

Choose us, we are different! Free schools' self-descriptions and -positioning in the Swedish educational system

Jakob Billmayer

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Swedish parents have had the possibility of choosing schools for their children based on publicly funded school vouchers. At the same time, free schools started to develop, competing for the pupils. Even though the free schools are a part of the educational system, obligated to follow the same rules as the public schools, they describe themselves as different, something outside the system yet inside the system. The aim of the paper is to analyse and discuss the different strategies of integration into and differentiation within the educational system. Economic theory on competition and differentiation strategies is used to analyse the content of the three largest free school companies' websites. The free schools mainly integrate into the legal aspects of the educational system and differentiate themselves from other schools by making claims about qualitative superiority. Different free schools position themselves differently relative to the educational system.

Keywords: free schools, market differentiation, marketing, school market, self-descriptions.

Introduction

Since 1992, Swedish parents have had the possibility to choose schools for their children outside their residential area, the so-called *free choice of school*. Each pupil is entitled to a tax-funded school voucher that he/she takes to the school he/she or his/her parents have chosen. At about the same time, it became possible for private actors to establish and operate profit-driven independent schools, here called *free schools*

Jakob Billmayer is a senior lecturer at the Department of Teacher Education, University of Borås, 501 90 Borås. E-mail: jakob.billmayer@hb.se

in respect of the Swedish term *friskolor*, and the fact that the term has been adopted into the English language (e.g., Hatcher 2011). Free schools have gained more and more importance in the Swedish educational system and influenced the public as well as the academic discourse about schooling in Sweden, even though only around 14 percent of Swedish pupils visited a free school in 2013 (Skolverket 2014). Most of them attended a free school that had not more than two school units. Besides the small, local free schools, there are a number of larger free school companies, some of which are owned by even larger companies within the educational sector. The three largest of these companies, in terms of the number of pupils in year 2013, are the focus of the current study: *Kunskapsskolan i Sverige AB* (KiS), *Internationella Engelska Skolan i Sverige AB* (IES) and *Pysslingen Förskolor och Skolor AB* (PiS). According to information from these companies' websites, KiS (Kunskapsskolan 2018) operated 29 school units with 13 000 pupils; the IES (Internationella Engelska Skolan 2018), 38 school units with 24 000 pupils; and the PiS (Pysslingen skolor 2018), 51 school units with approximately 20 000 pupils (the last number according to AcadeMedia 2017).

School markets are in fact a regional phenomenon, because since the beginning of the 1990s, public schools have been the responsibility of the municipalities. As mentioned above, the majority of free schools operate only one or two stand-alone schools, and are as geographically limited as the municipal schools. The large free school companies, by contrast, are nation-wide operating franchises, offering the same education over the whole country, forcing the local school markets to react – and adapt – to their strategy, possibly challenging the original ideas with local, municipal steering of schools.

The current study builds on the assumption that the free schools are – together with municipal schools – players on a market that offer education for pupils. The free schools' education has to be recognised by other parts of the educational system, their grades have to be recognised by other schools, e.g., as entrance to upper secondary schools or higher education, and the state has to recognise them as valid places to fulfil one's compulsory school attendance. In other words, to be a possible choice for the parents and pupils, the free schools have to prove themselves as legal and legitimate parts of the educational system. At the same time, as having to integrate within and be a part of the educational system, the free schools need to stick out from the system. To be able to compete with other players in the market, these schools need to emphasise their uniqueness.

Municipal schools would get their places filled because of compulsory schooling, because children of a certain age have to attend

school; otherwise, they or their parents break the law. Putting one's children into a privately run school can mean a certain risk, because there is a possibility of the school going out of business, declaring its bankruptcy, leaving the children without schooling. This results not only in periods of uncertainty in the families' lives and delay in the children's education, but also, theoretically, forcing them into illegality because of not being able to attend compulsory schooling. The case of the now-defunct, but formerly very successful John Bauer schools proved that this is a real possibility (Holm 2017). In such a case, the municipalities have to step in and provide the education as guaranteed by law.

The first immediate contact that parents and pupils will make with the free schools is in form of self-descriptions, e.g. public advertisements, information material or information events at an actual school. This kind of information can also be assumed to be part of the first contact, that the local school markets have to react to even before an actual school opens in a particular municipality.

Rooted in Niklas Luhmann's systems theory and using concepts about product differentiation, the current study aims to analyse, how the three largest free school companies create and present their "products" in their self-descriptions found on their websites. Keeping the above mentioned basic problematic of the free schools' positioning in relation to the educational system and other municipal or free schools in mind, the current study aims to answer the following question:

How do the three largest free school companies describe themselves as legitimate and worthy parts of the Swedish educational system while also describing themselves as unique? This results in the following empirical questions:

1. What are the three free school companies' points of reference for integration into the educational system?
2. What are these free school companies' points of reference for differentiation, i.e. what or whom do they differentiate themselves from?
3. In which respects do they describe themselves as different to other players in the school market?

