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# 'If the students don't come, or if they don't finish, we don't get the money.' Principals, immigration, and the organisational logic of school choice in Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

School choice is associated with increased educational inequality and across-school segregation. This article documents the organisational practices and logics affecting school segregation and inequality. Through an institutional ethnographic study of principals' responses to school choice within the context of immigration in Malmö, Sweden, I find that principals work to align their schools with generalised conceptions of a 'good' school – a 'Swedish' school without many immigrants. Principals pursue the image or reality of 'Swedishness' through choices about the presentation of the school, approaches to managing enrolment, selection of programmes of study, and even decisions about where schools are located. Through their administrative work, principals write presumed preferences for Swedishness into the structure of the school system. The results suggest that, when addressing the link between school choice and equality, group preferences of school choosers cannot be considered independently of the organisation of schooling accomplished by principals and other organisational actors.

## KEYWORDS

School segregation; school choice; institutional ethnography; immigration; Sweden

## Introduction

Past research finds that school choice is often associated with increased educational inequality and across-school segregation (Ball 2003; Bifulco, Ladd, and Ross 2009; Lubienski and Weitzel 2010; Miron and Nelson 2002; Orfield and Frankenberg 2013). In studying the impact of school choice on inequality, researchers typically focus on the educational preferences and choices of students and their parents (Bunar 2010b; Kimelberg and Billingham 2013; Lareau and Goyette 2014; Roda and Stuart Wells 2013; Rudolphi 2011; Saporito 2003). This work established that school choosers select schools on the basis of race, ethnicity, and class in addition to rational, objective measures of school quality.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Saporito (2003, 181) took the view that systemic school segregation arises from individual choices so far as to argue 'the link between [school] choice and segregation cannot be explained by school district policies'.

If we are to understand the relationship between school choice and inequality, exclusive emphasis on school choosers is problematic on account its 'abstract liberalism' – an

unquestioned belief in the neutrality of educational organisations and a corresponding attribution of segregation and inequality to the results of the free, personal choices and preferences of individuals (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2006). The aim of this article is to document the organisational practices and logics that affect school segregation and inequality under school choice. Through an institutional ethnographic (Smith 2005) examination of principals' responses to school choice within the context of immigration in Sweden, I find that, as principals work to align their schools with generalised conceptions of what counts as a good school, they write presumed preferences for Swedishness into the structure of the school system. These conclusions suggest that, when addressing the link between school choice and equality, the group preferences of school choosers cannot be considered independently of the organisation of schooling accomplished through the active practices of principals.

### School choice in Sweden and in the literature

It was a warm and bright Spring day when I sat with Matilda, principal of New Method High School. Matilda's office was just inside the school's main entrance and had floor-to-ceiling windows that provided a view of the steady stream of students stepping outside to enjoy the weather, smoke cigarettes, and play soccer in the street. Matilda paid them no mind.

Matilda had worked with New Method Corporation, the parent corporation of the school, for more than a decade, but she was only an interim principal at the high school. New Method Corporation asked her to take the struggling school in hand. Enrollments had declined by 30% over the previous five years. Educational achievement was also on the decline as only about 76% of school's students finished with sufficient credits to attend university. Matilda, a seasoned educator and administrator, described the challenges she faced:

Each year there is the Malmö [High School] exhibition. You put your materials out in a big room, and all the Malmö students [who are starting high school next year] attend. It's a lot of us schools there. How do you express your message in such little time? After the exhibition they have to come here and visit us. But, if they don't get the interest there, at the exhibition, they don't come ... If the students don't come, or if they don't finish, we don't get the money. Then we must close the school.

Matilda's challenges arise within the context of school choice. In the early 1990s, reforms introduced school choice and decentralised administration in Swedish education (Bjorklund et al. 2005; Lindberg 2011; Lindberg and Wilson 2011). These new educational policies made principals singularly responsible for pursuing educational objectives and establishing an effective school economy within a budget based on the number of students and their academic achievement (Lindberg and Wilson 2011). The reforms brought about a dramatic reversal as Sweden moved from having one of the most to having one of the least centralised educational systems of all OECD nations (Taguma et al. 2010).

