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Competitive arenas and schools' logics of action: a European comparison

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This article analyses the impact of competitive arenas on schools' logics of action in six local European contexts (London, Paris, Lille, Charleroi, Budapest and Lisbon). It first examines how competitive processes affect different schools' activities (recruitment, provision of options, promotion, tracking, provision for children with special needs and discipline) and how they are perceived by head teachers, teachers and parents. It then presents four ideal leading orientations (entrepreneurial, monopolistic, tactician and adaptive) developed by schools in response to competition according to their position in the local hierarchy and to their vulnerability to market processes, and it further probes into how these leading orientations are linked to the degree of internal coherence and consensus in schools. The conclusion insists on the importance of taking into account these local processes both to better understand schools as specific organisations and to improve their effectiveness.

Keywords:

Introduction

In the last 20 years, a significant amount of research has been devoted to markets in education. Research in this area has been fostered by the introduction of new quasi-market systems in the UK and the USA in the 1980s and in a growing number of educational systems around the world in the following decades. Quasi-markets in education comprise three main features: parents' free choice of schools, schools' financial and pedagogical autonomy and indirect control by the State through the allocation of *per capita* budgets to schools (Bartlett 1993). They have been politically promoted as the best system to improve the low levels of educational performance attributed to the over-bureaucratisation of schools. The underlying hypothesis is that schools can become more effective if they do not work under bureaucratic constraints oriented towards the satisfaction of professionals and encouraged by the political institutions governing school for purposes of control and legitimation, but instead work through the exercise of individual consumers' right to choose, that is under indirect social control (Chubb and Moe 1990).

This hypothesis is clearly derived from a liberal conception of society, and the reforms it has inspired have been promoted most vigorously by New Right governments (Ball 1992). It is nevertheless important not to see these reforms as political acts disconnected from social changes that have created a receptive audience for the ideas they promote. Their acceptance is linked to the fact that they were introduced in many educational systems after the massive influx of lower-class pupils into secondary schools resulting from the post-war creation of comprehensive educational systems. This situation generated new

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pedagogical and social control problems for teachers, making them more vulnerable to external pressures. It also encouraged backlash reactions among middle-class families who, after using comprehensive schools to compensate for the scarcity of enrolment slots in selective grammar schools, *lycées* or *gymnasiums*, became much less confident in their capacity to provide a good education, after the arrival of massive numbers of working-class and ethnic minority children in these schools. These families in turn started to opt out of them or exert pressure for internal changes (van Zanten 2002).

In addition to taking the interaction between social and policy changes into account, it is important not to limit the study of competition between schools to the educational systems that have introduced new quasi-markets, as has been mostly the case up to now with the largest bulk of the literature on this topic focusing on England, the USA, Australia and New Zealand (Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995; Hardman and Levacic 1997; Clune and Witte 1990; Lauder and Hughes 1999). Competition – that is, interactive relationships between schools linked to their desire to obtain coveted and scarce resources – exists in every system where these resources are not entirely allocated through bureaucratic or authoritarian procedures. This is the case in traditional free choice systems, or systems where parents are allowed to choose their children's schools based on religious or political reasons. In these systems, because of the growing mistrust and higher educational ambitions of middle-class parents, school choices are now guided less by ideological reasons and more by the search for quality which encourages schools to act in ways similar to formal quasi-markets (Karsten 1999). Competition also exists in systems in which there is a combination of bureaucratic rules limiting choice and formal and informal procedures to allow parents some leeway in opting out.

Parental choice is a central factor in the study of competitive relations between schools because pupils represent the most important resource for schools. There are two reasons for this: The first is that even in systems where school budgets are not allocated on a strict *per capita* basis, most other resources (premises, equipment, options, teachers) are allocated according to the number of pupils. This encourages a 'first-order' competition among schools to get enough pupils in order to obtain the other coveted resources. The second is that, as in all service professions, the characteristics of clients strongly modify work content and occupational prestige. This triggers a 'second-order' competition between schools to get the best – usually conceived as the most academically able – students (Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995).

