Research Article

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Between Equality and Competition: The Organisational Consequences of Imagined Competition

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Abstract: Marketization research typically takes competition as a present condition and asks what follows. We ask what precedes it. University School, a Swedish municipal upper-secondary school, was established in 2005 against private competitors that did not arrive for 16 years. Drawing on Beckert's fictional expectations, we distinguish the imaginary of competition – the cultural material available in a field – from imagined competition, the anticipation particular actors construct from it. The school, built to meet imagined private rivals, instead generated competition with the municipal schools whose students it had been designed to attract; building for a contest that had not arrived effectively brought one into being. Competition, once produced, did not stay between organisations but migrated into the relations among teachers, students, and parents, with consequences the founders neither intended nor controlled. This paper theorises the organisational work of preparing for competition that does not yet exist, and the competition that work can itself create.

Keywords: imagined competition; marketization; public sector; organisational identity; education

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1 Introduction

Marketization – the introduction of competitive markets and logics into the provision of services previously delivered by the state – has been a central theme of European public-sector reform since the early 1980s (Djelic 2006; Hood 1995; OECD 1987; Walsh 1995). Garbage collection, health- and elderly care, education: a wide range of public services have been reorganised under reforms premised on the proposition that competition will improve them. A large literature has investigated the consequences (Hood and Dixon 2015; Innset and Rudberg 2024; Petersen et al. 2018). Some studies report negligible effects on the services delivered (Agasisti and Murtinu 2012; de Lima and Dâmaso 2019; Walsh 1995) where other identify changes in efficiency (Epple et al. 2017; Petersen et al. 2018; Propper et al. 2004), in the work of professionals and leadership (Creed et al. 2021; Holm and Lundström 2011), or in the equality of access for service users (Ball 1993; Eikenberry and Kluver 2004; Hsieh and Urquiola 2006). These studies share the assumption that competition is in place once policy permits it, and that the analytical task is to register the effects of organisations competing.

The assumption is worth interrogating. Competition does not necessarily arise spontaneously when policy permits it but may require that organisations be reconstituted in particular ways before they can compete at all (Arora-Jonsson et al. 2020; Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000). Public-sector units that previously operated as agents of administrative hierarchies need remodeling as actors capable of strategic conduct and competitive distinction. Objects of competition have to be specified and made desirable and audiences, whose choices the organisation depends upon, have to be cultivated. This can require significant organisational effort (Arora-Jonsson and Edlund 2024; Dobbin and Dowd 1997) of the parties – municipalities, in our case – that organise competition. This preparatory work is what marketization sets in motion before market competition begins and it is largely missing from the literature on marketization's effects.

Even this formulation may be too modest. The case we examine suggests that the work of preparing for market competition can produce organisational consequences before any actual market competition – i.e., competition for monetary resources – occurs and, indeed, can produce competition where no market competition would otherwise have existed. "University School" (all names are anonymized for confidentiality), the public Swedish upper-secondary school whose establishment we trace, was established in 2005 as a municipal strategic response to the anticipated entry of privately owned schools into a segment of the local school market. But the entry of private school actors into the same niche as University School did not arrive for 16 years. What did arrive immediately, however, was competition with the two

existing municipal schools whose student market-niche University School had been established to overlap. The competition with private providers for which the school had been established remained imagined, but the competition the school produced with other municipal schools in the course of being prepared was real.

Key to the organisation of the school's establishment was an 'imaginary of competition' – a form of cultural and cognitive material out of which actors construct expectations of future competition. Drawing on Beckert's (2013) account of fictional expectations, we use the notion of an imaginary of competition to capture what the literature on marketization has lacked a vocabulary for – the cultural material out of which organisations prepare for competition that does not yet exist. We distinguish between the imaginary of competition (cultural material available in a field) and imagined competition (the specific instantiation of that material by particular actors in a particular case). The imaginary, in this account, is not an anticipation that turns out to be right or wrong but a performative specification (Scroggins and Soueles 2021) – material from which organisational actors construct an imagined competition that orients their action whether or not the anticipated future arrives. We suggest two consequences of taking the imaginary seriously as an analytical object. The first is that its instantiation in an imagined competition can produce competition – not necessarily the competition that was imagined, but competition nonetheless, with stakes the prior field had not had. The second is that imagined competition between organisations, once it has been inhabited by teachers, students, and parents, can migrate into the relationships among the people *within* the organization.

The case has a second analytical point as indicated by the title of this paper. The competitive identity University School constructed by drawing on the imaginary of competition was readily recognized by some audiences – academically-oriented parents, prospective students, and parts of the local press – but caused friction with others. The teaching profession, whose egalitarian commitments are deeply institutionalised in Swedish teacher education and professional norms (Åstrand 2023; Holm and Lundström 2011), proved to be an audience the school struggled to unanimously bring along. The municipal education board, having authorised the founding of a competitive school with an 'academic' identity at the founding, came to see its effects on socio-economic student segregation as a problem and eventually acted to dilute it. The friction is internal to the case, and the way it resolved – through a deliberate retreat over the school's second decade from what some termed an elitist academic identity – reveals a divergence the marketization literature has registered but not theorized: between the school as an organisation, with goals of attractiveness, distinction, and competitive position, and education as the school's task, with goals defined by national policy and professional norms. The two were aligned at University School up to a point but past that point, the pursuit of organisational

competitiveness chafed against the educational mandate the school had been established to fulfil.

We offer three contributions. First, an account of the imaginary of competition – the cultural and cognitive material from which actors construct their anticipations of future competitors in the form of imagined competition – that allows the analytical lens of marketization studies to be extended backwards into the period before market competition begins. Second, that the imaginary of competition can be performative in its imagined instantiation. Organisations assembled in response to competition that has not yet arrived can produce competition in the field. Third, that competition produced by an imagined competition between organisations need not remain at the organisational level. Once the imagined competition has been inhabited by the members of the organisation, the competitive sensibility it carries can migrate into their relationships, and may acquire, in the migration, an intensity its originators may not have anticipated and at points may not control.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical apparatus. Section 3 sets out the empirical context and the methods of the study. Section 4 presents the findings in five phases: the founding of University School against an imaginary, the construction of the school as a competitive actor, the production of competition where the imaginary had specified none, the inhabitation of the imagined competition by teachers, students, and parents, and the friction and retreat that followed when the school's identity claim ran into audiences whose recognition it could not maintain. Section 5 discusses what the case reveals about marketization, competition, and the relationship between the school as organisation and education as task. Section 6 concludes.

2 Theory

A common assumption is that competition emerges naturally where two or more actors vie for the attention of a third (Simmel 2008). Competition is, in this view, an emergent property of a suitable market structure (Burt 1993; Gane 2020; Vickers 1995). Empirical work on the introduction of competition into established public-sector fields suggests otherwise. Competition does not always arise spontaneously when policy permits it, but organisations may require reconstitution in particular ways before they can compete at all (Arora-Jonsson et al. 2020; Walsh 1995; Hood 1995). What this preparatory work consists of, and what it implies for the organisations that undertake it, is the question of this paper.

A clarification is in order at the outset. To say that competition need not arise spontaneously from policy reform is not to say that pre-marketization fields are free of *all* forms of competition. Public-sector organisations often compete for what can

loosely be called status – for reputational standing among peers, for the attention of professional networks, for recognition in the local press (Bourdieu 1984; Brankovic et al. 2018; Podolny, 1993). Schools, in particular, are often informally ranked by parents, teachers, and observers as better or worse, or more or less prestigious. What this status competition lacks are the features that marketization introduces: intentional organisational differentiation as a basis for consumer selection with material consequences for the organisation, and the recognition of the organisation as an actor responsible for its own competitive position. The shift marketization brings is therefore not necessarily from the absence to the presence of competition in general, but it can often be from one competitive form to another – from a competition over status conducted between essentially undifferentiated units with limited agency to a competition over users conducted between organisations expected to constitute themselves as distinct competitors. The latter is what we call *market competition* and the work of becoming a market competitor is what we examine.

