, 2011a). This suggests that there may be significant costs to even introduce competition, but, as for now, little is known about these costs as most research on the costs of competition has focused on its ex-post costs.
Another implication is that the introduction of competition may change a setting even *before* there is competition. Previous literature focusing on the effects of introducing competition into non-economic fields (Levacic, 2004; Marginson, 2006; Deakin et al., 2008; Turner and Lourenço, 2012; Musselin, 2018; Propper, 2018) has highlighted effects in terms of changes to the efficacy and innovativeness of organizations. We did not focus on such post-competition changes; instead, we tracked the *initial* changes required for competition to emerge. To wit, a full evaluation of the effects of introducing competition needs to encompass both types of changes. Perhaps the most fundamental pre-competition change that we identified was the desacralization of education. Principals needed to reassess their ideas of what education was, and what it was for, in order to see themselves as competing. Such reassessments can have important operational effects; seeing students as revenue-generating customers rather than knowledge-thirsting adolescents can have far-reaching implications for the operations of schools. Lax grading—that is, ‘grade inflation’—could become an alluring way of attracting students-as-customers, a practice that seems to have followed the introduction of school competition in Sweden (Tyrefors Hinnerich and Vlachos, 2017). An additional pre-competition change concerned the organizational identities of schools. A change in the identities of schools from that of agents conducting duties, to that of actors taking initiatives (cf Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson, 2000) was a key shift in making principals construct their perceptions of competition. This meant principals had to assume increased responsibilities, including strategy and marketing work (Erixon Arreman and Holm, 2011a, b)—most clearly visible in the near frenzy-like program profiling among certain schools.

In sum, the effects of introducing competition among schools cannot be reduced to changes resulting from ongoing competition; we must also account for changes needed and costs incurred to enable competition. To investigate this, researchers need a conceptualization of competition that allows for understanding its origins. Our article is an initial step, and further research is needed.

**5.2 Competition as a governance tool**

Past research has documented how governments continually organize and reorganize markets in order to maintain ongoing competition (Dobbin, 1994; Dobbin and Dowd, 1997; Fligstein, 2002; Beckert, 2009). Our focus on the organizational efforts required to introduce competition into a non-economic field extends our understanding of competition in several ways.

A first extension relates to the evaluation of competition and its effects—in particular with respect to how it is implemented, and in terms of the possibilities of exacting responsibility for its consequences.

With respect to evaluating its implementation, the perspective on competition that we drew on offers a detailed way of understanding policy slippage. Arora-Jonsson et al. (2020, 2021) introduce the concept of an organizer of competition as the ‘fourth’ actor to include in an analysis, but we identified two: The politicians in the municipal council were the indirect organizers, and the bureaucrats on the education board were the direct organizers. When conservative municipal politicians—aided by a national reform—pushed to introduce competition among schools in the early 1990s, many experienced bureaucrats hesitated, as they believed competition would conflict with long-standing values and norms of equal education quality. In their role as direct organizers, they could slow down the introduction of competition, as well as tailor it to what they perceived as the needs for the functioning of
their municipality. Theorizing the presence and roles of, sometimes several, organizers of competition can thus enable a better understanding of the dynamics of policy slippage.

This approach also suggests a hypothesis about why competition may be more or less difficult to introduce; a setting where there are two, or more, organizers should carry a greater risk of policy slippage, as interests are more likely to diverge among a greater number of actors. In our case, politicians wanted all municipally and privately owned schools to compete against each other, but bureaucrats evaluated this competition on the basis of whether municipal schools could sustain their budgets and provide relevant educational activities. When private schools increased their student shares, bureaucrats decided to re-organize competition, and transformed it into a situation featuring municipally and privately owned school groups.

The efforts to introduce competition thus morphed over time into the processes of organizing and reorganizing competition. Key to these processes were the evaluations of the earlier outcomes of competition on the functioning of the educational system, which then set the path for later reform efforts. Similar feedback processes between the organization and the outcome of competition have been shown in earlier work (Chamberlin, 1933; Fligstein, 1990; Dobbin, 1994; Dobbin and Dowd, 1997), which can be thought of in terms of the broader finding of the cyclical pattern of reforms, evaluations and re-reforms that has been shown in earlier work on public sector reforms (Brunsson, 1989, 2009).

Approaching competition as a governance tool suggests new inquiry lines involving questions of responsibility for the consequences of competition. In common discourse, reference is often made to competitive forces as a justification for unpopular actions (Wolff, 2006), in our case including school closures. Ascribing responsibility for negative consequences to competition can be an efficient way of diluting responsibility. As Simmel (2008) argued, it is more acceptable for a person to take someone else’s belongings through the process of competition than by other means. But, what if there are identified organizers of competition? Can these actors be held responsible for the competitive consequences? This is an area that requires further studies.

5.3 Competition as a situated construction

Competition, in our way of reasoning, should be understood as a situated construction; its presence or absence and its appearance can depend on whose analytical vantage point is taken. This reasoning differs from a structural perspective, which suggests competition is—roughly speaking—present when more than one actor operates in a setting (Stigler, 1957). A drawback with our perspective is that it does not provide a simple answer to when there is competition; as we show, the presence of several schools did not define the situation as competitive for the bureaucrats and principals. On the other hand, our perspective has the advantage that it, arguably, provides a better indicator of when the definition of competition overlaps with the situated practice of competition (Jarzabkowski and Bednarek, 2018). If principals perceive their situation as competitive, this should be a good indication as to whether there will be competitive actions forthcoming.

Whether or not competition is understood as a situated construction matters to how we study competition and its effects. A structural perspective would likely have suggested that there was competition by 1993 in our municipality, whereas our perspective suggests principals saw their situation as competitive about a decade later. Economists analyzing Swedish schools have found weak effects of competition in terms of learning achievement (Wondratschek et al., 2013; Edmark et al., 2015), in similarity to international studies.
(see Eppe et al., 2017). Competition, in their conclusion, does not seem to have improved or spoiled the Swedish education system in a systematic way. One possible explanation for such weak effects is that these studies rely on an identification strategy where they consider a setting to be competitive when there is more than one school for the students to choose from. In doing so, there is a risk that they have overestimated the presence of competition, and perhaps also underestimated its effects. This is yet another area of future research.

5.4 Limitations of our study
Our findings stem from a particular setting: one municipality in a Scandinavian welfare state, and the particularities of this setting likely influenced our findings. As the introduction of competition meant desacralizing earlier norms and values of egalitarian schooling, and because competition was also anathema to many principals, bureaucrats and even politicians, we approach our municipality as an example of a setting within which it was quite difficult to introduce competition. Central elements needed to introduce competition were missing, and they consequently required construction: schools were not regarded as actors nor were students perceived as scarce resources. In settings within which organizations are already seen as actors, and resources are already understood as scarce, less efforts may be needed to introduce competition than those that were required throughout our municipality. Despite these particularities, we argue that our main point is still valid: competition requires the construction of its constituent elements. Such construction may be more or less challenging; at times, the elements may be pre-existing and competition comes easy, but, in non-economic fields, it may often require significant organizational effort.

Notes
1. Education boards function as administrative units situated under the political oversight of elected municipal councils.

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