The answers to these questions lead up to a conclusive comparison of the three free school companies and thus discuss, whether they position themselves as inside or outside the Swedish educational system.

Studies with similar methodological approaches and research questions, but with a different theoretical basis, were conducted by Joan Forbes and Gaby Weiner (2008) about Scottish private schools,

and by Marianne Dovemark (2017) about different regional upper secondary school markets in Sweden. Otherwise, research has often focused on the free choice of school (Holmlund et al. 2014; e.g., Harling & Dahlstedt 2017) and the marketisation of the educational system, involving both municipal and free schools (Börjesson, 2016; Fredriksson, 2010; Harling & Dahlstedt, 2017; Mellén, 2017; Yttermyr, 2013), but not the free schools in their own right. In these studies, the competition between schools is usually described as *quasi-markets*. The current study, however, plays along with the market logics and market terminology, applying a *defamiliarization strategy* (Alvesson & Kärreman 2011) with the ambition to make a contribution to a widened understanding of the free schools' inner logics and relations to other parts of the educational system. Parents and pupils are therefore referred to as “customers”, and the offered education as “products”, for the time being. This will furthermore contribute to a deepened understanding of what the introduction of free schools at compulsory level has meant to education in Sweden and thus add sound and balanced argument for future discussion.

Methodological approach and theoretical frameworks

To answer the different research questions, two steps of data analysis have been used. The first step is based on an understanding of social systems and methodology inspired by Luhmann's systems theory. This rather inductive analysis aims at answering what points of reference for integration and differentiation can be found in the free schools' self-descriptions, and in what way these differences are claimed to become manifest. In order to contextualise the results into market logics, Luhmann's theory is left aside in a second, more deductive step of analysis. The second step of the analysis is done using a framework based on economic theory on differentiation strategies for gaining a competitive advantage in a given market (Mintzberg et al. 1996; Porter, 1980).

In detail, this means, that the free schools are here treated as social systems, which, according to Luhmann (1997, 2002), are brought into existence by their (autopoietic, i.e. self-creating) operations and not by, for example, physical boundaries. The operations make a difference between the social system and its – in the beginning – undefined environment. The two intertwined operations, which define social systems, are communication and observation. Social systems observe both themselves and their environment, to find out where its own

borders are and what makes them different from their environment. This self-observation is at the same time part of the system's auto-poietic formation. Social systems of a higher complexity, which the free school companies are assumed to be, are able to observe other social systems in their environment. When self-observations are fixated in a medium of distribution, i.e. written text, the self-observations become manifest self-descriptions and thus observable by the social system and its associates themselves, as well as other social or mental systems – e.g. educational scientists. By studying free schools' websites and advertisements, a form of self-description that is freely available to outside observers, conclusions can be drawn both about how they see themselves and how they want to be seen by others. In the case of the free schools' websites, they also give an idea about what the customer can expect from the product that is offered.

The relation between Luhmann's differentiation of systems against their environment is mainly related semantically to differentiation as strategy for market competition, but not exclusively. One strategy for differentiation, which is crucial in the current study, is about creating an *image* of one's product as different from the competitor's – and therefore more desirable. This image can be understood as one possible (self-)description of a social system.

In economic theory, differentiation strategies appear in two prominent works. First, Michael E. Porter (1980) formulated three *generic strategies* for an enterprise to reach competitive advantages against competing businesses: (1) overall cost leadership, i.e. keeping production costs lower than the competitors; (2) focus strategies, i.e. focusing on a certain niche of the market or a certain group of customers; and (3) differentiation strategies, i.e. "creating something that is perceived [...] as being unique" (Porter 1980, p. 37). Differentiation strategies are, according to Porter, recommended in market segments that are not price sensitive, which is true for the voucher-financed Swedish school market. Henry Mintzberg et al. (1996) identified five strategies for differentiation: (1) image, (2) quality, (3) support, (4) design, and (5) price. Image means the outside appearance of product that differentiates it from others. Different images do though not automatically indicate differences under the surface, but can be used to "feign differentiation" (Mintzberg et al. 1996, p. 121).

Differences in *quality* do though require a difference from other, similar products, offering superior characteristics, such as durability, taste or performance. *Support* is something that is offered connected with the product, without actually changing its configuration compared to others. Support usually refers to some kind of additional service, e.g., a free hotline in case the product does not fulfil the

claimed quality. To be different in *design*, a product must “provide unique features” (Mintzberg et al. 1996, p. 121) compared to similar products on the market, and can be related to quality differentiation. *Price* means simply being able to offer the product cheaper than the competitors, without any other real or feigned ways of differentiation. Cost and price-leadership play a minor role for the current study, since the customers are not directly paying for the education, but claims about financial responsibility and sustainability are used by the companies in the current study. These claims are treated as related to cost- and price-leadership.