2.1 The Foundations of Organizing Competition

Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2000) provide an early but developed account of the organisational reconstruction that marketization demands. Public-sector units in pre-market arrangements typically operate as agents – parts of larger administrative hierarchies that follow direction from above and lack the structural features of a complete organisation. They typically lack leadership empowered to take independent decisions, capacity for strategic visioning, a self-contained accounting system, and a clear identity distinguishing them from neighbouring units delivering the same service. To compete, they must be remade as actors with distinct, bounded, intentional organisations, their own goals, structures, and strategic capabilities. This actorhood is not a given of marketization reform, but a precondition for its functioning.

Hasse and Krücken (2013) extend this argument by emphasising that the actor-organisation must also come to be recognised as a competitor – accepted by relevant audiences as a participant in the contest. Arora-Jonsson et al. (2020) draw the implications together into an account of how competition comes about. They argue that competition requires the presence of four elements: competitors constituted as *actors* capable of acting in their own interest, who *relate* to each other and an audience over an object of competition recognised as *scarce* and *desirable*. Either, or all, of these four elements may require organisational effort to become present in a context. It is possible that they develop by mutual adjustment (Aspers 2021) but most likely there is the need for an organising party – a "fourth actor" to organise their presence – in particular in fields that have never been characterised by market

competition. Where the field is being marketized, the assembly proceeds against the backdrop of an institutional context organised around a different logic, and the work it requires is correspondingly substantial. For instance, principals of schools need to shift their ingrained conceptualisation of students as purely recipients of education to also being scarce resources of the school that can be competed for. Over time, competition can become institutionalised, that is, taken for granted as the obvious way of operating.

Thinking of competition as an organisational effort rather than spontaneously emerging also clarifies what was new about marketization in the school sector and what was not. Some of the required components were already at least partly in place under the agent regime. Schools existed as nominal organisational units and they were related to each other by parents and teachers that in some cases acted as audiences for an informal status hierarchy. What was missing were the rest of the elements in the form a competitive market requires. Schools constituted as distinct organisational actors with strategic capacity and an object of competition (students whose enrolment carries budgetary consequence) recognised as such. The missing elements were organised by a fourth actor, in our case the municipality. Marketization, in this way of seeing things, did not introduce competition where there was none; rather it entails the construction of the elements that were missing for a specific type of competition and the reconfiguration of those that were already present to introduce this form of competition.

2.2 Identity Work and Audience Recognition

Of the elements Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2000) identify as constitutive of the actor-organisation, identity has a particular position. An identity – what is seen as central, enduring, and distinctive about an organisation (Albert and Whetten 1985; Gioia et al. 2013) – is what makes the organisation legible to its environment as a particular kind of competitor and to its members as an organisation worth acting in the name of. Schools, hospitals, and other public-sector units in the agent form had identities of a kind, but those identities were typically shared across the sector – a school was a school, a hospital a hospital, with little to differentiate one instance from another within the field. The construction of an actor-organisation requires identity in a different sense – an identity specific enough for external audiences to distinguish this organisation from others in the same category, and stable enough to coordinate action over time. Markets in general (Aspers 2011), and the quasi-markets typical of public-sector services in particular (Hood 1995; Le Grand 2009), depend on competing organisations being recognisable and distinguishable to those who choose among them.

Recent work on organisational identity treats identity not as a fixed organisational characteristic but as a continuous accomplishment achieved through the identity work of its members (Gioia et al. 2013; Ravasi and Schultz 2006). Identity work is the discursive, cognitive, and behavioural actions and processes through which individuals and collectives create, sustain, share, and change the identity of an organisation (Kreiner and Murphy 2016). In the formation of a new identity, this work typically proceeds through the articulation of an identity vision, managerial sensegiving around that vision, experimentation with practices and symbols that enact it, and broader sensemaking that gradually consolidates a shared sense of who the organisation is (Corley and Gioia 2004; Gioia et al. 2010). This sequence is informative for the case we examine, in which the school had no prior identity to revise but had to be constructed from the start.

Identity work is undertaken in relation to audiences whose recognition the organisation depends upon. The practices, symbols, and artifacts an organisation draws on to make an identity claim must be legible and meaningful within the field in which the organisation operates (Czarniawska and Wolff 1998; Glynn 2008). King et al. (2010) show how Arizona charter schools constructed identities by combining institutionally mandated elements with optional or "flexible" elements that allowed competitive distinctiveness. The mandated elements made the schools recognisable as schools at all and the flexible elements staked their specific identity claims. Identity work is thus constrained by the cultural resources the field makes available (Swidler 1986).

The audiences whose recognition matters are plural. Schools answer to parents and prospective students, sister schools and their principals, local government, the teaching profession, and the regulatory apparatus that defines what a school is permitted to be. Their criteria for recognition do not necessarily align. A claim that secures recognition from one audience may be withheld by another.

2.3 The Imaginary of Competition

The case we examine has a further feature that requires conceptual elaboration. The market competition for which the school was being established did not yet exist when the preparation of the school began. As stated by a principal and teachers working at the school at the time of establishment in 2005 (Interview 6, First principal, Interview 9, Teacher B) and in research reports from the time (Research report 5 & 6), the school was an initiative from the municipal political majority coalition in anticipation of competition from privately owned schools. However, no private schools targeting the same market niche entered the local school market until 2021. In other words, the organisational work of becoming a competitor proceeded against a competition from private actors which, in hindsight, did not materialise for 16 years. In this sense, the

establishment of University School was guided by imagined competition. The conceptual vocabulary for this work must be developed.

As argued above, organisations construct their identities by drawing on culturally available material that have meaning in the field (King et al. 2010; Swidler 1986). Drawing on Beckert's (2013) account of fictional expectations, we suggest the notion of an *imaginary of competition* to refer to a kind of cultural material: the elements actors draw on to specify who their future competitors will be, what will be scarce and worth the contest, and how the contest will be won. The imaginary, in this sense, is the prospective form of the cultural resources that identity work in general draws on. It supplies the cognitive content that enables actors to begin assembling competition's components before the components are in fact in place.

The imaginary supports imagined competition in three respects in our case. The first concerns *who* the competitors are expected to be – a speculation about the identity of future entrants, often anchored in observed entrants in adjacent fields or geographies. The second concerns what is *scarce* and worth competing for – in our case, students, and within that, particular categories of students whose enrolment carries some form of value. The third concerns how competition will be *won* – through which strategies, organisational forms, and forms of differentiation. Each specification is an act of imagination in the sense developed by Beckert (2013) – a fictional expectation whose status is neither true nor false but performative. Beckert argues that economic actors orient their behaviour by reference to such expectations regardless of whether the imagined future arrives as imagined. Baumol's (1982) theory of contestable markets establishes a parallel proposition at the level of the market itself where the credible threat of entry can produce behavioural effects of competition where entry has not occurred. Our concern is with the corresponding proposition at the level of the organisation. The credible expectation of having to compete can produce the organisational effects of competition in advance of market competition itself.

As noted in the introduction the *imaginary* of competition is a shared cultural script – in the Swedish case, a script supplied by the marketization reforms of 1991 and 1992 and by the visible entry of private schools into the Swedish major-city markets across the 1990s – and *imagined* competition is what particular actors – competing actors, the fourth actor organising the contest and sometimes others – do with that script when they project specific competitors into the future of their own field. The two are connected, since the imaginary supplies the material from which specific anticipations are built, but they are distinct, and the case we examine requires both. The imaginary of competition made it thinkable for a municipal education board in 2003 to expect private entrants in a town that did not yet have any. The founders of University School then imagined the form, scale, and competitive strategies of those entrants and built a school designed to compete with

them. The imaginary of competition is thus the cultural condition that made imagining possible in our case, while imagined competition is what we concern ourselves with empirically.