The five countries examined in the REGULEDUC research study[1] were selected, among other reasons, because they are representative of various competitive systems. While Belgium is a traditional free choice system, England and Hungary are examples of newly created quasi-markets, more formalised and coherent in the first case than in the second. On the contrary, France and Portugal are countries that combine the use of school zones, which assign pupils to schools with some formal and informal possibilities for parental choice. In each country, a local context (two in France) was chosen to conduct detailed empirical studies of 'lived markets' (Yair 1996). Four of these contexts are capital cities (London, Paris, Budapest and Lisbon) and the other two (Lille and Charleroi) urban areas as well. Urban contexts were chosen because the diversity of school provision and the social and ethnic mix of the population are factors that encourage competition. Although most contexts shared these two characteristics, there were important differences that increased the interest of the comparative approach. For instance, diversity in provision was very high in the London area because of national and local policies oriented towards diversification and low in the Lisbon area under study, which was the only one

comprising nothing but state schools. All areas were socially mixed, but the ethnic mix was a relevant factor only in London, Paris, Lille and Budapest.

Schools' logics of action

The main focus of the research was on the schools' responses to competitive pressures in each of these contexts. The concept of 'logics of action' is used to refer to schools' leading orientations toward their environment conceived as a 'competition arena' (Glatter, Woods, and Bagley 1997). Like the concept of strategy, this concept supposes that there is an underlying rationality in the choices schools make and that an external observer or researcher has the means to grasp it. However, in contrast to the concept of strategy, it does not suppose that school agents are conscious of the effects of their choices or that they act on the basis of a rational-instrumental calculation of costs, means and benefits. The concept of logics of action presupposes an enlarged concept of rationality, whereas choices can be expressive and axiological, that is led by feelings, values and norms, and not only by interests. Moreover, it is based on a concept of action that takes into account routines, unconscious adaptations and spontaneous reactions to unpredictable situations. It also accepts that logical action can be based on an erroneous appreciation of real contexts and situations and that school *habitus* can last beyond the specific set of conditions that gave rise to them. The underlying model is one in which the main focus is on the relationship between schools and their institutional environments (Yair 1996). Schools are conceived as organisations whose activity is influenced, externally, by norms, policies, directives and recommendations and, internally, by the activity of head teachers, teachers, parents and pupils, but which are also affected by the local configurations they are embedded in (Delvaux and van Zanten 2006).

In order to study these logics of action, the REGULEDUC researchers conducted case studies in 14 schools (two in London, Lille, Budapest and Lisbon, three in Paris and Charleroi) during an 18-month period. These schools were selected on the basis of their reputation, which was strongly linked to their enrolment and their performance, with the purpose of contrasting in each area the choices of schools occupying a favourable position in the local arena of competition (seven schools) or an intermediate position (five schools). We chose fewer schools with very bad reputations (only two in the sample) because, for reasons analysed more fully below, these schools tend to withdraw from competition. In each school, 20 or more interviews were conducted with the head teacher, teachers, other school personnel and parents. This was complemented by observations of various meetings and activities and by the analysis of websites, brochures and various documents. The main orientations of each school were also linked to the social and institutional characteristics of each local context studied through the analysis of local statistics and qualitative data provided by local educational authorities. This article is based on the comparative analysis of these case studies. A more extensive presentation of the results is provided in Delvaux and van Zanten (2006).

How competitive pressures affect different school activities

One of the main results of the research was that, although the notion of logics of action implies some degree of coherence between different school activities, these activities enjoy a relative autonomy from one another as they are governed by different national and local norms and are not affected in the same way by competitive pressures. The notion of coherence has thus to be understood in the sense that some kind of congruity between

domains is built across time through everyday interactions, local narratives and the deliberate action of some agents, more frequently the head teacher (Bidwell 2000). In this analysis, we focus on six activities that were chosen for two main reasons. The first one is that these activities existed in most of the schools in the six local contexts studied in the REGULEDUC research. The second is that they were the activities that seemed most affected by competitive interdependencies and that were used – at least by some schools in each context – to improve their position in the local hierarchy or their attractiveness in the market. We distinguish three activities that are oriented toward the external environment (parents and other schools), making them more visible, and three others that focus on the internal management of pupils and, for that reason, are not always publicised.