In the reformed system, Swedish students enjoy many options – traditional public schools offering vocational and college preparatory programmes, 'profiled' public schools following a particular educational approach, and private voucher schools offering both traditional and profiled programmes. As the government pays the tuition of private schools, students are not constrained by their family economy. At the lower educational

levels, students chose freely between schools. Only the neighbourhood school is obligated to take eligible students. At the upper secondary level examined in this study, there are no neighbourhood schools. Students rank their school preferences in a centralised application process. When demand exceeds the space available in a school, students with the best middle school grades take priority in assignment.

In the last half century, Sweden also experienced rapid immigration and a corresponding increase in social, cultural and religious population diversity. In 2015, a full 22.2% of Swedish residents had so-called ‘immigrant background’ because they were born outside of the country or both of their parents were (Statistiska Centralbyrån 2017). Sweden is home to immigrants from many nations. In order of population size, the top countries represented in Sweden’s immigrant population in 2016 were Finland, Syria, Iraq, Poland, former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, Norway, Denmark, Thailand, Eritrea, Afghanistan (Statistiska Centralbyrån 2017).

In the wake of school choice and in the face of rising immigrant settlement in Sweden, segregation and inequality increased as ethnic Swedish and immigrant background students increasingly attended separate schools and experienced diverging educational trajectories (Andersson, Östh, and Malmberg 2010; Böhlmark 2009; Böhlmark and Lindahl 2015; Bunar 2010a; Bygren and Szulkin 2010; Dovemark and Johnansson 2016; Lindbom 2010; Östh, Andersson, and Malmberg 2013; Rudolphi 2011; Rydgren 2004; Taguma et al. 2010). Research has documented the contributions of school choice to educational inequality in Sweden’s increasingly multicultural context. First, school choice reduces segregation across scholastic programmes through a proliferation of schools offering high-demand college-oriented programmes that, as a result of their limited seats prior to reform, were often inaccessible to students with immigrant background who have, on average, lower grades (Andersson, Östh, and Malmberg 2010; Böhlmark and Lindahl 2015; Bunar 2010b; Bygren and Szulkin 2010; Lindbom 2010; Östh, Andersson, and Malmberg 2013). However, school choice also increases segregation between schools. While students’ aspirations influence their choice of academic programme – often leading students with higher grades opt for more prestigious academic programmes populated by other high-achieving students, they also select schools on the basis of location, social and familial networks, and by students’ sense of ‘social belonging’ – that the other students at the school are like them (Barmark and Lund 2016; Bygren and Szulkin 2010; Lund 2008). Furthermore, students in Sweden are encouraged to select schools where they feel comfortable and understood, and this means that students coming from segregated neighbourhoods and elementary schools tend to opt for segregated high schools as well (Dovemark and Johnansson 2016).

But what are the schooling options presented to students? It is crucial to examine the institutional aspects of school choice, in particular the work of principals, who are the organisational actors translating school policy into the schools that students choose between (DeVault and McCoy 2001). As Matilda makes clear in her concerns about recruiting successful students to apply to New Method High School, principals cannot merely be effective administrators, they must also appeal to students. Principals often rely on limited information as they undertake this task. In the United States, Holme, Carkhum, and Rangel (2013) find that principals lacked information about how many students they were ‘losing’ to other schools, and remained in the dark as to the factors driving students’ enrolment decisions. As a result, principals are very concerned with the image of

the school and recognise that a schools' reputation may have very little to do with test scores or other evidence of educational effectiveness (Ambrose 2016; Bunar and Ambrose 2016; Kallstenius 2010). Attempting to manage their image, principals shape incoming cohorts of students. Recruiting students through information sessions, promotional materials, and advertising (Johnsson and Lindgren 2010), principals seek students who will improve the standing of the school, and avoid enrolling students who will harm the schools' reputation or require extra support (Gillborn and Youdell 1999; Jennings 2010; Lunneblad and Dance 2014; West, Hind, and Pennell 2004; Whitty, Power, and Halpin 1998). Principals manage the student body after enrolment by encouraging the transfer and absence of students who put the school's standing at risk (Jennings 2010; Searle 1996).

How do principals' adaptations to the context of school choice shape the structure of schooling? School choice may impact how principals interact with other educational institutions and administrators as they hire teachers, build curricula and programmes of study, and work in concert or conflict with other schools within their district. As I demonstrate below, as they anticipate the interests behind prospective schooling choices, principals' organisational work can serve to align their school with the generalised preferences of school choosers in ways that may prove detrimental for school equality.