2.4 The Empirical Question

Three elements organise our analysis – the construction of organisational actorhood and the assembly of competition's other elements; identity work and the audiences whose recognition it requires; and the imagined scenery that orients action toward future competition. Together they suggest a more demanding view of what marketization reforms set in motion than the literature has hitherto offered. The empirical question follows: *what is required for a public-sector organisation to construct a competitive identity in a field where market competition is imagined but not yet present, and what are the organisational consequences?*

3 Method and Case

3.1 Case Context

The Swedish school sector has been extensively reformed over the past three decades (Jarl and Pierre 2018; Rönnberg 2014). Until the beginning of the 1990s, the Swedish education system was strongly characterized by central control and bureaucratic structures, where schools were allocated students and budgets from above (Jacobsson and Sahlin-Andersson 1995). Swedish schools were the archetypical public sector agents that Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2000) discuss. They provided education according to the decisions and directions of the ministry of education (Swe: *Utbildningsdepartementet*) and the School Authority (Swe: *Skolverket*). Schools did not plan, strategize, or seek to distinguish themselves as individual organizations. Their identities were those of one municipal school among many. This changed in 1991 and 1992, when a decentralized control structure and a model for inter-school competition were introduced in which students were supposed to choose a school, and the budget of the school would derive from how many students it attracted (Böhlmark and Lindahl 2015; Innset and Rudberg 2024).

The shift to a market system was so encompassing that Sweden, together with Chile, has been seen as one of the most pro-market countries with respect to primary education (Björklund 2005) and the OECD expressed their surprise at the speed and extent of marketization of the Swedish school system (Elmore et al. 1992). The school reform of 1991 allowed private for-profit actors to enter and compete with municipal

schools all over Sweden under a system where the municipalities fund education by educational vouchers provided to all pupils, who select a school to attend, and their chosen school is credited with the voucher.

This is a primarily episodic competition between schools (Chadwick 1859) as students and their parents choose among secondary schools in the spring term of the ninth grade – the last year of compulsory school. Every student register three preferred upper-secondary programs and schools to attend with the municipal admittance board. There is no tracking of students into different educational paths in the compulsory system, so students can – if they have passing grades in all subjects – enroll in any program. There are 18 national programs, 6 that prepare for higher education and 12 vocational programs. A typical school will offer 3 to 6 programs – often a mix between preparatory and vocational programs.

There are limited means for competitive positioning of a Swedish school (Edlund and Westergren 2025). Schools cannot compete on price as the school system is a fully state-funded flat-voucher system so schools compete on the programs they offer, the location of the school, its pedagogical profile, its amenities, and the profile of its current cohort of students (Forsberg 2018; Thelin and Niedomysl 2015). All of these competitive dimensions are encapsulated in the competitive identity of the school (Westergren and Schunnesson 2025).

3.2 Case Selection

The education field is a useful site to study the preparatory work and effects of constructing a competitive organisational identity in a public-sector setting. It is a contested case of marketization in Sweden, regularly debated in the press and among politicians; yet academic research has focused primarily on its operational effects. Another, pragmatic, reason is that data is available on the producers of education (schools) and on the users – students. This offers an opportunity to investigate the effects of preparing a school for competition and also the wider question of the impact of marketization of education on both producers (schools) and consumers (students).

Our study originated in a series of interviews conducted as part of a larger project on the consequences of introducing competition into the Swedish education system. In exploratory interviews with key actors in a municipality's education field in 2016, we learned about the establishment of a school in 2005 as a part of the municipality's strategy to counter what was expected to be a competitive threat from private education providers. This particular school, stood out as a strong example (Tight 2022) of the organisational consequences when a competitive identity is constructed in a field where market competition has not been present.

3.3 Empirical Material: Collection and Analysis

Case studies allow for varied data-collection methods and rich material (Langley and Royer 2006; Yin 2003) and ours are elaborated in Table 1.

The initial interviewees were chosen as they were key knowledgeables who could guide us in the selection of our case and general understanding of the field (Patton 2022), but subsequent interviewees were chosen in accordance with a theoretical sampling approach, as emergent themes increasingly guided the process (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Silverman 2005). For instance, as we were told that students played an important role in the school's identity work, and that the school fair was a central event for the school's competitive positioning, we expanded our interviews to cover also these. Beyond guiding the selection of the school as a case, the initial interviews also yielded critical insights into the contextual factors shaping the school's creation and development.

The school's first principal – who, at the time of the interviews, had become a manager at the municipality's education board – became a key informant (Tremblay 2003) throughout our research process. His dual vantage point guided us further in our studies. The interviews with teachers and principals at the school lasted for about an hour, were conducted at the interviewees' workplaces, and were recorded and transcribed. Student interviews lasted about 15–20 min. Four students and one former student were interviewed individually and eight students in pairs. The student interviews were conducted at the school fairs and open-house events, where field notes were taken during and after the events. During the interviews and observations, we learned that the school's principal and student union regularly used social media accounts. We collected this online data as a supplement, since it provided insights into the school's context and into its identity work (cf. Toubiana and Ruebottom 2022). As the school's principal and the student union usually cross-posted the same posts on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, we focused on the Instagram posts.

Our process for analysing the empirical material can be described as abductive, as we iterated between the empirical material and our theoretical interpretations (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007; Gehman et al. 2018). Such a process is context-sensitive, linked to the entirety of the material, and includes following up on hunches and informed guesswork in interpretating the material (Alvesson and Sandberg 2022). The coding was primarily conducted by the first and third authors in a collaborative process based on intersubjective readings of the material. Possible interpretations of the data were then compiled in reports which were discussed in meetings where all research members participated. These meetings were held during the whole research process to discuss and validate possible interpretations of

Table 1: Data sources.

Data type	Source	Year	Use in analysis
Exploratory interviews	1. Manager municipal education board, also First principal university school	2016	Guided the selection of the school as a case, and yielded insights into the contextual factors that shaped the school's creation and development.
	2. Director municipal upper secondary schools	2016	The first interview also provided more detailed descriptions of the school's creation and development.
	3. Director of education administration	2016	
	4. Former municipal director secondary education	2016	
	5. Former municipal manager school remuneration	2016	
Interviews	6. First principal	2018	Provided insights into individuals' experiences of the school's establishment and development within a competitive context, and more specifically into the work involved in creating, sustaining, sharing and/or changing the school's identity.
	7. First principal	2020	
	8. Teacher A	2018	
	9. Teacher B	2018	
	10. Third principal	2018	
	11. Teacher C	2018	
	12. Teacher D	2018	
	13. Fourth principal	2020	
	14. Second principal	2022	
	15. Student A	2019	
	16. Student B	2019	
	17. Student C + student D	2019	
	18. Student E + student F	2019	
	19. Student G + student H	2022	
	20. Student I	2022	
	21. Student J	2022	
	22. Student K + student L (student union)	2022	

Table 1: (continued)

Data type	Source	Year	Use in analysis
	23. Former student	2022	
Observations	School fair	2019, 2022	Provided access to participants and allowed observations of the dynamics of the school's identity work in practice.
	Open-house event	2019, 2022	Provided insights into the context of the school and confirmation of activities described during the interviews.
Documents produced by the school	Policy documents	2007–2020	Provided insights into the context of the school, and confirmation of activities described during the interviews.
	Guidelines/Plans	2020	
	Leaflets/magazine	2004–2020	
	Book	2008	
External documents	Enrolment data	2005–2020	Provided insights into the context of the school, and confirmation of activities described during the interviews.
The Swedish national agency for education	Student survey data	2012, 2016, 2018	
Other	Political protocols, municipality	2003–2008	
	Debate articles in local newspaper	2003–2009	
	News coverage, local	2001–2014	
	Research reports	2007–2015	
Social media	School's website	2006–2020	Provided insights into the context of the school, and illustrations of activities described during the interviews.
	School's facebook	2019–2020	
	Student union's facebook	2010–2020	
	Principal's instagram	2016–2022	
	Student union's instagram	2012–2022	

the data. The second author had been involved in related empirical work in the same municipality, which was helpful for validating impressions such as if the school was seen as an "excellent" school also by other actors in the field such as principals of other schools.