Recruitment, provision of options and promotional activities

Because of the centrality of pupils as an organisational resource, recruitment activities are very important in all schools and all local contexts. However, schools are more or less concerned with recruitment according to the role of pupil numbers in the allocation of their budgets, to local demographic factors, and to the social and ethnic composition of the population. Their autonomy in this domain is also more or less important according to local and national rules. In the REGULEDUC research, it appeared that Belgian and Hungarian schools were the most driven to pay attention to pupil enrolment for financial reasons, and to enjoy official or unofficial means to do so, while public (but not private) schools in the London borough, in Paris and in Lille were much more controlled by local regulations. The schools in the Lisbon area were the least concerned by recruitment due to both the bureaucratic modes of control the flux of pupils between schools and to the small proportion of choosers among parents.

Provision of options is strongly related to recruitment. In all contexts, except in Portugal, most schools asked for specific options not because they considered these options to be intrinsically interesting and useful but because they made the school attractive for specific groups of clients. It is in this area too that the influence of the institutional environment of other schools became more apparent. Schools 'scan' what other schools do and try to imitate them or to build specific niches (Bagley, Woods, and Glatter 1996). However, schools' logics of action in this domain were even more controlled by local authorities than pupil enrolment: all the educational systems studied had rules preventing the monopolisation of attractive options by one or several schools. Our research shows that it is in London that schools had the highest level of autonomy to provide for specific options, but it was a constrained autonomy as schools in this area were forced to be innovative in order to get external funds. School autonomy in this domain was also high in Belgium although there were mechanisms for the coordination of school provision within the public and the private sectors (but not between the two). In Budapest and in the two French areas, there was little official autonomy, but in all three contexts, some schools took advantage of the lack of effective control by educational administrations to develop strategies in this area.

Schools' promotional activities are strongly linked to recruitment and to provision as their aim is to attract pupils by putting forward aspects of school provision that correspond to parental wishes or, as in the French system where there is no free choice, that can be used by parents to officially request a school other than the assigned and local one. Our research shows that promotional strategies were logically much more developed in contexts where parents could choose schools and where schools were financed on a per pupil basis, that is in London, Budapest and Charleroi. In France, these strategies were

less frequent because they were discouraged by local administrations, but the most active schools had developed some promotional activities (websites, distribution of brochures, visits to the schools) to make themselves more visible in the marketplace. They also relied on the development of stronger networks with feeder schools that were perceived as being able to provide the 'best' pupils. These strategies were not very frequent in Portugal.

Tracking, provision for children with special needs and discipline

Other school activities are less visible because they relate to the internal organisation of the school. Nevertheless, depending on the strength of competition and on the profiles of the schools, they can be used as resources in local educational markets. This is true of tracking, which is normally used to solve the crucial internal problem of dealing with the academic heterogeneity of pupils but that can also be used as a signal for middle-class parents who want to avoid school mix in countries where there is little official curriculum diversity between and within schools (Ball 2003; van Zanten 2003). Tracking was used extensively in that way by the French and Hungarian schools of our sample. The latter developed options attractive for both middle-class students and classes for pupils with special needs, helping them get more financial resources from the municipality, the State and international agencies. In Portugal, classes were heterogeneous, but there was an internal social differentiation according to the school sessions pupils attended. Middle-class children generally attended the morning session, as this allowed them to participate in extra-curricular activities in the afternoon, while working-class children more frequently attended afternoon sessions.

Provision for pupils with special needs is another area strongly conditioned by internal factors. However, choices in this area can also serve as external signals in competitive local arenas in at least three ways. First, in heterogeneous contexts where middle-class parents cannot easily opt out of local schools, they can reassure the most anxious of them about the quality of education that will be provided to their own children, especially when special classes are set up for these other pupils with specific extra funding, as was the case in many schools in Budapest, or when they are oriented towards specific technical and professional tracks, as in Belgium and Portugal. Nevertheless, some schools, especially the most vulnerable in the marketplace, do not develop specific policies towards children with special needs in order to avoid being stigmatised as difficult schools. This was observed in some French schools.