## Data and methods

Data for this article were obtained in an ethnographic study of immigration and educational achievement in Malmö, Sweden – a formerly industrial city of 278,000 in Southern Sweden. The research was conducted in Malmö because it is Sweden's most ethnically diverse city, making it possible to observe the impact of immigration and school choice in a setting where neither residential segregation nor small numbers of immigrant students could entirely account for school segregation. Malmö's 2010 population was 41% first or second-generation immigrant (Statistiska Centralbyrån 2013). In the same year, approximately 14,000 high school students attended greater Malmö's 35 public and private schools, and 63% of those students were immigrants or the Swedish-born children of immigrant parents (Malmöstad 2013; Skolverket 2013; Statistiska Centralbyrån 2013).

Malmö high schools are situated within the same institutional landscape. Indeed, they are competing to enrol the same students. However, as this research is oriented toward unpacking the logic of principals' responses to school choice, the schools were selected for the variation in the ways they are positioned within the choice set of Malmö schools. The schools included in the study are listed with their pseudonyms in Table 1. Including both public and private schools, the schools reflected the character of the institutional landscape of schooling in Malmö. This institutional landscape is characterised by a broad spectrum of academic programmes (college-oriented/vocational) and locations (central city/suburban). In Sweden, students request admission in a particular academic programme at a particular high school. As evident in Table 1, there can be significant within-school heterogeneity across academic programmes. The table includes the average middle school score of admitted students in the various programmes offered in each school. This number, the sum of the 16 highest scores students received in middle school courses, is an imperfect measure of the popularity and selectivity of a given

**Table 1** . High schools.

Name	School type	Average Middle School Score (all programmes)	Educational programmes (average middle school score of admitted students by programme)	Class size	Not ethnic Swedish (%)	Parents with higher education (%)
Alfred High	Suburban, Private	184	Construction (184)	45	13	21
Central High	City, Public	221	Natural Sciences (227) Social Sciences(207) Special Programmes in Sports, Education (242) Individual Programmes (NA)	174	49	29
City Academy	City, Public	258	Natural Sciences (286) Social Sciences (241) Introductory Programme for recent immigrants (n/a)	369	35 16 100	77 73 50
Davidson High	Suburban, Public		Automechanics (157) Woodworking(183) Individual Programmes	38 2 42	70 a 93	13 b b
Harbor High and Villa High (single high school split into two campuses over the course of the research project)	City and Suburban, Private		Childcare (139) Construction (200) Security (172) Electrician (168) Driver (139) Business (150) Keymaker (129) Locksmith (129) Horse keeper (158) Eldercare (174)	11 b b 12 12 14 12 b b 15	45 b 41 31 32 25 b b a b	 b 32 28 b 31 b b b b
Langlet High	City, Public		Natural Sciences (227) Social Sciences (184) 'Uniform Professions' e.g. law enforcement (223) Introductory programmes for recent immigrants and other individualised programmes	69 32 94 100	68 65 37 84	54 48 45 28
New Method High	City, Private		Natural Sciences (232) Social Sciences (170)	37 59	59 66	54 43
Nightingale High	Suburban, Public		Childcare (170) Nursing and Healthcare (157) Introductory programmes for recent immigrants and other individualised programmes	46 6 70	69 50 84	23 31 32
Vista High	Suburban, Public		Remedial Programme/ Returning Vocational Education for Previous School Drop outs (n/a)	263	67	15
Zorn Gymnasium	City, Private		Information Technology (174) Business (173)	48 19 45	61 60 21	35 30 29

*(Continued)*

**Table 1** Continued.

Name	School type	Average Middle School Score (all programmes)	Educational programmes (average middle school score of admitted students by programme)	Class size	Not ethnic Swedish (%)	Parents with higher education (%)
			Hotel and Tourism (192)	50	19	38
			Hairstyling (214)	19	28	36
			Media (173)	49	30	28
			Health Sciences and Sports (193)			
Malmö Student Population	Public			3321	46	46
	Private			1825	27	47

Source: Sveriges Skolverkets Internetbaserade Resultat- och Kvalitets Informations System (SiRIS), <http://siris.skolverket.se/>. The average middle school score is based on Education Administration admissions statistics for students who were admitted to the programme in 2010.

Number of students (year 1) and the proportion of immigrant students and highly educated parents (collectively, all grades) based on data from October 2010.

a = Data not available.

b = Data not reported when it is based on fewer than 10 students.

programme in a particular school. The higher the middle school score, the more demand for seats in that school, in that programme.