We initially coded our material according to the overarching categories of identity work – create, sustain, share, and change – suggested in earlier work (Kreiner et al. 2015; Kreiner and Murphy 2016). This first pass identified the school's identity vision and the work surrounding it as a particularly significant category for the case. As we examined the material pertaining to the founding of the school – political protocols, interviews with the principal and teachers, research reports, and debate articles in media – an inconsistency emerged between the competitive motivations articulated by participants in the founding period and the empirical conditions of the local field at the time. Working the inconsistency back to the relevant literature led us to Beckert's (2013) account of fictional expectations, which provided the conceptual entry point for what we develop in this paper as the imaginary of competition. We triangulated the interview accounts with enrolment and student-survey data from the Swedish National Authority for Education (cf. Flick 2004) and with the contemporaneous documentary record of school competition in the local field, in order to anchor the account in independent evidence.

For the period following the school's establishment, we coded the material across the three remaining categories of identity work – sustaining, sharing, and changing organisational identity. The coding drew on the full range of source material – interviews with successive principals and with teachers and students from different cohorts, documents produced by the school, its social media posts, and earlier research reports on the school. Cross-source coding allowed us to track how the founding identity claim was reproduced, contested, and revised across the school's first two decades. Statistical data from the Swedish National Authority for Education provided independent corroboration of the patterns visible in the interview accounts, and the convergence across sources gave us confidence that the case revealed an organisational dynamic rather than a localised perception.

4 Findings

4.1 The Imagined Competition at Founding

University School is a public municipal upper-secondary school (grades 10–13) in a Swedish university town. It opened in 2005, the first municipally established upper-secondary school in the town for over four decades. The competition it was built to meet did not arrive for 16 years when the first private entrant, "Private School", came

into University School's programmatic segment in 2021. Between those dates the school's admission averages pulled away from the other municipal schools' and stayed there through the following decade, until a broadening of the school's intake after 2017 began to narrow the gap. What organised University School's establishment was therefore not market competition as a present condition of the field but imagined competition.

This imagined competition was enabled by an imaginary of competition. The 1991 marketization reform of the Swedish school system had, over the course of the following decade, produced a visible influx of privately owned schools in Sweden's larger cities, and these schools were drawing high-performing students away from municipal schools (Björklund 2005). The trend had been registered in the public debate, in the educational research community, and in the political deliberations of municipalities watching the larger cities. In the town we examine, debate articles written by representatives of the political majority in the local press from 2003 framed the establishment of a new municipal upper-secondary school as necessary to facilitate, what was described as, "healthy" competition in the local school market (Debate article, 07/10/2003). Whereas political protocols from 2003 to 2004 record the need for (Political protocol 2003-08-21), and authorization of a new municipal school (Political protocol 2004-0072), the first principal, interviewed for an external research report in 2006, articulated the founding logic in terms that would recur throughout the school's first decade: the new school was to "consolidate the position of municipal upper-secondary schools in relation to independent schools" (Research report 5, p. 10). A 2008 commemorative book produced by the school described the founding ambition in similar terms, where the principal, just like in the interview, was described saying "[the first principal] defends his [University School] and believes that several popular independent schools would have started in [university town] if [University School] had not been proposed" (Book, University School, 2008). Taken together, local newspaper coverage and debates from the period make it apparent that this was a politically charged issue, which was confirmed in contemporary interviews and also in our later interviews. In Table 2, we present a summary of the empirical evidence we have for the justifications used for University School's establishment.

This imaginary of competition directed attention into the decisions related to the establishment of University School. First, it prompted the municipal managers and the first principal to consider who the competitors would be. These actors named, primarily in our interviewees' accounts, were not abstract market entrant but schools of a particular kind – privately owned, free to set their own pedagogical profile, and oriented toward academically high-performing students. These speculations were anchored in observation of events in larger markets. Stockholm and Gothenburg already had such schools by the late 1990s, and the educational debate

Table 2: Empirical evidence of University School's establishment.

Date	Source	Founding-logic claim articulated
07/10/2003	Debate article, local newspaper	Establishment of new municipal upper-secondary school framed by political majority as "proactive investment in the future" to stimulate pedagogical development and growth. Indicates the imaginary of competition.
13/12/2004	Debate article, local newspaper	Municipal directors justify university school by claiming "the school will complement existing schools, among other things, through its collaboration with the university, private business and other sectors. A positive and stimulating competition through diversity will be beneficial to all schools". Confirms the imaginary of competition being crucial to the logic of the school's establishment.
21/08/2003	Political protocol, municipal education board	Initial decision to establish the school, with adjustments made to approve visions, objectives, educational content, and working methods. As several debate articles in the local newspaper made clear, much of the decision-making process was characterized by secrecy.
2004	Political protocol, municipal education board	Authorises premises near university, narrow programme portfolio (natural science as flagship programme), and university collaboration as identity elements.
11/01/2005	Debate article, local newspaper	Political opposition critiques the founding logic as catering to socio-economically advantaged families; confirms the elite-academic positioning was visible and contested at the time. This sentiment was also expressed by teachers from the competing municipal schools in several debate articles.
2006	First principal interview in research report 5	School's purpose articulated as "consolidat[ing] the position of municipal upper-secondary schools in relation to independent schools"
2006	Research report 6	"One of the ideas behind university school was also that the municipality should be able to compete on equal terms with independent schools. The school was intended to be a municipal alternative to independent schools, where work would be carried out more consciously with school development, new approaches, and working methods. In the beginning, there were even ideas that the operation would be run in the form of an independent school."
2007	Our principles, internal policy document	Formalises the academic, science-oriented, university-adjacent identity in writing
2007	Research report 2	"University school was originally intended to be established as a purely science-oriented school, or an "elite school" with a focus on the natural sciences, as one of the interviewed teachers put it. The question of the school's

Table 2: (continued)

Date	Source	Founding-logic claim articulated
		establishment caused a stir both politically and among representatives from other schools, who argued that the demand for science education in uppsala was already met."
2008	Commemorative book	Via student-conducted interviews with the principal, teachers, and other school actors, presents the vision behind the school's establishment: a Pedagogically ambitious school with close university ties which fended off private school competitors. As expressed by the first principal, "[he] defends his [university school] and believes that several popular independent schools would have started in [university town] if [university school] had not been proposed"
2016	Interview 1, First principal	"University school was established in 2005 as a rather controversial project, where there was an agenda – more or less explicitly expressed – by the then ruling majority, the social democrats, to establish a school that could serve as a municipal spearhead in response to the expansion of independent schools, and that would compete in the market."
2018	Interview 9, Teacher B	"I have worked here since the very beginning. […] one of the arguments for starting [university school] was that it would take on competition with the independent schools; that it would create an upper secondary school located close to the university, with a more academic orientation, and in that way take up the competition."

of the period treated their entry as the leading indicator of what would follow elsewhere (Björklund 2005; Vlachos et al. 2012). The municipal education board's expectation was that what had happened in the larger cities would happen in this town, and that the public sector should be ready when it did.

The imaginary of competition suggested, second, what would be scarce and worth competing for. The object of competition was students – but not students in the abstract. The 2004 directive specified that the new school should prepare students for higher education and, within that, should occupy the academic-track segment of the upper-secondary system (Political protocol 2004-0072). This narrows down onto a particular category of students, the academically high-performing children of cultural-capital-rich families, as the population whose enrolment would carry reputational value and to an extent financial value. The imagined private competitors were, in the educational debate of the period, oriented toward exactly this population, and the founding directive was calibrated accordingly.