Although discipline is also a domain strongly influenced by internal factors, such as pupil behaviour and educational professionals' views of what is acceptable and possible, choices in this domain can be used to modify the schools' image and pupil enrolment (Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995; van Zanten 2001). Discipline problems are usually associated with disadvantaged schools. To improve their position in the local arenas of competition, these schools frequently have to show that they are able to limit these problems. This was done by some Belgian and English schools in our sample through the development of new post-bureaucratic forms of control such as 'behavioural contracts' between adults and children (Verhoeven 1999). Schools in Hungary, on the other hand, opted to construe discipline problems as psychological or medical problems to be treated by specialists inside and outside schools. However, 'good discipline' was also an important factor in parental choices between public and private schools placed higher in the local hierarchy, especially in France and England.

How competitive pressures are perceived by different educational agents

Another important issue concerning schools' logics of action is the degree of agreement among the different school agents concerning aims, means and problems. A working consensus can be built through repeated exchanges, shared memories, discussions and negotiations. However, to a certain degree, according to the characteristics of each school and each local and national context, there is bound to be some disagreement, partly because the stakes of competition are higher for different groups, namely head teachers, teachers and parents, whose positions may converge or diverge. We leave out pupils because, despite their central role in the functioning of schools, at the ages we are considering here (11–15), they are rarely considered to be responsible participants in school affairs. Indeed, other actors tend to speak on their behalf.

Head teachers

In all institutional contexts, head teachers tend to be the agents most concerned by the position of the school in the local marketplace as their position at the head puts them at the interface between the school and its local institutional context. However, their implication in the competition with other schools depends on several factors: the degree to which they feel uncomfortable with the position of their school in the local hierarchy and its vulnerability in the local quasi-market, how their own professional position is affected by these dimensions, and their belief in the possibility to improve their position and their capacity to do so (Ball and van Zanten 1998). It is also related to national and local policies. In countries such as England that have introduced important market and management reforms in schools, head teachers are strongly pushed to improve the position and attractiveness of their schools in order to obtain material and symbolic rewards, all while enjoying considerable autonomy to do so. In countries such as Portugal, these pressures are, on the contrary, almost inexistent, which leads head teachers to focus on their internal role.

Teachers

Teachers tend to be much more concerned about the internal functioning of the school than about competitive interdependencies. This is due to several factors. One is the 'egg-crated' structure of schools with teachers working separately from each other, insulated from the immediate control of head teachers and away from the sight of parents. Another factor has to do with the motivations for choosing teaching as a profession, training and work orientation. Young people who choose to become secondary school teachers are generally interested either in a specific subject or in working with adolescents. Their training does not focus on understanding the local dynamics and markets, and the prevailing conception of work is strongly related to interaction with pupils in the classroom. A third reason has to do with the dominant ethic in the teaching profession which focuses on the child and is concerned with progress and caring much more than with competition in local markets (Gilly et al. 1993).

Although there are fewer variations across local and national contexts in teachers' attitudes towards competitive interdependencies than in head teachers' attitudes, some differences can be pointed out. In countries where pupil enrolment depends strongly on market dynamics either because of the official existence of free choice, such as in Belgium, or because of a declining demography combined with a lack of resources and lack of effective control, such as in Hungary, teachers are much more concerned with competitive

interdependencies since they directly affect pupil enrolment. This encourages them to engage with the head teachers in specific actions to attract pupils. When pupils are allocated to schools according to a school map, as in Portugal and France, teachers are less concerned with this kind of 'first-order' competition, although they may still be interested in the school's role in 'second-order' competition, i.e. competition for the best pupils.

Parents

The position of parents as concerns competition and choice was very much influenced by social class in all local and national contexts, except perhaps in Portugal. At one extreme, upper- and middle-class parents appeared very much aware of local hierarchies and local quasi-markets and developed strategies to have access to the best schools. These strategies varied, however, according to the schools' positions in the social and organisational structure and the ethos associated with them and to the characteristics of local contexts (van Zanten 2003; Raveaud and van Zanten 2006). At the other extreme, working-class and immigrant parents appeared, as in other studies, mostly 'loyal' to local public schools (Hirschman 1970). This is either because they do not want to choose when they can, whether for affective (attachment to the local school and community) or for moral and political reasons (defence of the public sector and its values of comprehensiveness and equality for all), or because they do not know how to choose (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1995). This was true in all of the educational systems studied. Nevertheless, these parents were more disadvantaged in systems like the Belgian one, in which free choice encouraged upper- and middle-class parents to opt out, and less in countries such as Portugal, where choice, although not impossible, is not politically encouraged, and where middle-class parents have a much less strategic view of schooling and are not very interested in choice. This is much less true for upper-class parents, who use the private sector extensively.