### *Institutional ethnography*

Over a period of 18 months in 2012 and 2013, I studied the intersection between the immigrant background student population, school choice, principals, and the structure of education within and across the schools.<sup>2</sup> I engaged in multi-sited institutional ethnographic research (Eisenhart 2017; Jeffrey and Troman 2004; Marcus 1995; Smith 2005). Developed by Smith (2005), institutional ethnography observes the everyday work of people in multiple locations. By examining people and sites that are not explicitly interacting, institutional ethnographers uncover what Smith calls ‘ruling relations’ – extra-local forces consisting of interests, ideologies, discourses and socially established practices – that coordinate and co-opt people’s work in order to maintain a particular social order (Griffith and Smith 2005; Smith 2005; DeVault 2006). Correspondingly, this multi-sited institutional ethnographic study takes each school as a distinct case of organisational adaptation to school choice within the Malmö’s institutional landscape (George and Bennett 2005; Yin 2009). Compared to traditional ethnography, multi-sited ethnography attenuates the ability to develop general findings about individual principals and their subjective experiences in a particular context in favour of using principals’ interests and actions as a window to the institutional processes and logics of a broader system – in this case the characteristics of school choice as an engine for equality or for inequality in Malmö (DeVault and McCoy 2001; Marcus 1995).

Data was collected through fieldwork, the accumulation of textual and documentary evidence, and interview – all typical modes of data collection in institutional ethnography (DeVault and McCoy 2001). I engaged in at least one day of observation at each school. I focused my observations on public settings of the schools such as cafeterias, courtyards, hallways and noted the details of interactions between teachers and students, between administrators and teachers, and between students. I observed the physical structure of

the schools, for example, the placement of administrative offices in relationship to student spaces, and how clean and well-maintained the building and grounds were. I recorded all observations in detailed fieldnotes. I gathered textual and documentary evidence consisting primarily of the schools' print and online promotional materials, and media reports on the schools. I also conducted 13 semi-structured, 60–90-minute interviews with the principals and assistant principals of the schools. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Although some argue that interview data are not ethnographic data (see Hammersley 2009), along with Jacobsen (2014) I submit that interviews can provide important data on institutional processes, and shed light on 'representations, classification systems, boundary work, identity, imagined realities and cultural ideals' (Lamont and Swidler 2014, 157).

I conducted a combination of within and cross-case interpretive analysis of the data – taking the data as schematic evidence of the work principals do to manage school choice. Interpretivism emphasises constructing explanations by developing an understanding of the particular 'landscapes of meaning' shaping the motivations of individuals and the institutionally prescribed mechanisms available to individuals who act on those motivations (Reed 2011; Voyer 2017). First, I developed an in-depth understanding of the unique features of each school's encounter with school choice. I then examined the impact of the encounter with school choice on principals' concerns and actions. Working between fieldnotes, collected documentation, and interview transcripts, I tagged instances in which school choice arose either directly (for example, when the school was offering an information session for people engaged in the school choice process) or indirectly (e.g. when a school was closing as a result of low enrolment). I created thematic codes that accounted for tags on school choice and brought that information together in a general picture of ways in which school choice shapes principals' interpretations and actions. I incorporated other examples of ways in which school choice exercises an impact on the structure of education through its tie to institutional motivations and mechanisms that extend beyond the boundaries of a single school. In sharing the results of this analysis, I include selected supporting examples. When quotations of speech in English are offered below, they are presented as originally given. When a quotation has been translated from Swedish, this is noted in block parentheses. In some cases, the observed speech included both English and Swedish words. In such instances, I retained Swedish words. When I eliminated some of what was said in the interests of parsimony, periods are included where the omitted speech would be. When necessary, I add clarifying or contextual information in block parentheses.

### ***Outsider standpoint and insider categories***

As required by institutional ethnography, both the cultural context of the research setting and my own cultural background must be examined (Griffith and Smith 2005). My position as a white American female with accented Swedish had a significant impact on the research – from data collection through analysis. My particular outsider status carried both advantages and disadvantages in the Swedish context – a context in which a very particular set of concepts and categories around immigration and diversity were employed.