The imaginary suggested, third, how competition would be won. The means were differentiation: an explicitly academic, university-adjacent, science-oriented profile that few other municipal schools in the town offered. The first principal, recruited from a teaching and management background and given unusual latitude over the design of the school, articulated the vision through a number of guiding commitments that were eventually formalised in a written document, *Our Principles* (2007). Among other things, the document specified that the school would apply "a scientific approach to our work," that "a spirit of wonder and interest in learning" would permeate its activities, and that close working relationships with the town's university would prepare students for further study (Our Principles, University School, 2007). One of the teachers from the founding cohort, recalling the period in an interview a decade later, described the founding logic in terms that match what the contemporaneous documents specify:

> I have worked here since the very beginning. […] I remember very strongly the period when this upper secondary school was about to open. You might remember that it was somewhat of a political battleground? One of the arguments for starting [University School] was that it would take on competition with the independent schools; that it would create an upper secondary school located close to the university, with a more academic orientation, and in that way take up the competition. (Interview 9, Teacher B)

The teacher's account converges with the principal interview from 2006, and our interview with him in 2016. The school was thus assembled around a specification of competition that was, in 2005, prospective rather than a present condition. The imaginary had suggested *who* the competitors would be, *what* would be scarce, and *how* the contest would be won and all three were articulated before the contest existed. How this was specified in the local context is what we call imagined

competition. The work set in motion by this imagined competition, and the consequences produced, are the subject of the chapters that follow.

4.2 Constructing a Competitive Actor

The articulation of an identity vision specified what kind of competitor University School was to become and how it would respond to imagined competition. But it did not, on its own, make the school one. The components that competition requires had still to be assembled: an actor with the strategic capacity to compete, the scarce object it would compete for, and the formal requirements under which the contest was sanctioned (Arora-Jonsson et al. 2020), together with an audience whose recognition the school would need (King et al. 2010). The imagined competition supplied only part of this: Its *who* named the adversary, not something the school built, its *what* became the object of competition, and its *how* ran through the whole assembly rather than sitting in any single element. Two years separated the political decision from the school's opening, and most of the assembly was done in that interval. The assembly pulled, throughout, in a single direction. It built the differentiation that the imagined competition had identified as the means of winning – an explicitly academic, university-adjacent, science-oriented profile – into premises, programmes, faculty, and the school's standing with the municipality.

The construction of the school as an actor was, by Swedish municipal standards, unusual. Upper-secondary schools in this municipality had long operated as agents in Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson's (2000) sense – administrative units whose pedagogical direction, staffing, and budget were largely settled by the municipal education board rather than at the school level. The first principal of University School was given unusual latitude as he defined the school's pedagogical structure, formulated the identity vision in his own terms, and, most consequentially, got to handpick the founding cohort of teachers from a municipal school that was being reorganised. The latitude was unusual enough that the teachers themselves registered it. One described the recruitment process as competitive in a way that sat uneasily with the egalitarian conventions of municipal hiring:

> It was a very difficult situation for those who did not make it. I live very close to [the name of a school withheld], and I remember cycling home and found a letter saying that the new working team at University School consisted of – and then a list of names – and a few names were missing. It did not feel good. (Interview 12, Teacher D)

The principal used the latitude deliberately. The teachers he selected had worked together previously and shared a pedagogical approach he wanted to import. Many had won teaching awards and were prepared to take on the additional work that

establishing a new school would require. The selection produced a faculty unusually aligned around a particular project.

The construction of the school's audience – the people whose recognition the identity claim would have to secure – proceeded through choices about premises, programmes, location, and external relations. An early breakthrough came with the opportunity to take over the former premises of a science-based government authority, situated directly across from a major university building (Political protocol 2004-0072). The premises were newly built, light, and unmistakably academic in their associations. The location, in the affluent inner core of the town near the university, signalled what Börjesson et al. (2015) call geographical elitism. Resources were allocated to support extensive computer use in teaching, to provide high-quality catering and administrative services, and to maintain physical surroundings that would register, to visiting parents and prospective students, the school's positioning. Collaborations with the university were set up early and two university professors joined the project group during the planning phase. Researchers were engaged as part-time teachers and students were given the opportunity to write reports under researchers' supervision. This positioned the school for recognition by the audiences whose acceptance the identity claim required – academically oriented parents and their children, the local press that would cover the school's activities, and the university whose proximity gave the school's claims their material support.

The construction of the object of competition – a targeted segment of students – proceeded in parallel. The leadership chose a narrow set of educational programmes designed to attract the category of students in the imagined competition. One programme in the natural sciences, the school's flagship, and two in the social sciences focused on international studies and journalism respectively. Initially, the school leadership only wanted to offer a natural science-program, but due to lab facility restrictions, they had to find complementary programme offerings (Book, University School, 2008). All three were preparatory programmes for higher education. The natural-science programme, in particular, occupies a high-status position in the Swedish upper-secondary system as it draws students whose parents score high on cultural and educational capital (Bertilsson 2014; Broady et al. 2009; Forsberg 2018), and its presence as the flagship signalled, to academically-oriented families, that this was a school designed for them. The decision to offer only a limited number of seats reinforced the signal, since limited supply would keep admission GPAs high and discourage applications from less academically oriented students. Politicians from the majority in local government framed the programme choice as an investment in the municipality's competitiveness (Debate article, 07/10/2003) but critics from the political opposition and from the other municipal schools framed it as the deliberate provision of a privileged option for the town's already-privileged

families (Debate article, 11/01/2005). Both recognised what the programme design was doing – constituting a particular category of students as the object the school would compete for.

The formal requirements of competition – the rules under which competition was formally sanctioned – had been set, at the national level, by the post-1991 school choice framework. The voucher system specified that schools would be funded according to the number of students who chose them, that students and their parents would choose freely among schools, and that municipal and private providers would compete on equivalent terms. These rules, however, were instantiated locally by the municipality. The municipal education board had, in establishing University School, accepted the political costs of opposition from municipal sister schools and from a portion of the local political spectrum. It had granted the school its unusual managerial latitude, and it had allocated the resources to support its non-standard premises and programmes. The fourth actor, in our case, the municipality was an active architect of the contest (cf. Schwarz 2020), and the school was being assembled in active partnership with it.

By the time the school opened in autumn 2005, all four elements of competition were in place. An actor had been constituted with strategic capacity unusual for a municipal school, a scarce and desirable object had been specified through programme design and admission selectivity and, because its programmes overlapped those of the existing municipal schools, the school stood in a competitive relation to them by design, before it had competed with anyone. The school had been built to compete, but its imagined competitors had not arrived.

4.3 Producing Market Competition where None Existed

The competition with private entrants for which University School had been assembled did not arrive for a long period. What instead came about instantly was competition of a kind the founding logic had not specified. The school's establishment, organised around a prospective competition with imagined private entrants, produced market competition with the two municipal schools whose programmatic niche it overlapped.