The focus of the current study lies on the image, the self-descriptions, that the free schools offer of their product as the main means of differentiation. These images are created using references to the other strategies by claiming superiority and uniqueness in areas such as price, support, design or quality. For that reason, the four categories have been used systematically to analyse *how* the free schools differentiate themselves from others in their images. In general, it was uncertain from the beginning whether the economic terminology would be suitable to analyse the free schools’ self-description, since education is a product with other characteristics than a TV-set or an all-inclusive holiday trip, for example. As work continued, it showed that all differentiation strategies are represented, even though to a varying extent.

Data selection and method of analysis

The three free school companies, *Kunskapsskolan* (KiS), *Internationella Engelska skolan* (IES) and *Pyslingen* (PiS) were chosen because of their size and spread over the country. Furthermore, they were chosen because they offer compulsory education and are well-established companies within the Swedish school market. The data were gathered through a text-only download of the entire websites; layouts, pictures and graphics were not included in the analysis. The websites were retrieved for analysis on 19 June 2017 and checked for changes on 14 February 2018. No substantial changes could be found then.

The websites vary in complexity and word count. The KiS website consists of only six pages with ca. 2 610 words in total, whereas the IES website contains 22 pages with ca. 9 470 words and the PiS website contains 30 pages with ca. 8 200 words. As the following report of the results reflects, the contents’ density also varies. Even though the PiS website is almost as large as the IES one, much of the

information given in the text is redundant. The section about the PiS in the results is therefore shorter.

The data was treated and analysed using database software to facilitate qualitative data analysis. In a first step, the text from the websites was read, separated into smaller, significant parts and added to the database. The data was then analysed by coding it using the inductive discursive analytical strategies described by Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen (2003), called *systems analysis* and *form analysis*. They both are based on Luhmann's theory and thus align with the theoretical points of departure of the study. Systems analysis basically means asking: "How does a system of communication [i.e. social system] come into being in a distinction between system and environment?" (Andersen 2003, p. 92). Systems analysis is, in other words, about the outside border of the system and its observation of its environment. Form analysis, on the other hand, is about the particular way in which the system becomes observable from the outside and is therefore about the system's self-observed and -described inside, i.e. in what respect the system is different to its environment. As Andersen (2003) states "[...] form analysis is never a goal in itself but rather a strategy for the formulation of further questions" (p. 101), which in this case means analysis of the self-descriptions using economic theory about differentiation strategies. This step is more deductive, meaning that a perspective adequate for the research question is chosen. Since the question is about positioning and competition in an economic market, economic theory is an obvious choice.

In practice, analysing the data meant thoroughly reading the sorted and separated website texts and asking, (1) how the free schools describe themselves as a part of the educational system, (2) who or what they claim to be not like, i.e. who they delimit themselves from, and in (3) which respect they claim to differ from these others. The results of the last question were then analysed and systematised once more, using the above-mentioned differentiation strategies.

Since the data is public and can be accessed by everybody, they can easily be examined for validity and compared to the current study's interpretation of the data. To facilitate such an examination, the numbers in brackets in the result section refer to the appendix, which is an index of the websites and -pages, to make it clear where the particular result is rooted in the data.

Results

The results of the inductive systems and form analysis are reported school by school. Each section contains: a general introduction about the supposed senders and intended recipients of the websites, followed by, first, which references for integration into the educational system are pointed out in the self-descriptions, second, what references of distinction can be found, and third, in what respects each free school claims to be different. The areas for differentiation that derived from the analysis are – in the order of the text – the pedagogy, the people involved (parents, pupils, teachers, principals) and the company itself. Each section is concluded by further, related findings that appeared during data analysis, that are more unique to the respective free school's self-description.

The results of the second, deductive step of analysis regarding differentiation strategies are reported in a fourth section that to a certain extent summarises and discusses the results already. Since both the KiS and PiS websites are in Swedish, the results are mainly reported as summarized, not quoted data. Where “quotes” are used, they are the author's translations, except for the IES website, which is in English from the beginning.

Kunskapsskolan i Sverige AB (KiS)

The KiS website mainly aims at potential customers; at the same time, some pages are information for current parents and pupils. The website generally addresses a *you*, by which future pupils are meant. The parents are not addressed directly but through the child and the focus lies on the pupil as a single individual. The *you* goes with a *we*, which refers to both a school unit, mainly represented by teachers, but it can also refer to the school as a company.