The language gap shaped data collection. My imperfect understanding of Swedish impaired my ability to interpret field observations. Most interviews were conducted in

English and facilitated by an interview protocol in both Swedish and English. People in Sweden often speak English well, but the language gap still affected mutual understanding. When the principal was not comfortable speaking English, a fluent Swedish speaker attended to assist in conducting the interview. Two interviews were conducted in this manner. When possible, I attempted to capitalise on the ability to speak in English about ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity – a subject that is often difficult to discuss in Swedish (Beach and Lunneblad 2011). My outsider status made it possible to ask questions that might otherwise be considered inappropriate (for more information, see Voyer and Lund n.d.).

My outsider standpoint also shaped the interpretive analysis. While my cultural background led me to view social dynamics through typical American racial and ethnic categories, I quickly learned that different social categories operate in Sweden. I sought to learn the Swedish categories and to see them, like American categories, as constructed and contextual elements of a particular social world. To that end, I worked closely with other researchers conducting related research (see Note 2).

One cannot attend to contextualised meaning without examining the predominant prohibitions, concepts and categories used in the research setting. I provide a brief overview here to assist readers from outside of Sweden (for a more in-depth discussion, see Lund and Voyer n.d. and Voyer and Lund n.d.). First, it is important to note that open discussion and endorsement of racial and ethnic diversity, which was commonly called ‘cultural background’ was considered completely taboo. The accepted vocabulary for discussing ‘cultural background’ included the aforementioned category of ‘immigrant-background’, a sub-classification of ‘Arabic-speaking’ to designate individuals who were from predominantly Muslim countries, and ‘multicultural’ as a more formal and generic term that still carried negative connotations. Another common term, ‘*blatte*’, carries racial and underclass connotations. ‘*Blatte*’ is Swedish slang for immigrant background people who are visibly identifiable through their darker complexion and/or non-white features, speak accented Swedish and/or are associated with tough neighbourhoods, and thuggish behaviour (Beach and Lunneblad 2011). The designation ‘*blatte*’ is a classification incorporating dozens of nationalities, ethnicities, and religions and deemed identifiable by its association with segregated non-ethnic Swedish neighbourhoods, a particular cultural style, and a distinct and regionally inflected variant of Swedish. Instead of being an outward-looking category that references some specific otherness predating immigration, ‘*blatte*’ is an internally referenced category with characteristics defined in negation – in being ‘Swedish’, but not typically or unproblematically ‘Swedish’ (Voyer and Lund n.d.). Finally, the category of ‘Swedish’ refers to those who are Swedish by heritage – the term is the opposite of ‘immigrant background’ For the purposes of this article, I adopt the categories used in the research settings and use the terms without quotation marks.

## Analysis

### *The presumed insignificance of school diversity*

At first glance, it appears that principals do not attend to school diversity as an important or significant factor in the life of the school. On the contrary, most principals asserted the insignificance of students’ cultural backgrounds. When I asked Erik, principal of a school

offering college preparatory programmes and with a majority of immigrant background students, about the significance of cultural background at school, he said,

We don't care about your backgrounds and so on ... We don't talk about it. We don't have it as something that is of common interest ...

Likewise, Lina, principal of a high school attended by at-risk students from immigrant backgrounds, took a similar stance:

One day a few years ago there was a girl who came by ... She said to me, 'Didn't you know that I came from [country in the Middle East]?' 'No' I said 'I did not know, and to be really honest, that's not something that interests me ... If you want, I am happy to talk with you about what to eat for food in [your country] or what culture you have, or how to think about religion and other things. I think that can be exciting, but wherever you were from, I'm more concerned about where you want to go'. [Author's translation]

When I asked Amanda, the principal of a selective and majority Swedish school, about the presence and significance of students' cultural background in her work, she spoke at length about her efforts to insure that the school provided adequate services for students with dyslexia. When I requested that she reflect on the programming or planning she did around the subject of immigrant-background students, she said there was no such programming or planning.

### ***School diversity and school reputation***

In fact, principals do attend to school diversity when it comes to school choice. Under school choice, principals are motivated to tend to the reputation of their school, and they recognise that their reputation will have an uncertain relationship to actual measures of educational quality or effectiveness. What, then, shapes school reputation? This research suggests that school choice in Malmö operates on the presumption of Swedish students' self-segregation and the desirability of a reputation as a Swedish, as opposed to immigrant, school. For example, Johan discussed the academic merit of Langlet's successful natural science programme. As Johan sees it, despite Langlet's academic strengths, Swedish students avoid the school.