The reaction at Old School and Nearby School – the two municipal schools with which University School's overlapped closely in its program offering – was visible from the moment the political decision was taken. The 2004 political protocol (2004-0072) records objections from the principal of Nearby School, and representatives from other schools and the political opposition recurringly raise their objections in local media debates in 2004. Local debate articles in the months that followed framed the establishment of University School as a threat to the existing municipal schools

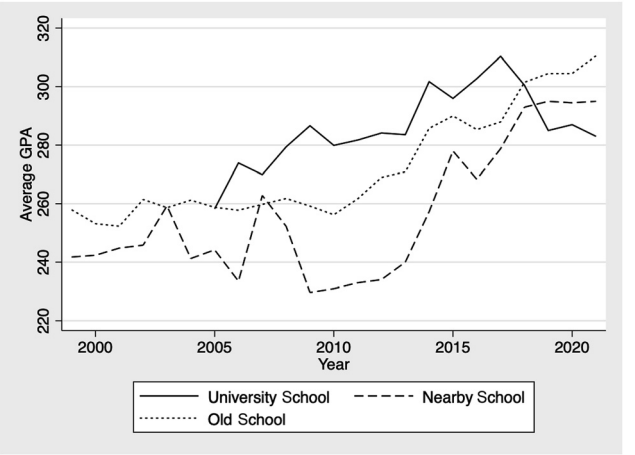

Figure 1: Average GPA for University School, Nearby School and Old School, 2005-2020.

and a misuse of public resources (Debate articles 25/11/2004, 18/12/2004; News coverage 21/09/2004). The hostility was operational as well as discursive. The first principal of University School was, initially, refused entry to the regular meetings of municipal upper-secondary principals. Only after some months was he admitted, and the atmosphere in those meetings, by his account, took longer still to settle. He described what he found there in terms that register the change as new:

> When I joined the group of principals – I started as principal in 2004 – they were very much like independent business operators. Whoever ended up with the short end of the stick had to deal with it, and people concealed things from one another. […] I could see that other schools were being drained of the best teachers and the best students. How am I supposed to deal with that from a moral standpoint? (Interview 1, First principal)

What the quote illustrates is not the appearance of competition where there had been none. As we noted in our framing of the case, municipal schools had long competed for status. The principal's account is of a different competition, with different stakes. Where the prior status competition had occurred between essentially undifferentiated units whose enrolments (on which their status largely depended) were administratively allocated, the post-1991 framework attached budgetary consequence to student choice, and the founding of University School made operative what the framework had until then left abstract. The sister schools were not unfamiliar with reputational rivalry, but they were unfamiliar with reputational rivalry that drained their teachers, redistributed their students and reduced their budgets.

The structural form of the new competition is visible in the divergence of admission GPAs across the three schools (Figure 1). Albeit a new entrant, University School's first intake in 2006 already drew students with a higher average GPA than either Old School or Nearby School, and the gap widened over the following decade. By 2017 the divergence was visible to all participants and registered, in interviews and in the local educational debate, as a fact about the field. The figure also documents the consequence the divergence had for the other two schools. Their average GPAs declined in the years following University School's establishment before recovering later, as both schools did organisational work of their own to position themselves against the new competitor. What Figure 1 shows is therefore not just University School's success but the pattern of mutual response that constitutes a competitive field – a pattern that did not exist in the same form before 2005 (cf. Espeland and Sauder 2007).

This is the sense in which the imagined competition was performative. The expected competition with private entrants did not merely authorise the assembly of an organisation built to compete it also specified a school that, built to that specification, already overlapped the niche of the two municipal schools the day it opened. The contest was latent in the assembly, and operation activated it. The competition was not the one the imagined competition had specified – it was with the municipal schools, not the private entrants – but it was competition nonetheless, with stakes and dynamics the prior status competition had not had.

The asymmetry between the imagined competition, and the competition produced, matters. It is possible to describe what happened as that competition was anticipated in one direction and arrived in another, but this underplays what the case shows. The imagined competition did not arrive on schedule, but its organisational effects did not wait for it. By the time a private entrant, Private School, did appear in University School's segment of the local market in 2021, the competitive field around University School had already been remade by 16 years of operation under the imagined terms. The further consequences of this contest – for the school's students, its teachers, and ultimately its own identity – are what the sections that follow take up.

4.4 Inhabiting the Imagined Competition

An identity vision of a competitive school articulated by management does not stay where management put it. To become operative, it has to be taken up – inhabited, interpreted, enacted – by the people whose work makes the organisation what it is (Hallett 2010). The vision University School's leadership had articulated was

inhabited by teachers, students, and parents in ways that exceeded, refracted, and at points contradicted what the vision had specified.

Management's own identity work proceeded along the lines the literature on identity formation would predict. The first principal and the small leadership team articulated a vision and they produced a written reference document, *Our Principles*, which set out a number of guiding commitments and was used as a basis for hiring, enrolment, and external presentation. Before each open-house event and each appearance at the municipal school fair (both important recruitment events for new students), the leadership convened "pep-talk meetings" – the first principal's term – to discuss what the school was, what it stood for, and how staff and students should articulate it to prospective students and their parents (Interview 6, First principal). The first principal described the work as deliberate and effortful. He and his colleagues had, in his recollection, "fought hard to create a shared sense of us" (Interview 6, First principal), spurred in part by the contested circumstances of the school's founding. This is identity work in the narrow sense: vision articulated, sensegiving applied, sensemaking encouraged, consensual identity gradually consolidated (Corley and Gioia 2004; Gioia et al. 2010).

The teachers' inhabitation of the vision extended it through professional practice (Zilber 2002). Many of the first cohort of teachers had won teaching awards before arriving at University School, and they took the school as a setting in which to do the kind of teaching they considered most ambitious. Overseas field trips for the international social-science programme, sleepover events at the school during Swedish and U.S. elections, the cultivation of a school magazine that doubled as marketing material, the curated programme of guest speakers, including former government ministers and well-known authors and journalists – all of this is identity work in the Gioia sense, but it is identity work animated by the professional commitments of the people doing it. The teachers were extending the management's vision through practices they had professional reasons to value, and the school was simultaneously a project they worked on and a setting in which their professional identities were affirmed.

The students' inhabitation of the vision was more consequential still, because the school's identity work depended on it operationally. The open-house events and school fair appearances that recruited each successive cohort of students were organised around the present students rather than the staff. Current students acted as guides, ran the student-organisation booths, performed music, sold coffee, and were the primary point of contact for prospective students and their parents (Field notes 2019, 2022). The school magazine that circulated as recruitment material was written and produced by students. The social-media accounts that documented the school's life, and through which much of its public presence was sustained, were largely the work of the student union (Student union's Instagram, 2012–2017;

Principal's Instagram, 2018–2022). One student articulated what attendance at the school meant in terms that would have been recognisable to its founders:

> like-minded fellows who prioritize studies and who are constantly encouraged to perform. (Interview 15, Student A).

Similar formulations appear in earlier research on the school: students describing the value of being among "clever people," among others with "the same high level of ambition" (Research report 3, p. 45). National student-survey data from 2012 to 2018 show University School's students reporting significantly higher levels of academic challenge and stimulation than students at other schools in the municipality (Student survey, 2012, 2016, 2018). The vision specified what the school was and the students, teachers and principals inhabiting the school made it true.

Parents inhabited the vision by selecting into it and, having selected, by pushing it further than the vision had specified. Homophily – here in the form of families that choose schools whose existing student bodies resemble their own – has been documented in Swedish school choice as elsewhere (Thelin and Niedomysl 2015), and University School became a focal point for academically-oriented families in university town. Eight of every 10 students came from families with academic traditions and high social and educational capital (Enrolment data, 2011–2017) – against an average of about four out of 10 across all upper secondary schools in this town. The parental inhabitation of the vision did not stop at school choice. One teacher recounted being asked by parents to issue an "A-warning" if their child was at risk of receiving anything less than the highest grade (Interview 9, Teacher B), an inversion of the standard "F-warning" used to alert students at risk of failing a subject, and a marker of how far the competitive sensibility had travelled into the school's surrounding milieu.

What our data reveal, across these different forms of inhabitation, is that the imagined competition did not stay at the organisational level at which it was articulated. The school was established to compete with other schools. Its students, having competed for a place at the school, faced no formal cause for competition among themselves. Swedish grading is goal-based rather than relative, so the highest grade is in principle available to all students in a class, and the official assessment system contains no quota or ranking that would put students into competition with one another. Yet the spirit of competition between schools came to colour the experience of being a student at University School. The first principal, looking back on the school's first decade, registered the consequence:

> We were a very progress-oriented organization, and we thought it was really fun to be really good, really sharp, in all areas. And then the students and parents started demanding more and more, and "good enough" did not really exist. This also showed in the students' events, their organization; it always had to be the most impressive. But it's also these schools – [Old School

> and University School] – that have the highest degree of mental issues and attract the high achievers: both staff and students. (Interview 6, First principal)

A student in the journalism programme, speaking to the local newspaper about his experience of depression at the school, articulated the same dynamic from the other end:

> It was not really the teachers who encouraged the students' fetishisation of grades, but students themselves did this. No one accepted a pass with distinction, not even a pass with special distinction was enough. To feel satisfaction, you needed to ace all tests. (Local news coverage 31/03/2014)

The fetishisation the student describes is not a feature of the founding vision. The founders of University School wanted academically excellent students but they did not specify that those students should be unable to accept any grade short of the highest. The intensity is what happens when imagined competition articulated at one organisational level is inhabited by actors operating at another.