The KiS integrates itself into the Swedish educational system mainly by referring to its legal and institutional aspects, e.g., the national curriculum is mentioned a couple of times (1, 2). As if there could be any doubt, it is emphasised that the KiS follows “[...] the same curriculum as all other schools [...]” (1). In addition, the school taking part in the national assessments in Maths, Swedish, and English at the end of years 3, 6 and 9 (*nationella prov*) is pointed out as if it is something exceptional, even though the tests are legally mandatory anyway (6).

The pathway to upper secondary school is a further reference of integration (6), meaning that the KiS not only follows the law but also is acknowledged as sufficient preparation for the pupils' further

educational careers. The KiS states that their schools prepare their pupils well for the transmission to other, higher school forms and are, therefore, possible as schools of choice according to the Swedish free choice of school policy. At the same time, as “other schools” are used as reference points for differentiation, the KiS also uses them as reference of integration (1). The KiS is described as *one* possible school amongst others. The Swedish free choice of school policy is thus used as another part of integrating the KiS into the (legal) Swedish educational system (38). The only reference point of the KiS that is not related to legal/institutional aspects of the educational system are references to educational research (6, 7).

It has already been mentioned above, but for reasons of completeness, the KiS delimits itself from “other schools” both in general (1, 5, 6) and specifically “municipal” (5) schools, which are referred to as “traditional schools” (1), emphasizing the KiS’ modernity.

The KiS mainly describes its pedagogy as different from other players in the market. The KiS’s stated pedagogy is quite specifically making a statement against fact-based teaching (1, 5) and promises improvement as well as continuity (6). The KiS describe their grading as different and claim it is “correct and fair” (6). Furthermore, they describe their lessons to be exceptional because they are varying, modern, ordered, and disciplined (5, 6, 7). The above-mentioned educational research is here used as an argument for the KiS to be modern and up-to-date in its pedagogy. Especially the specific descriptions of how the pupils are organised in so-called “base groups” (2, 3), are a statement against traditional teaching in classes. The pupils only meet in a form of classes in the morning, and they are differentiated in other groups throughout the day.

The KiS describes the parents, who have chosen or will choose the KiS to be happy and satisfied (6). Similar to that, the KiS pupils are described as happy and satisfied as well as proud of their school (6); at the same time the pupils are called the school’s “evaluators” (6). Their teachers are described as skilled, committed, responsible, present, knowledgeable, thorough, as well as happy and satisfied, with time at their hands for pupils and work (5, 6, 7, 8). The schools’ principals are described as being able to focus on “[...] rising the pedagogical quality and keeping close contact with pupils and parents” (6) rather than spending time on administration works.

The company as an economic organisation is described as having good and sustainable finances (6). Being part of a large company with a “[...] centralised pedagogical development department [...]” (5) and the fact that the school is a family-owned business (8) are also pointed out as beneficial differences. Emphasis of benefits of a school being

a large company is the school's implicit differentiation from free schools with only one or a couple of school units. This is a reference of differentiation that is not clear, but relevant to have in mind.

Internationella Engelska skolan (IES)

The IES website is aimed at both future and current customers; in this case, more directly aimed at parents rather than at pupils. Furthermore, the IES website contains pages for recruiting teachers both in Sweden and internationally.

The IES also refers to legal and institutional aspects of the educational system as references of integration. They point out that they “[...] follow the Swedish curriculum” (9) and mention the Swedish School Law, several times. Different paragraphs of the law are quoted as well as the exclusive exception that the IES has been granted by law to be able to employ foreign teachers (13, 14, 15, 16). An ambition of involvement in policy work is indicated by stating: “Laws and regulations are to be followed, even if we may be working to change some of them for the better” (16). Other institutional aspects that are mentioned integrative are the Swedish School Inspectorate (*Skolinspektionen*) (13, 15, 19, 22) and the Teacher Certificate (*lärarlegitimation*), which the IES demands their Swedish teaching staff to have (15, 25).

The major points of reference for integration though are “other” and, especially, Anglo-Saxon countries as well as cultures. They are described as both the origin of the school staff, teaching materials, and some pupils, as well as the school culture. This culture is described using different metaphors and commonplace terms such as “tough love” (9, 10, 11) and “work hard, play hard” (13). Other more scattered points of reference for integration can also be found in the IES self-description. These are “adult life” (11), for which they claim to prepare their pupils, the *Free School's National Association* (16), which they are a part of, and the local municipalities where the schools lie (15, 16).

The IES clearly delimits itself only in general terms from “other schools” (10, 15), which can include both free and municipal schools.

The descriptions of the IES education and pedagogy are rather vague and held in broad terms, claiming a difference because of a general “high quality” (10, 11, 12) based on “strong values” (16). What the education and pedagogy actually look like is not made clear.

The people involved with the IES are described as different from others in respect of qualities. Their current or prospective parents as responsible (10) and involved in their children's schooling (12, 15).