When you ask about our school, they will say, '*Blatte* school.' That is not a good reputation but you also hear, 'OK, they are quite [academically] tough.' And you hear 'Oh that is a good school because you can be who you are ...' We see that quite a lot of high achievers from multicultural backgrounds want to come to us. We have difficulty recruiting Swedish students, but high achieving multicultural students apply to us as their first choice.

Meanwhile given an overwhelming majority of immigrant background students, Yvette, the principal at a public vocational high school, has given up on recruiting Swedish students:

We have the reputation of a being an immigrant school ... That's a big problem here. We want the Swedish students, too, because you cannot be multicultural without Swedish students ... If you look at the rumours, the people ... who are Arabic-speaking and coming from an immigrant background, they say, 'Davidson is a good school.' But if you are Swedish and you come from another part of Malmö then you think, 'Oh Davidson, that is a lot of *blattar* [plural, noun form of *blatte*] ...'

In the system of school choice, a less-desirable reputation has potentially catastrophic ramifications. Matilda was not the only principal who worried about student enrolment.

The possibility of school closure haunted many school principals (Lunneblad and Dance 2014). As a result of a declining student population and the proliferation of schools resulting from the introduction of private schools, there were high closure rates among schools that failed to enrol sufficient students, and there was significant intra-municipality restructuring as public schools adjusted to the competition for students (e.g. Åslund and Skans 2010; Jällhage 2013). Indeed, by the end of data collection for this study, three of the schools were closed or had a pending closure, three operated under threat of imminent closure, and one school split into two separate schools.

### ***Image control and quality control***

Given the vital importance of maintaining enrolments, it follows logically that considerations of reputation influence the schools' promotion and recruitment efforts. In strategically shaping the incoming cohorts, principals chose to appeal to Swedish students by making their schools appear more Swedish and less immigrant. For example, at Langlet, Erik is responsible for school publicity, and has given the presentation of school diversity in student recruitment considerable thought:

We don't have student with a typical Middle-Eastern look on our advertising ... [Shows picture of students selected for the school's marketing campaign. The female students depicted are wearing typical clothes and make up. Their long hair is worn straight and loose.] They are all immigrant background. None of them are Swedish, but they still look like everyone else ... We have noticed that if you have a girl with a veil on that puts quite a lot of students off.

Not all principals fear becoming '*blatte*' schools, however. Amanda, City Academy's principal, maintains the school's high standards through selective admissions decision that serve to maintain the school's Swedish majority. Amanda determines her class size based on the middle school scores of potential students.

We are good at filling up because we have a queue of students who want to get in and we pick from that queue. So, the natural sciences are not that easy to fill up ... I have to make strategic decisions. For example, we have a certain amount of natural science students. Should I take in many students to get a good economy, but the grades will be lower? You have to, and I think I am good at this, take in the right amount of students to get the good mixture but to keep the level up ...

While Amanda does not have the power to hand pick her students, each year she balances her admission numbers and the merits of potential students. Although this approach does not overtly take cultural background into account, immigrant background students are more likely to study natural science than Swedish students. In 2010, 20% of students in Sweden but only 7% of students in the fine arts programme were immigrants. Meanwhile, immigrant background students made up 23% of those enrolled in the natural sciences (Skolverket 2014). However, on average immigrant background students have lower middle school scores, often on account of lower grades in Swedish language arts (Barmark and Lund 2016; Bjorklund et al. 2005; and independent analyses of data from Skolverket 2014 and Statistiska Centralbyrån 2013). In limiting the programme that is more popular among immigrant background students while selecting on the basis of middle school scores that are already unequal

by immigrant status, Amanda curtails the enrolment of immigrant background students in elite City Academy.

As we see by considering marketing and class size decisions at Langelet and City Academy, principals employ the resources at their disposal to pursue their enrolment goals, and those enrolment goals are believed to be directly related to a school's reputation as being a *'blatte'* or 'Swedish' school. Because school choice makes school choosers' presumed preferences for Swedish schools salient to principals, those preferences are aligned with school admissions as principals attempt to turn school choice into 'school's choice' (Jennings 2010). Principals use marketing and class size decisions to increase their chances of bringing in Swedish students or maintaining a Swedish student body at the expenses of immigrant background students.