Competition, originating between organisations, migrated into the relationships among those organisations' members and acquired, in the migration, an intensity its originators had not anticipated and at points could not control. This dynamic – institutional abstractions taken up and given local force by interpretively active actors – has been described in adjacent literatures as the inhabitation of institutional myths (Hallett 2010). The same dynamic, our case suggests, is at work when the imagined competition is inhabited by actors below the level at which it was articulated. What imagined competition becomes, in the inhabitation, depends on who inhabits it and to what use they put it.

4.5 Friction and Retreat

An identity claim sustained by an organisation depends, in the long run, on recognition by the audiences whose acceptance the organisation needs (Dutton and Dukerich 1991). The friction University School encountered was structured by the differing relationships its identity claim had to the audiences whose recognition it required. Parents and prospective students recognised the claim readily, and many selected the school precisely because of it. The educational research community, registering the school as an "elite" school, accepted the description while signalling that the description carried mixed valence in the Swedish field (Research report 3 & 5). The teaching profession and the municipal board occupied a different position. Both recognised the school as a school without difficulty – its category recognition was never in question – but both, in different ways and for different reasons, came to

question recognition of the specific identity the school was claiming. The friction this produced reshaped the school's trajectory.

The teaching profession was the first audience from which recognition began to fray. Teachers at University School were, by every indication, proud of the school and of their work in it. The same teachers were, by their own accounts, also uneasy about what the school had become. The school had quickly built a reputation for advanced teaching, and word of the demands placed on students spread through the town. Highly educated parents responded with enthusiasm and the school attracted what one external research report called the local "academic elite" (Research report 5, p. 15) and the resulting student body was homogeneous along socio-economic, academic, ethnic, and geographical lines. The teachers found this difficult to reconcile with the professional commitments they had brought to the school. One articulated the difficulty directly:

> We do have a high GPA for admission, and although it is nice to have these well-behaved youngsters from academic families, it also becomes very skewed; it doesn't reflect reality. (Interview 9, Teacher B)

The unease was not idiosyncratic. Swedish teacher education is built on a strong commitment to equality of educational opportunity (Åstrand 2023), and the professional norms documented among Swedish teachers and principals (Holm and Lundström 2011; Lundström and Parding 2011) treat the differentiation of schools by social composition as something to be resisted. The teachers at University School found themselves doing professional work in an organisation whose identity claim ran against the professional norms their training had instilled. The school's success made the friction more visible, not less. The more clearly University School registered as an elite school in the local field, the more sharply the teachers felt the discrepancy between what their organisation claimed to be and what their profession had taught them to value.

The municipal board was the second audience to problematise the school identity and position. The board had been the founding partner of the competitive identity. It had granted the unusual managerial latitude, allocated the resources, and absorbed the political costs that the school's establishment required. By the early 2010s, the board had begun to register the socio-economic homogeneity of University School's student body as a problem rather than a success. A programme to introduce migrants to the Swedish language (IMS) was introduced on a small scale at the school in 2013. A programme for students who lacked a complete set of grades from compulsory school (IMA) was launched in 2020. Both programmes broadened the student population at the school in ways that diluted the elite identity that had organised its first decade. The appointment of a fourth principal in 2020 was the

clearest sign of the shift. She defined her project, in the interviews we conducted with her, as an explicit move away from the elitism that had characterised the school under her predecessors:

> I was not here from the beginning, but from what I hear of the descriptions, we had such incredibly high admission GPA in the beginning, which meant that most of the students had really high grades and when they entered – it [the school] also became somewhat… elitist… It is almost too strong of a word. But I do not think we are that [elitist] at all anymore. (Interview 13, Fourth principal)

She removed the word "best" from the school's Instagram description, and the Instagram account itself, which had previously documented the school's high-profile activities and notable visitors, began to feature daily life at the school: a barbecue evening (Principal's Instagram 05/16/2019), spontaneous student gatherings (Principal's Instagram 10/01/2020), the school's local punk band (Principal's Instagram 14/07/2022). The fourth principal articulated the new orientation directly:

> It used to say "X [the town's] best school" […] I removed the word "best" because you can misunderstand it. I think that we should be a really, really good school for our students, preferably the best school for all students, but it does not mean that you need to be the elite in everything. (Interview 13, Fourth principal)

The retreat is registered structurally as well as discursively. Figure 1 above shows the average admission GPA at University School declining from 2018 onward – a decline that is not fully explained by the introduction of the IMS and IMA programmes (IMS began in 2013, IMA only in 2020) but also reflects the broader effort of the school's leadership to widen the base of applying students. The fourth principal's identity work was the inverse of the first principal's. Where the first had articulated a vision designed to attract a particular category of student, the fourth was articulating a vision designed to broaden the category. Both were doing identity work, and both were doing it in response to what the relevant audiences – parents and students in the first case, teachers and the municipal board in the fourth – were prepared to recognise.

What the friction reveals is a divergence between the school as an organisation and education as the school's task. As an agent in the pre-1991 system, University School's predecessors had no goals separable from those of education itself. The school existed to deliver education as specified by national policy and professional norms. As a competitive organisation, University School acquired goals of its own – attractiveness to a specific category of students, distinction from other schools, the maintenance of competitive position over time. These organisational goals could be pursued in alignment with educational goals only up to a point. Beyond that point, the pursuit of organisational competitiveness undermined the educational mandate

the school was nominally established to fulfil. The systematic grade inflation documented in Swedish schools exposed to competition (Hinnerich and Vlachos 2017; Vlachos 2019) is one form this divergence takes, the homogenisation of student bodies is another (Holmlund et al. 2019) and the stress and disengagement among students at the high-performing end is a third. The chafing one teacher described, in an interview that captured something of the underlying tension, identified the problem as one of fit between what the school was becoming and what education was supposed to be:

> Now we have these [youngsters] who really want to attend University School because it is a "good school" but do not want to join the natural science program. So, they chose this [international studies social science] program even though they are not really interested in it. (Interview 9, Teacher B)

The retreat from an elite identity at University School can be read, in this light, as the resolution of a divergence that had become organisationally unsustainable. The school could not abandon competition altogether; it could not, given the field it now operated in, return to the agent form its predecessors had occupied. What it could do, and what its leadership eventually did, was adjust the version of competitive identity it was claiming to one that could still secure recognition from the audiences whose acceptance it could not do without – the teachers and the board. The imagined competition that had organised the founding had run its course. What replaced it was a more chastened claim, less ambitious in its differentiation and less elitist in its register, but still a claim about what kind of school University School was and what kind of competition it was in.

5 Discussion

University School was assembled in preparation for a market competition that did not yet exist. All the central organisational decisions of its founding – its location, the educational programmes it would offer, its premises, the teachers it hired, the pedagogy it adopted, the audiences it positioned itself to attract – were taken in relation to a vision of competitive identity that had no present contest to be measured against. 16 years separated the founding from the arrival of a private competitor in the school's segment of the local market. By the time that the competitor arrived, the school's first competitive identity had already been adopted, contested, and partly retreated from. What we have shown is that the absence of the realization of the imagined competition was not, for 16 years, an absence of its effects. The imaginary of competition – the cultural and cognitive material from which the school's founders constructed their anticipations of future competitors that congealed into

imagined competition – was sufficient to organise the assembly of an actor-organisation, and the assembly produced consequences of its own.