They are held informed by the school (10, 13) and “[...] support from parents is to be encouraged” (12). The pupils are described as the schools’ centre of attention (13) and are meant “to become productive and responsible citizens” (11). The IES pupils are described as orderly, punctual, tidy, polite, successful, fantastic learners who are prepared for the future (9, 10, 12, 13) and do their homework (15). All this is controlled and assessed by the school (10, 12, 13). Their teachers are described as skilled, committed and responsible (10, 16). The IES has “teachers who teach” (9) and are as orderly as their pupils as well as clear, inspired, determined, successful, professional, qualified, certified, autonomous and best in the world (9, 13, 15, 16, 25). The schools’ principals are described as “visible and present” (9) as well as being a part of the organisation and backed up by staff and management while acting autonomously (13, 16). In case of misconduct though, they are considered to be replaceable (13).

The IES describes itself as a company with good and sustainable finances (13). Being part of a large, centralised company is also pointed out as a beneficial difference (13). This once again is a subtle delimitation to smaller free schools.

The IES declares their schools as “workplaces” (9, 11, 12, 13) as well as safe and secure spaces (9, 10, 11, 12, 13). Pupils and staff must follow a certain dress code (though not a uniform) (12, 15). At several places in the self-description, it is pointed out that the IES is open to pupils from all socio-economic backgrounds (11, 13, 16) – as if this might not be the case.

The IES self-descriptions are exceptional in two respects compared to those of the other schools. First, they use a number of clearly stated guiding distinctions. Making differences between child and adult (12, 16), a pupil and a teacher (12, 25, 26), pupils with special needs and highly gifted pupils (11, 15), teaching and learning (9, 10), discipline and “feel good curriculum” (10), discipline and love (11) as well as Swedish teachers and foreign (English speaking) teachers; favouring the latter, they state the following: “[...] we [the IES] recruit teachers from Canada, USA and the UK. We dare say that their teacher training is superior to the Swedish teacher training” (15).

Making and marking these distinctions is a major difference between the IES and the two other schools. In addition, aspects that are used in an integrative manner at a first glance seem to hide ways of differentiation. The school integrates with Anglo-Saxon and other countries/cultures. This culture is represented by certain values, that originate from and are guaranteed by the school’s founder (9, 11, 24). This integration, however, points outside Swedish society, to something different from the Swedish culture. Based on the fact that

the Swedish School Law is apparently described as being necessary to improve, in other words flawed in its current state, this integration with the Swedish educational system is therefore an implicit reference of differentiation.

Pysslingen skolor i Sverige (PiS)

The PiS website addresses future customers. They are addressed as *you*, and the website is aimed mainly at the pupils/children and not their parents. It is the responsible, deliberate young person that the PiS website is aimed at. The *you* is met by a *we*, which mainly seems to refer to the teachers or educators of the PiS.

The PiS also refers to legal and institutional aspects for integrating itself into the Swedish educational system. The national curriculum is referred to several times, with a focus on the included aims and outcomes (31, 37, 38, 39, 41). Preparing pupils for upper secondary school (38) and being a possible “school of choice” (33) are other features mentioned as integrative. Furthermore, the PiS refers to the Swedish National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*) as institutional reference points. The PiS also integrates itself with society in broad terms (38).

The PiS delimits itself explicitly both from municipal and other free schools (30, 33).

The PiS describes their pedagogy in great detail, repeatedly referring to different kinds of “guarantees” (31, 33, 34, 35, 36) for success. They further claim their pedagogy to be “[...] well-planned with a thought-through scheme for progression” (31), future-oriented (32, 49), and supports “world-class learning” (32). It is said to be varied, challenging and based on the pupils’ needs (32, 38). Some specific, but not further explained, pedagogy named “whole-day learning” (32) is aimed at achieving higher results.

PiS describes the parents as happy, satisfied (37, 38, 40, 42), responsible and deliberate (32) “customers” (35). The schools’ principals are described as in charge of the school in a managerial manner (37). Similarly, to their parents, the pupils are described as happy and satisfied (37, 38), and their “interests and experiences” (32) are described as being in the school’s focus. The PiS claims their pupils are – or will become – “[...] responsible citizens and individuals, capable of independent choices” (32), with learning outcomes above the national average (38). The pupils – as the parents – are described as “customers” (35).

Even the PiS describes their teachers as skilled, innovative, entitled to benefits, as well part of a team (31, 32, 50). It is emphasised that they do have career possibilities within the school company (51). They describe their company as having good and stable finances, pointing out that they do not see “[...] a contradiction between sustainability and economic profits” (33).

The PiS mentions that their schools are safe and secure spaces (33, 40). It refers to its use of IT (32) and its specially designed and prepared school meals (32). Being part of a larger organisation, not only the actual school company, but also the parent company, AcadeMedia, is held out as a guarantee for educational quality (30). The PiS acknowledges the possibility that individual or organisational problems can occur. Even though they state that they are exceptional at dealing with these kinds of situations, it is still worth mentioning that the PiS self-description actually mentions negative aspects as part of school life (33, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51).