### **Shaping school options**

Up to this point I have discussed each school as an independent organisation within Malmö's institutional landscape. However, principals and other school administrators worked collectively within the city school district and larger educational corporations running multiple private schools. In the public school district, that collective action was motivated in part by the desire to stem the loss of public school revenue arising from students' decisions to attend private schools. In the educational corporations, the motivation was to increase revenues by enrolling a larger share of Malmö's students. Thus, when a school is in a district or a large parent company, it can be involved in a reorganisation involving multiple schools. These district- and organisational-level actors' decisions to open and close schools, and establish new educational programmes and discontinue others may also institutionalise the preference for Swedishness. Malmö's school system was a system in flux as both public and private schools were opening, closing, relocating, and adjusting their academic offerings. Just as it influenced principals' marketing and enrolment decisions, the preference for Swedish students shaped these changes in the school system.

For example, shortly after fieldwork began, the city of Malmö announced that Central High would be closing and that another school, New Central High, would open to carry on the name and legacy of the original school. New Central would have a new building, a new student body, and a specialised fine arts curriculum to replace the standard menu of programmes available at Central. New Central would offer programmes in languages, social sciences and media studies – liberal arts concentrations that were, as previously discussed, more popular among Swedish and less popular among immigrant background students. New Central High would not include many programmes that had been housed at Central. For example, an early childhood education programme that was more popular among women from immigrant backgrounds would be lost.

The decision to close and reboot Central High was a decision made at the district level. One Langlet principal involved in the planning committee – a collection of principals, administrators, and government officials – that developed the plan for the new school discussed Swedish-by-design New Central:

Central High is a multicultural school ... New Central High has the visual and performing arts program, and the arts program gets students from all walks of life. The kinds of students

we have they won't get ... New Central is going to be a more homogenous Swedish type of school ... The types of students that went to the old Central High may be losing out ... Perhaps they will come here now.

In the case of Central High, a desire to be more appealing to Swedish students leads to the development of a school favoured by those students. This administrative reaction to school choice inscribes the preference for Swedishness in the structure of schooling in Malmö.

This was not the only example of school reorganisation oriented toward mitigating the school-choice ramifications of Malmö's immigrant background students. During the study, it was also announced that Nightingale would be closed and its students merged into another school. According to Nightingale's principal, the merger was a 'political decision' taken by the district planning committee:

The school we are going to move to [pause] well, they have a good reputation and it is more Swedish – not so many [pause] not representing Malmö that way ... I think it is good, because then they can meet. It is a better mix. It is located near the train station so it is easier to get more people from outside of Malmö town. We don't know if we will have the same programs ... The natural science program will stay but we also have classes for newly arrived people in Sweden and we also have classes for students who have not succeeded in lower school levels – sometimes they just do not have their Swedish [language arts] credits ... They will have these classes somewhere, but we don't know where.

In this quotation, the principal of Nightingale struggled to discuss a politically sensitive subject – that the desire to bring in more Swedish students influenced the school merger, the placement of the school, and the likely removal of the least integrated immigrant background students to another setting. In the case of the closure of Nightingale High, the school was closed and merged in the interests of establishing a Swedish student body.

Such reorganisation was not limited to the public schools. During my fieldwork, what had been one high school was divided into two different schools – Villa and Harbour High Schools. Villa High was situated in a suburban-style outlying residential area. Harbour High was located in the central city. According to Karin, the principal of Villa High, differences between immigrant background and Swedish students prompted the creation of two schools:

We applied to be two different schools ... At Harbour High ... a higher percentage of those students come from the eastern part of Malmö [immigrant neighbourhoods]. It is a rougher environment. If you get inside here [Villa High], there is not so much noise. It is rather quiet and calm. The situation at the other school is not the same. Some of the other students are very noisy. They are totally nuts. They are not mentally well. Some of them are traumatized. We thought from the beginning that several of them are traumatized by war. But when we asked them if there had been war in their home countries and very, very few said yes. Most of them were born here.

The creation of two schools, one with an urban and immigrant identity and the other with a suburban and Swedish identity, allowed for the creation of two spaces – one school that operated with a 'quiet and calm' environment that could appeal to Swedish students and the other characterised by a chaotic and noisy environment that reflected, in the mind of the principal, the damaged psychological state of its immigrant background students.