Ideal types of competitive logics of action

After having explored in some detail the different factors that influence and are part of the competitive logics of action in schools, we will now proceed to summarise this information by constructing ideal types. We believe that setting up ideal types brings added value to qualitative studies such as the ones conducted within the REGULEDUC research programme. From an empirical point of view, they help researchers to show how different, scattered elements are linked to each other and give rise to distinct configurations. From a theoretical perspective, by relating new empirical material to existing models and concepts, they limit the tendency of qualitative studies to remain connected to specific contexts and increase the possibility of generalising interpretations to other local contexts and intellectual domains (Schnapper 1999).

Leading orientations

The examination of the 14 schools studied in REGULEDUC shows that most schools correspond to one of the following four ideal types. These ideal types have been constructed using two main variables: the position of the school in the local hierarchy and the state of the local quasi-market (Table 1). This scheme neglects those situations where there are no clear local hierarchies – all schools being considered more or less the same – and no distinct local quasi-markets, i.e. very low levels of choice and competition. It thus

Table 1.   Leading orientations.

Hierarchical position	Market position	
	Open and unstable	Closed and stable
High to intermediate	Entrepreneurial	Monopolistic
Intermediate to low	Tactician	Adaptive

applies only to hierarchical societies and educational systems, as well as urban, and especially metropolitan, contexts where there is both diverse and accessible school provision. All of the contexts studied correspond to this model, except, to some extent, the Lisbon area.

Entrepreneurial versus monopolistic

Two ideal orientations are frequently observed among schools located at the top or near the top position. When the market is open and there is a possibility to attract better pupils allowing them through a virtuous circle to improve both their results and reputation, schools develop entrepreneurial logics of action. The opening up of local markets may result from changes in the reputation of other schools, from changes in local modes of control of pupil allocation to schools, or from the arrival of new middle-class inhabitants due to gentrification processes (Butler and Robson 2003) as was observed in some areas of Paris, Lille and London. The predominant means of action of entrepreneurial schools is the provision of new options such as international, European or bilingual classes in Paris and Lille, or specialisation in subjects such as reinforced mathematics in Charleroi. In Budapest, schools also offered 'accelerated' classes for the most able pupils. These options were particularly attractive to middle-class parents looking for cultural distinction but were more generally used by parents to reinforce bonding between middle-class pupils and separation from others (van Zanten 2007).

These schools also paid close attention to the selection of pupils and promotional strategies. The results were also significant in that these schools tended to give more attention to the best and average students than to students with special needs. Because the activities of these schools were oriented toward the external environment, head teachers played a central role. However, entrepreneurial activities were only successful if at least some teachers and parents shared the head teachers' orientation and were willing to teach in the new optional classes or send their children to them. Teachers and parents would also need to participate in their promotion in formal and informal ways. It is important to note, however, that we observed some schools that were, in a sense, trapped into entrepreneurship, doing more than was necessary to improve their position and attractiveness. Whether this happened depended mostly on the head teachers' personality, ambitions and projected career. At least one school in each context, except in Portugal, can be put into this category, that is five schools out of 14.

When the market is closed or almost closed and stable, the top schools can continue to enjoy their quasi-monopoly of the best pupils. The two schools we observed (one in Charleroi, one in Paris) which fell into this category were both private and not very innovative. They maintained a high level of pressure for good results and paid little attention to pupils with special needs. They also enforced strict discipline through established rules. Their curriculum remained very classical and was centred on Latin, Greek and mathematics. These schools were very selective but, relying on their reputation

to attract pupils with good results and from the highest social groups, they did not need to develop aggressive promotional strategies. With their provision of a collected code of knowledge, these schools have usually catered to the 'old' middle class but still attract parents from the 'new' upper and middle classes who turn to tradition as a distinctive strategy (Bernstein 1975; Edwards and Whitty 1997).