The free schools’ differentiation strategies

When looking at the results through the lens of economic theory about how companies can create competitive advantages (Porter 1980), it is almost exclusively differentiation strategies that become visible in the self-descriptions and not overall cost leadership or focus strategies. The three free school companies do not aim at high profits according to their self-descriptions. The PiS is the only example, where profits are mentioned in the self-description, but only in relation to a claimed financial responsibility and sustainability.

The free school companies are not aiming at a certain niche of the market either in their self-descriptions. This might be different, if the study had included religious free schools, which address customers by religious affiliation. Such schools do exist in Sweden, even though they are currently being critiqued from politicians and the public (Aretun 2007). Research has also shown that free schools rather recruit from the niche market of motivated pupils who are eager to study, than pupils in need of extra support (Ambrose 2016; Trumberg 2011), but this is not communicated in the self-descriptions for obvious reasons.

As a reminder, the five strategies for differentiation according to Mintzberg et al. (1996) are as follows: image, quality, design, support and price. In this study, the free schools’ *images* have been studied, and how the other four differentiation strategies are used to create them. The free schools’ self-descriptions build around claims of differences in terms of *quality* and superiority, that their respective schools have

to offer. As described extensively above, these differences in quality are proclaimed both for the education, the results and the people who are involved in leading, teaching and learning. Even school meals are used as example of a qualitative advantage. Using slightly different expressions they describe their education as high quality, their parents and pupils as happy and satisfied and their teachers as skilled. Only the PiS uses pupil and parent evaluations, commissioned by the school company itself, to give proof to their claims. Pointing out the obvious, as if it was something exceptional that cannot be expected from any other school, is often used as a strategy for claiming qualitative advantages, i.e. the emphasis on the schools obeying the law. Would they tell their customers in case they didn't, one might ask. This is clearly an attempt “[...] to feign differentiation where it does not otherwise exist [...]” (Mintzberg et al. 1996, p. 121). By claiming their superiority and uniqueness especially in terms of quality, the free schools at the same time insinuate, that the others, i.e. municipal and other free schools, are inferior to them, and that, for example, their teachers are unskilled, and their parents and pupils are unhappy.

Descriptions of differences in *design* are more sparsely spread. Maybe, because these claimed differences would be much easier for customers to compare to the product they eventually get. As an exception, the KiS is rather specific when describing their alternative way of organising the pupils in different groupings, something that they claim being a clear difference in design in their education. The PiS stresses the central role that assessment and measuring play in their pedagogy. The IES on the other hand remains vague, when describing their schools as workplaces and that this goes along with a certain dress code. All three free schools claim advantages with being large companies. This is a differentiation from small free schools, that only contain one or two school units, which are still the majority of free schools in Sweden as mentioned in the introduction.

All three free school companies claim their principals as being visible and involved, which can be classified as type of *support*. This gives the idea that principals in other schools are detached from everyday school-life. Furthermore, the individual schools being a part of a larger company can also be understood as claim of special support, which becomes visible in the PiS guarantee for customer success and satisfaction, backed up by the parent company.

Obvious claims about *cost-leadership* or *price* cannot be found in the self-descriptions. One reason for that might be that claiming to be cheap or greedy – in any way – is not a good sales argument when it comes to children's development and welfare. Since the schools are paid indirectly through tax-financed vouchers, smaller tuition

fees are not good selling points either, as they are for example in Scotland (Forbes & Weiner 2008). Though all three free schools claim their finances are healthy and sustainable, an attempt to reassure the customers that their tax-money is treated responsibly and that they are not threatened by bankruptcy as happened in the case of the John Bauer schools (Holm 2017).

Whether the nation-wide operating free school companies do counterfeit the original ideas of locally steered municipal schools or not, that was brought up in the introduction, cannot be answered based on these results and due to the limitations of the studied data. It is worth pointing out that there is no extensive reference to the locality of the actual schools in the self-descriptions either. The free schools' websites describe their schools in a remote way, quite distanced from the actual life in actual schools and classrooms.

Discussion and conclusion

It has been pointed out in the results that the free school companies mainly integrate into the Swedish educational system by referring to its legal aspects. These are represented by the school law, the curriculum and national agencies (*Skolverket* and *Skolinspektionen*). This confirms the assumptions, mentioned in the beginning of this paper, that to be a possible choice, customers, i.e. parents and pupils, have to be sure that the free schools fulfil their obligations within the compulsory educational system. By showing their awareness of their legal obligations in their self-descriptions, the free schools aim to give this reassurance to their (future) customers. In this respect, all three free school companies are alike, but they do differ in other respects.