We see in the examples of New Central, Nightingale, Villa, and Harbour High Schools that school choice leads to organisational adjustments that allow students' presumed

preference for Swedishness and, as in the case of Villa High's self-segregation, school choosers and administrators' biases to shape the existence, placement, and programmatic offerings of high schools in Malmö. Reforms implicitly and explicitly devalued immigrant background students, whose programme preferences and neighbourhoods were actively shunned in the creation of schools with 'a better mix' of pupils.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Concerned with the reputation and financial health of their schools, the principals in this study managed the diversity of their student body and the way it was presented. They did this in a cultural context in which immigrant background is devalued and Swedishness is desirable. Whether or not they personally held those views, the principals assumed there is a general preference for ethnic Swedish students, and took that preference into account in their marketing and enrolment decisions. Schools with the ability to do so maintained their identity as a more Swedish school. Schools that already had a reputation for having many minority students did the best they could to maintain a viable school in an environment shaped by the risk of closure.

These organisational adaptations to school choice did not merely take place within schools, they also operated across schools. I described school district and corporate decisions to create segregation through their choice of programmes of study. I also observed the way in which the motivation to enrol Swedish students prompted school separation explicitly designed to segregate immigrant and Swedish students and to move schools to neighbourhoods with fewer immigrants while likely eliminating language programmes for the least assimilated immigrant students.

### ***School choice and inequality in Malmö and beyond***

The goal of this research was to uncover organisational practices and logics arising in the context of school choice in Malmö. While the research suggests that institutional actors play a key role in the production of educational segregation and inequality in Malmö, these findings regarding the process by which school choice prompts principals to align their schools with preferences for Swedish cultural background do not conclusively establish a causal relationship between school choice and Sweden's school inequality. The data are derived primarily from research within the schools, so I do not observe the actual process by which school choice results in a system that produces ethnic segregation and inequality. I instead rely upon interpretation and analysis of observations, interviews, and reporting of events. However, the interpretive approach enabled analysis of these observations as schematic evidence of the ruling relations at play – the meaning system motivating organisational adaptations to school choice.

This research was conducted within the specific institutional landscape of schooling in Malmö, Sweden, but some form of school choice is a bulwark of educational policy in many nations. Further research should examine organisational adaptations to school choice in other settings where the symbolic landscape and school choice policies vary. For example, Sweden operates private schools in which tuition is paid in full by the government and school administration is decentralised. We may observe a different process in school choice systems with greater centralisation or with non-voucher private schools that

are financially out of reach for many students. Furthermore, Swedish schools do not require standardised tests for class promotion or college admittance. A student's record is based entirely on their grades. The relationship between a school's popularity and the ethnicity of the student body might be different in settings where the school can establish a reputation based on standardised test scores and a record of college admissions.

Finally, as a result of a Swedish reluctance to discuss issues of inequality by cultural background, and a corresponding lack of policies for the identification of prejudice and discrimination, cultural background operates as both an explicit and an implicit principle of distinction and division. It is possible that in other contexts, allowing cultural preferences and biases to determine school closures and programme offerings might result in significant disapproval and operate as a check on the role that school choice can play in creating segregation and inequality.

Neutral policies can have pernicious results. Under school choice, group preferences have a disproportionate impact on school marketing, within and across-school segregation, the structure of educational institutions, and the availability of academic programmes. In this neo-liberal age characterised by increasing inequality and segregation, the sanctity of individual choice is used to account for and justify unequal outcomes (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2006). Yet, under school choice, the continued attribution of school segregation and inequality to the free choices and preferences of individuals who happen to be guided by group preferences does not take into account the fact that school choice creates an incentive structure for principals to incorporate those group preferences into their work as school administrators. Principals' frontline organisational work compromises the neutrality of schools. As this institutional ethnography of school choice in multicultural Malmö demonstrates, principals are caught in the ruling relations of their context – economic interests that compete with their educational mission, discourses of colourblindness that lead them to deny the significance of cultural background within school, and predominant ideologies that 'immigrant' schools are bad schools and 'Swedish' schools are good ones – that lead them to develop schools aligned with the preference for Swedishness. In other words, their work as principals reifies those ruling relations – inscribing them in the organisation of schooling and creating, to adopt the vocabulary of the American context in which this variety of conclusion is more frequently drawn, racist social structures that, although built on the scaffolding of individual prejudice, can now stand on their own (Bonilla-Silva 2001).

## Notes

1. Educational researchers typically conclude that parents are the school choosers. In the case of high school students in Sweden, parents are assumed to have limited involvement in the school selection process (see Lund 2008).
2. The research was conducted as part of a larger investigation in which 10 researchers pursuing individual research while collaborating and sharing their data (Lund and Lund 2016).

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