Tactician versus adaptive

Although schools located in an intermediate position of the local hierarchy have more margin to improve, they have less autonomy to develop strategies than the other schools. This does not mean that all of them remain passive or react in similar ways. Average schools that have undergone or are undergoing a downgrading are the most likely to react, especially when they are embedded in a competitive market. These schools develop various tactics to diversify their student population and improve their reputation. In our case studies, these schools (five out of 14) tried to set up options (such as sports in France or social sciences, expressive arts and infographics in Belgium) that were attractive to some segments of the middle class or to the rising working class but less prestigious than those set up by the schools located at the top. These schools were also those that relied the most on student tracking both as an externally oriented strategy to retain middle-class parents and as an internally oriented strategy to deal with an academically, socially and ethnically heterogeneous population. This was particularly the case in France and in Hungary.

In educational systems where schools can to some extent choose their pupils, such as Belgium and England, students were often selected on a behavioural basis. In other words, these schools did not necessarily choose the best students, but those with a good attitude towards learning and school norms and with supportive parents. They also focused on discipline, not only using exclusions but also contracts and therapeutic measures to reject and isolate 'problematic' students and reduce their impact on the functioning of the school. These tactics worked to some extent when there was an ambitious and dynamic head teacher in the school, if teacher turnover was not very high and if there were active loyal parents who supported the choices of school professionals. In most cases, however, these defensive tactics were not powerful enough to counter the more sophisticated strategies of entrepreneurial schools or the monopoly of the other top schools.

If school professionals think it is vain to act because their reputation is too anchored in the local space, because it is impossible to find a minimal internal consensus on a specific line of action, or especially because the local quasi-market seems impervious to their strategies, their schools tend to turn inwards and to develop different ways of adapting to their pupil enrolment. This logic of action, observed in two schools in our sample, can be decomposed into two sub-types. In the first, schools just try to cope with the existing situation. In these schools, the dominant ethic is 'humanitarian'. School professionals think that working-class and immigrant children can only make limited academic progress and teachers adapt their teaching contents, methods and evaluation to this perception. In fact, many of these schools only focus on socialisation and pastoral care, the main goal being that of maintaining a good climate and preventing disruptive incidents through a cohesive system of etiquette rules, dialogue, contracts and therapeutic procedures (van Zanten 2001). Head teachers and teachers also focus on keeping a good morale and good relationships between adults. However, there are also schools that adapt positively to their pupil enrolment. These schools, which constitute a second sub-type, use all their resources to improve pupils' results.

Coherence and consensus

The choices made by schools corresponding to each of the four previous ideal types presuppose some degree of coherence and of consensus in schools. As pointed out in the previous sections, these two factors are present to varying degrees in each specific school, giving rise to four other ideal types presented in Table 2.

Integrated versus conflicting

In some of the schools observed, there was both a strong coherence in the dynamics of each domain and a strong consensus among the different groups involved. This was particularly the case in the highly reputed, monopolistic schools for various reasons. The first is the correspondence between prevailing norms of excellence and the characteristics of the majority of pupils. These schools combined academic and social selectiveness with a strong ethic, integrating excellence and responsibility. These schools were also very cohesive because of the existence of a homogeneous and stable teacher body and because parents had little voice in school affairs. Two integrated schools of this kind were observed in Paris and in Charleroi and both were Catholic, private schools. In Portugal and in France, there were also examples, however, of integrated schools (two) located at an intermediate level in the local hierarchy. These schools did not have to worry about pupil numbers due to both a stable or rising local demography and to local modes of control, which were based on the principle of even distribution of pupils between schools. Although these schools did not get the best pupils, they did not feel an urge to enter into 'second-order' competition with other schools because they found it less stressful to teach to average students and to deal with lower-middle-class or working-class parents loyal to the schools and respectful of school rules. An integrated logic also characterised a school located at the bottom, which focused on the reduction of school failure. This school was also characterised by a stable teacher body and by a large number of loyal, if somehow apathetic, parents. Both types of schools can qualify, although for different reasons, for the status of 'indolent monopolies' (Hirschman 1970).