We draw three threads of the case together here. The first concerns the performativity of the imagined competition at the organisational level. The second concerns the migration of competition across levels once the imagined competition has been inhabited. The third concerns the divergence the case reveals between the school as an organisation and education as the school's task – a divergence the marketization literature has registered but, in our reading, has not theorised in the form the case allows.[1]

5.1 The Performativity of Imagined Competition

Beckert (2013) and Baumol (1982) locate the performativity of expectations at the level of the market. The corresponding proposition at the level of the organisation is that the credible expectation of having to compete produces competition's effects before any competition arrives – and, here, even though it did not for a long time. The case sharpens that proposition in one way. The competition imagined at University School's founding was with privately owned schools, but the competition it produced was with the two existing municipal schools whose programmatic niche University School had been built to overlap. The performativity of the imagined competition is not, then, a matter of imagined competitors becoming real but a matter of organisational work. The school built in response to imagined competition already overlapped the schools that existed, and operating turned that overlap into a contest. The imagined competition did not predict the contest it produced.

This asymmetry has implications for how the marketization literature should think about its object. Studies of marketization that observe only the actual entrants in a field – the standard design – will miss the effects of imagined competition on the organisations that were already there. In our case, the relevant effects of competition had been visible for over a decade by the time a relevant private entrant could have been observed. The standard design, in other words, would have dismissed all of this as background noise. Bringing it into the foreground shows that the field was remade long before any competition with the anticipated private entrants existed.

1 Our analysis sits within organisational sociology and is concerned with the construction of competitive actorhood and identity, rather than with the educational-sociological tradition that treats selection and distinction as constitutive performances of education itself (Bourdieu 1984; Christensen and Knudsen 2021). The two perspectives are complementary and we read our case as a contribution to the first, with implications that the second tradition is well placed to develop further.

5.2 The Migration of Competition

The competition the school was built to wage did not stay at the level of the school. Inhabited by teachers, students, and parents, it migrated into the relations among them and took on an intensity – grade fetishisation, demands for "A-warnings," stress-related illness – that the founders had not intended and could not always control.

The closest precedent in the organisational literature for the dynamic is Espeland and Sauder's (2007) account of how rankings of law schools migrate into the work of admissions officers, faculty, and students, reshaping practices that the rankings had not directly addressed. Our case extends Espeland and Sauder's observation in two respects. The migration we describe is not driven by an external measurement device but by cultural material internal to the organisation – the imagined competition that the founders deployed and that subsequently became available to teachers, students, and parents to deploy in turn. And what migrates is not a metric but a sensibility – the disposition to compete, to differentiate, to position oneself against others.

This migration is, we suggest, more than a side-effect of the imagined competition's deployment. The cultural material that specifies what competitors are and how the contest will be conducted is legible at the level of the organisation, but legible too at the level of those whose work the organisation depends on. What is legible is, sooner or later, deployed. The vision that specified competition between schools became available to teachers, students, and parents as a vocabulary for relations among themselves, and those relations came to be coloured by it.

5.3 The School as Organisation and Education as Task

The school as an organisation and education as its task can come apart. University School's predecessors, as agents in the pre-1991 system, had no goals separable from education itself. As a competitive organisation, University School acquired goals of its own – attractiveness to a specific category of students, distinction from other schools, the maintenance of a competitive position over time. These organisational goals could be pursued in alignment with educational goals only up to a point. Beyond that point, the pursuit of organisational competitiveness undermined the educational mandate the school was nominally established to fulfil.

The retreat from the elite identity that the school undertook over its second decade can be read as the resolution of a divergence that had become organisationally unsustainable. The teaching profession's egalitarian commitments and the municipal board's eventual concern with socio-economic homogeneity were both

signs that the audiences whose recognition the school depended upon had registered the divergence and were no longer prepared to support its widening. The school did not abandon competition – it could not, given the field it now operated in – but it adjusted the competitive identity it was claiming to one that the relevant audiences could continue to recognise. The imagined competition that had organised the founding had run its course.

The divergence is not, we suggest, particular to schools or to education. It is a structural feature of the marketization of services that retain public goods characteristics. A hospital as an organisation has goals – patient throughput, financial position, reputation among referrers, standing in the local field – that can be aligned with healthcare as a task only up to a point. The economists who have studied Swedish school competition have documented one form the divergence takes: systematic grade inflation by teachers in schools exposed to competition (Hinnerich and Vlachos 2017; Vlachos 2019). The homogenisation of student bodies under choice-based systems is another (Forsberg 2018; Fjellman et al. 2018). The stress and disengagement among students at the high-performing end of differentiated systems is a third. These are not failures of marketization to deliver what it promised but predictable results of a tension that marketization introduces into fields whose tasks have public goods characteristics, and that organisations must then manage.

Our case adds a sharper formulation of the tension. Marketization, by requiring organisations to constitute themselves as competitive actors, gives them goals that are theirs as organisations, separable from the goals of the task they exist to perform. The two sets of goals can diverge, and the divergence is the price of the organisational form that marketization demands. Whether the price is worth paying – and how the divergence is to be managed when the price is paid – are questions the marketization literature has been better at registering than at answering. The school we have studied managed the divergence, in the end, by retreating from the edge of it. Whether that retreat is a generalisable response, or one specific to a field where egalitarian commitments are unusually deeply institutionalised, is a question further work might take up.

5.4 Limits and Further Work

A single case can only do so much. Our case is of one school in one Swedish town, observed across roughly two decades, and the dynamics we describe were shaped by features specific to that setting – the strength of egalitarian commitments in Swedish education, the role of the municipality as a fourth actor with both authority and

political accountability, the absence of the imagined competitor for 16 years. Each of these features is consequential for the case, and the generalisations we have offered are correspondingly cautious. The performativity of the imaginary, the migration of competition across levels, the divergence between organisation and task – these are propositions our case supports, not claims it settles.

Further work could test the propositions in three directions. The first is comparative across cases of public-sector marketization where the imaginary of competition was salient at the founding. Health care, elderly care, and the introduction of competition into postal or rail services are candidate sites where the dynamics we describe might be visible. The second is closer attention to fields where the imagined competition does arrive on schedule, to test whether the organisational effects of the imaginary persist once the anticipated contest begins. The third is into the conditions under which the migration of competition across levels is more or less intense. Our case suggests that migration is constitutive of how competitive identities become operative, it does not show how the intensity of migration varies with the institutional context in which it occurs. All three directions would extend the lines of inquiry our case has begun.

6 Conclusions

Studies of public-sector marketization have largely assumed that competition is in place once policy permits it, and have asked what follows once organisations compete. This paper has examined what comes before. The establishment of University School shows that the work of preparing for competition can reorganise an organisation from the ground up – its location, programmes, premises, staffing, and the identity it claims – in advance of any actual contest, and even where the anticipated contest never arrives.

We have made three claims about this preparatory work. The imaginary of competition – the cultural material in the field from which actors construct their anticipations of future competitors – can organise the founding of an organisation long before the anticipated competition is present in its local context. In its imagined instantiation, that imaginary can be performative: it can produce competition, not necessarily the competition anticipated but competition nonetheless, among the organisations that were already there. And the competition ultimately produced need not stay at the level at which it was set in motion. Once inhabited by the people whose work the organisation depends upon, it can migrate into the relationships among them and acquire an intensity its originators neither intended nor controlled.

These claims bear on how marketization is understood. Reforms that introduce competition are more intrusive than the literature has supposed, because their effects begin before competition does. They reach the founding decisions of an organisation, the relationships among its members, and – as University School's retreat from its elite identity showed – the relationship between the organisation and the task it exists to perform. A research design that observes only the organisations that actually meet in a market will miss most of this. What marketization sets in motion becomes visible only if the analysis begins earlier than the contest.

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