The KiS and the PiS point out they are part of the educational system's organisation, preparing pupils for further studies in higher school forms. They also seem to show their integration into the school market by referring to themselves as one possible school of choice and recognise other players as possible choices. The PiS is unique, since it mainly acknowledges other free schools as its competitors and does not explicitly consider municipal schools as competition. In general, the rules and necessities of being players in a market seem to be accepted, which is affirmed by Marianne Dovemark (2017). According to her study, this is also the case for municipal schools, which more and more adapt to the rules of marketing. There is a growing tendency, also among municipal schools, to invest in the creation of school profiles (Yttermyr 2013), which, in the end, are nothing else than different

images or self-descriptions to the outside, shown on websites or school market fairs (cf. Harling & Dahlstedt 2017).

An even stronger integration into market-logics can be observed in the PiS self-descriptions. The way their education is described is reminiscent of the advertising of products like high-end plasma-TV-sets referring to a success and satisfaction guarantee. Hence, they do not clarify, how an unsatisfied customer would be compensated; an education cannot be returned to the store as easy as a TV-set.

Some of the above mentioned aspects for differentiation do not qualify as such when given a closer look. The KiS for example differentiates itself by stressing out their self-proclaimed modern and innovative pedagogy, which according to them is based on grouping the pupils according to their needs. This is, however, not new or alien in the Swedish educational system, where pedagogical differentiation by regrouping pupils has been a well-established method for quite some time (cf. Billmayer 2015).

In contrast to the KiS and PiS, the IES does not integrate itself into the market logics of schooling or as part of the free choice of school. Their claim of being best and open to all children seems to underline that they consider themselves not being *a* possible choice, but the *right* choice. The IES integrates extensively into an Anglo-Saxon culture, which is a distinction from Swedish culture, meaning in fact a distancing from the educational system that provides the school's existence. Despite references to written rules, e.g., the curriculum and school law, the IES refers to points outside the Swedish educational system and culture. Both are described as flawed and in need of changing. The IES does not integrate itself by showing its preparatory role for further education. The difference in quality is based on another culture's superiority proclaimed by the IES. Salvation for the flawed Swedish educational system and society must come from the outside – the Anglo-Saxon world – and is proposed by the IES.

In conclusion, both the KiS and PiS self-descriptions position the two free school companies quite clearly within the Swedish educational system, culture and educational traditions. Whether their claim of their products' superiority has its correspondence in their actual work or not, remains to be seen and is another empirical question. The IES' rooting in other cultures and educational traditions, in order to compensate for proclaimed flaws in the Swedish educational system, appears more of a self-positioning to the side or even outside the Swedish educational system, culture and educational traditions. The IES is one of the fastest growing free school companies. What implication this kind of escapism has politically and why it is attractive to

many Swedish parents and pupils, requires critical investigation and discussion in the future.

References

- AcadeMedia (2017): *Kvalitetsrapport 2016/17*. Retrieved 14 March 2018 from <https://utbildning.academedia.se/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Kvalitetsrapport201617.pdf>.
- Alvesson, Mats & Kärreman, Dan (2011): *Qualitative Research and Theory Development – Mystery as Method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ambrose, Anna (2016): *Att navigera på en skolmarknad - En studie av valfrihetens geografi i tre skolor*. Stockholm: Stockholms universitet.
- Andersen, Niels Åkerstrøm (2003): *Discursive Analytical Strategies - Understanding Foucault, Koselleck, Laclau, Luhmann*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Aretun, Åsa (2007): *Barns "växa vilt" och vuxnas vilja att forma - Formell och informell socialisation i en muslimsk skola*. Linköping: Linköpings universitet.
- Billmeyer, Jakob (2015): *Ska dörren vara öppen? Disciplin i klassrummet i Sverige och Tyskland*. Härnösand: Mittuniversitetet.
- Börjesson, Mattias (2016): *Från likvärdighet till marknad - En studie av offentligt och privat inflytande över skolans styrning i svensk utbildningspolitik 1969-1999*. Örebro: Örebro Studies in Education 52.
- Dovemark, Marianne (2017): Utbildning till salu - konkurrens, differentiering och varumärken. *Utbildning & Demokrati – tidskrift för didaktik och utbildningspolitik* 26(1), 67–86.
- Forbes, Joan & Weiner, Gaby (2008): Under-stated powerhouses - Scottish independent schools, their characteristics and their capitals. *Discourse Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 29(4), 509–25.
- Fredriksson, Anders (2010): *Marknaden och lärarna - Hur organiseringen av skolan påverkar lärares offentliga tjänstemannaskap*. Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet.