Coherence and consensus are more difficult to attain when schools try to improve their reputation and attractiveness. We observed four schools of this type in which there was a strong coherence between the different activities resulting from past efforts to adapt to pupil characteristics and established traditions with a lot of debate on new lines of action. In these conflicting schools, parents' voices frequently played a more important role than in other schools. We observed unstable alliances between head teachers and parents in the most aggressive schools, while in the others, teachers and parents sometimes collaborated to limit the ambition of head teachers. In some cases, head teachers and teachers also united to limit the parents' strategies to improve their positional advantages. In fact, there was considerable tension in these schools linked to a transition from an old, and at least partly meritocratic, orientation to a new market orientation (Brown 2000).

Table 2.   Coherence and consensus.

Degree of coherence	Degree of consensus	
	High consensus	Low consensus
High coherence	Integrated	Conflicting
Low coherence	Polarised	Anomic

Polarised versus anomic

In other schools, there was much less coherence between the different domains. This was particularly the case in schools catering to a heterogeneous population. In this case, the four schools observed in Hungary and France developed a polarised orientation. The activities in the more externally oriented domains, i.e. recruitment, provision of options and promotional activities, were essentially aimed to retain and, if possible, attract middle-class pupils. The more internally oriented activities, i.e. provision for children with special needs and discipline were, on the contrary, oriented toward lower-class immigrant pupils with learning and behavioural problems. Contrarily, tracking, a domain which is frequently both externally and internally oriented, tried to combine attractive options and segregation by academic level to satisfy middle-class pupils and parents, on the one hand, with special classes providing specific programmes and aid for lower-class and immigrant pupils, on the other hand. This polarised logic of action was not only promoted by the head teacher but also by a large fraction of teachers and a small group of middle-class parents to avoid downgrading and segregation. However, there remained an underlying tension in these schools as compared to integrated schools, and any change – change of head teachers, turnover of teachers or departure of some middle-class parents – quickly disrupted a precarious equilibrium.

The most segregated schools do not even enjoy this fragile equilibrium. They usually become anomic in the sense that Durkheim (1930) gave to this term, that is to say they lack any regulating principle. It is easy to understand why this can be so, especially in countries where the influence of norms of excellence issued from elite education is very strong, as is the case in our sample schools in England, France, Belgium and, to a lesser extent – because of the influence of past Communist regimes – Hungary. In these educational contexts, it is particularly difficult for schools catering to less academic pupils to develop a competing educational ideal. Although we only observed one school of this kind, it clearly appeared that, in the absence of norms providing an organisational and axiological frame, these schools are likely to sink into a state of disorganisation and confusion. These processes are accentuated by the low morale of school professionals and their turnover and by the lack of involvement of lower-class and immigrant parents, as well as by the tendency of each group of agents to transform the others into scapegoats: head teachers criticise the lack of involvement of teachers and parents, teachers the lack of leadership from head teachers and the lack of collaboration from parents, while parents point to the turnover and absenteeism of school professionals and so on.

Conclusion

This analysis shows that the daily functioning and the general orientation of schools is strongly influenced not only by national and local regulations and by internal processes but also by local processes as well, especially the competitive interdependencies between schools (Maroy and van Zanten 2007). This adds to our comprehension of school dynamics and provides links between educational research and research on other organisations (Meyer and Rowan 1978). It also provides some keys to improving school effectiveness. School effectiveness theorists have developed models that cannot be easily generalised because they have been conceived without taking into account local processes, including competitive pressures on schools (Thrupp 1999). Our careful analysis of these pressures helps to understand why a great number of 'failing' schools and even a large number of average schools cannot easily improve their outcomes. Competition might be beneficial at the top since it might stir 'indolent monopolies', but this will more frequently

lead to the fabrication of a better image than to real improvement (Hirschman 1970; Ball 1997). It clearly diverts more average and near-the-bottom schools from attending to pupils' needs as they spend more time on developing tactics to change their image and intake than on developing teaching strategies to improve pupils' results and well-being.

Note

1. The REGULEDUC research study was conducted from 2001 to 2004 by eight national teams coordinated by C. Maroy with funding from the fifth research framework of the European Union. The overall results are presented in Maroy (2006).

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