- Harling, Martin & Dahlstedt, Magnus (2017): Sälja, välja och svälja - En analys av skolval, marknadsiering och gymnasieimässans logiker. *Utbildning & Demokrati – tidskrift för didaktik och utbildningspolitik* 26(1), 159–76.
- Hatcher, Richard (2011): The conservative-liberal democrat coalition government's "free schools" in England. *Educational Review* 63(4), 485–503.
- Holm, Ann-Sofie (2017): En friskolas uppgång och fall. *Utbildning & Demokrati – tidskrift för didaktik och utbildningspolitik* 26(1), 87–106.
- Holmlund, Helena; Häggblom, Josefin; Lindahl, Erika; Sjögren, Anna; Vikman, Ulrika & Öckert, Björn (2014): *Decentralisering, skolval och fristående skolor: Resultat och likvärdighet i svensk skola*. Uppsala: IFAU.
- Internationella Engelska Skolan (2018): Retrieved 14 February 2018 from <http://www.engelska.se>.
- Kunskapsskolan (2018): Retrieved 14 February 2018 from <http://www.kunskapsskolan.se/>.
- Luhmann, Niklas (1997): *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Luhmann, Niklas (2002): *Einführung in die Systemtheorie*. Heidelberg: Carl Auer.
- Mellén, Johanna (2017): Rörlighet och selektion på en 'öppen' gymnasieimarknad. *Utbildning & Demokrati – tidskrift för didaktik och utbildningspolitik* 26(1), 133–58.
- Mintzberg, Henry; Lampel, Joseph; Quinn, James Brian & Ghoshal, Sumantra (1996): *The Strategy Process: Concepts, Contexts, Cases*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Porter, Michael E. (1980): *Competitive Strategy - Techniques for Analyzing Industries and Competitors*. New York: Free Press.
- Pysslingen skolor (2018): Retrieved 14 February 2018 from <http://www.pysslingen.se/skolor>.
- Skolverket (2014): *Private Actors in Preschools and Schools*. Stockholm: Skolverket.
- Trumberg, Anders (2011): *Den delade skolan - Segregationsprocesser i det svenska skolsystemet*. Örebro: Örebro universitet.
- Yttermyr, Olga (2013): *Varför blev det (bara) en? En studie av en offentlig marknad i förändring*. Linköping: Linköpings universitet.

Appendix

Reference in text	Website <i>Webpage title</i>
	Kunskapsskolan (http://www.kunskapsskolan.se)
1	<i>Pedagogisk modell</i>
2	<i>Vår undervisning</i>
3	<i>Vår handledning</i>
4	<i>Vår miljö</i>
5	<i>Lärare</i>
6	<i>Betyg & kvalitet</i>
7	<i>Internationellt</i>
8	<i>Om företaget: Kunskapsskolan i Sverige</i>
	Internationella Engelska skolan (http://www.engelska.se)
9	<i>About IES Welcome from the CEO</i>
10	<i>Founder's Introduction</i>
11	<i>What We Stand For</i>
12	<i>What We Do</i>
13	<i>The People Who Do It</i>
14	<i>Results</i>
15	<i>Vanliga frågor</i>
16	<i>Ethical guidelines for Internationella Engelska Skolan</i>
17	<i>IES Ombudsman</i>
18	<i>Board of Directors</i>
19	<i>Management</i>
20	<i>Advisory Board</i>
21	<i>About SchoolSoft</i>
22	<i>Join the Queue</i>
23	<i>School Profile</i>
24	<i>Food</i>
25	<i>Are You An IES Teacher?</i>

26	<i>What We Offer</i>
27	<i>Living in Sweden</i>
28	<i>Making the Move</i>
29	<i>Current Vacancies</i>
	Pysslingen skolor (http://www.pysslingen.se)
30	<i>Om Pysslingen Skolor</i>
31	<i>Strategi för bättre lärande i matematik</i>
32	<i>Strategier</i>
33	<i>Att välja skolor</i>
34	<i>Vår skolmat</i>
35	<i>AcadeMedia-modellen</i>
36	<i>Hantering av personuppgifter</i>
37	<i>Läsa-skriva-räkna-garanti</i>
38	<i>Läsgarantin</i>
39	<i>Skrivgarantin</i>
40	<i>Räknagarantin</i>
41	<i>Kvalitetsarbete</i>
42	<i>Våra övergripande mål</i>
43	<i>Våra resultat</i>
44	<i>Förskolan</i>
45	<i>Grundskolan</i>
46	<i>Grundsärskolan</i>
47	<i>Klagomålshantering</i>
48	<i>Medicinsk insats</i>
49	<i>Psykologisk insats</i>
50	<i>Psykosocial insats</i>
51	<i>Specialpedagogisk insats</i>
52	<i>Barn- och elevombudsman</i>
53	<i>Studie- och yrkesvägledning</i>
54	<i>Förmånswebben för alla medarbetare</i>
55	<i>Karriärvägar</i>
56	<i>VFU – verksamhetsförlagd utbildning för studenter</i>
57	<i>Etablering</i>