



## Configuring parents as citizens and consumers: local variations in informational material about school allocation and choice in Sweden

Hanna Sjögren & Baki Cakici

To cite this article: Hanna Sjögren & Baki Cakici (06 Feb 2025): Configuring parents as citizens and consumers: local variations in informational material about school allocation and choice in Sweden, Education Inquiry, DOI: [10.1080/20004508.2025.2463206](https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2025.2463206)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2025.2463206>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 06 Feb 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 42



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Configuring parents as citizens and consumers: local variations in informational material about school allocation and choice in Sweden

Hanna Sjögren <sup>a</sup> and Baki Cakici <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Childhood, Education, Society, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden; <sup>b</sup>Business IT, IT University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we shed light on the mundane performance of market-logics in public educational settings by focusing on municipality websites in Skåne County, Sweden, that inform parents about local school choice policies and procedures. We build on existing knowledge about the importance of websites in school choice systems. The aim of the paper is to 1) identify different ways in which Swedish municipalities configure parents in local school choice settings and 2) relate these configurations of parents to different ideas about the purpose of education. We draw on theoretical insights from Science and Technology Studies (STS) on how technical systems shape their own (future) users as well as the theoretical conceptualisation of education as a private and public good. Our data derives from 27 municipalities in the Skåne County in southern Sweden. We identify two types of scripts in the data; one that expects parents to make a choice and one that does not expect such a choice from the parents. In conclusion, our study indicates that children and their families in Sweden might encounter different understandings of the aims and responsibilities related to education, depending on which municipality they live in.

## KEYWORDS

School choice; educational policy; websites; parents; Sweden

## Introduction

School choice policies are now established worldwide and provide a way of allocating children to schools preferred by their parents as early childhood education and care is increasingly dressed in the language of choice (Plank & Sykes, 2003; Vandebroek et al., 2022). In countries such as England, United States, Chile, and Sweden, these policies have now been operating for decades and with the increasing worldwide spread there is a growing interest in how school choice policies are organised and operated (Greaves et al., 2023; Kafka, 2022; Lovenheim & Walsh, 2018). School choice is recognised as a complex issue that works in “contradictory ways to both empower and disempower parents as participatory

**CONTACT** Hanna Sjögren  hanna.sjogren@mau.se  Department of Childhood, Education, Society, Malmö University, 10 Nordenskiöldsgatan, Malmö SE-205 06, Sweden

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

citizens” (Olson Beal & Hendry, 2012, p. 521). Previous research identifies how implemented school choice policies sometimes tend to view parents as consumers of education rather than citizens (Dabisch, 2022; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Vandebroeck et al., 2022). More broadly, research on public administration offers insights into how a stronger customer orientation involves customers “in the creation of value for themselves” (Karlsson et al., 2016, p. 3). These ideas belong to the tradition of new public management (NPM), which took hold in Sweden in 1990s. In brief, the aim of NPM is “to increase efficiency and effectiveness in the public sector by establishing administrative models and methods derived from the private sector” (ibid.). Within the literature on NPM and the emergence of public consumers, extensive conceptual work has already been made related to theorising the consumer of public goods, while empirical studies on when and where a citizen becomes, or fails to become, a consumer are requested to understand the phenomena better (Karlsson, 2024).

Together with the rise of new modes of governance in the form of NPM, school choice policies can be understood in the context of a world-wide process of educational marketisation and commodification (Greaves et al., 2023; Magnússon, 2020; Vandebroeck et al., 2022). Marketisation signifies the performative processes under which markets are implemented, organisations are adjusted, and identities are shaped to fit the logics of markets (Karlsson, 2020; Rönnerberg et al., 2022). Previous studies on how systems of choice are implemented show that the choosing citizen is enacted and configured in several and sometimes contradictory ways (Carlbaum, 2016; Glazerman et al., 2020; Lucio, 2009).

Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) define *competition*, *choice* and *calculation* to be the three central and complimentary components of a neoliberal ideology that increasingly influence early childhood education and care. In this context, choice is understood as “an ideal of individual choice where autonomous individuals choose between competing offers, to find the product (broadly defined) that best suits their needs, preferences and pockets” (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021, p. 6). Provision of information is a key for a market of competing offers to function, in which public institutions continue to play a key role. How this information is formulated tell us something about the language in which choice policies are dressed (Corcoran & Jennings, 2019). Wilson (2008, p. 17) argues that different kinds of choice regimes need to be examined in detail as “different choice policies, schools and practices enact certain qualities of public-ness and private-ness”. This study sets out to empirically study the local contexts in which choice policies have been implemented for the past three decades.

In our study, we build on existing knowledge about the importance of websites in school choice systems. A number of previous studies have analysed school choice-related information on websites (see, e.g., Allbright et al., 2023; Carlbaum, 2016; Glazerman et al., 2020; Wilkins, 2012; Wilson & Carlsen, 2016). In their experimental study of the choice architecture of school choice websites, Glazerman et al. (2020) argues that seemingly mundane decisions by policy-makers and web designers on how to present school choice on websites have effects on the outcome of the choice.

For the past three decades, the Swedish school system has allowed the option of school choice for parents. Today, the option of school choice varies between regions and municipalities, even though Sweden is on average sparsely populated with few or

no school options in certain parts of the country (Winblad et al., 2021). Currently, Swedish municipalities design and organise school choice systems locally, and since such authorities have extensive autonomy in Sweden the organisation of school choice varies between municipalities.

In this paper, we shed light on the mundane performance of market-logics in public educational settings by focusing on municipality websites that inform parents about local school choice policies and procedures. The aim of the paper is to 1) identify different ways in which Swedish municipalities configure parents in local school choice settings and 2) relate these configurations of parents to different ideas regarding the purpose of education. By analysing how parents are addressed by public authorities through official digital channels, we seek to demonstrate how public organisations draw on different ideas about the purpose of education and presume certain behaviours among parents in relation to the public authorities.

## Theory

In our analysis, we draw on theoretical insights from Science and Technology Studies (STS) on how technical systems shape their own (future) users by describing, instructing, scripting and limiting interactions. We combine these insights with a theoretical conceptualisation of education as both a public and a private good.

STS scholars have long proposed the reading of machines as texts to see how technology is inscribed with the expectations of their designers and the potential actions of its future users. Akrich (1992) has highlighted how technical objects define actors, and how designers delegate some activities to the technology while assigning others to the users. The technologies then establish causal relations between the scripts of the designers and the actions of the users. In other words, when users make choices using the machines, they act out the scripts of the designers. In this relation, technologies can stabilise, naturalise and even change social relations and that gives them a form of political strength.

Similarly, Woolgar (1991, p. 69) has argued in his study of the usability trials of a new computer model that the development of a technology can be seen as a struggle to “configure”, that is, to define, enable, and constrain the user. In this process, user manuals and documentation about technologies act as peripheral texts that enable the users to see the relevant features of the “machine text” (i.e. the technology itself). The documentation texts define the correct course of action and contribute to the configuration of the users’ capacities and future actions.

Suchman (2012) defines configuration as a way of studying how imaginaries and materialities are joined together in technologies. Referring to Akrich and Woolgar’s work that we cite above, she argues that both texts overestimate how much of a user can be inscribed into artefacts. Instead, she proposes a more fluid and ambiguous figure of the user that allows for the contingency and the incompleteness of the technologies. As technologies do not always work as intended, and as users do not always follow the scripts laid out by the designers, our analyses must consider the consequences of such configurations.

Our analysis centres on the guidance documents provided by the municipalities to the parents. These documents define certain types of parents by describing their potential actions and establishing different paths for the consequences of their decisions. Most of the texts start with the assumption that the parents will declare

a choice about which school they wish their child to attend. A few texts assume the exact opposite: They start with a pre-distribution of the students based on the assumption that most parents will not declare a choice. Different scripts are set up for the parents to follow and in them we find not only potential actions and capacities leading to the designers' intended goal, but also descriptions of less desirable paths that the users might take along with the consequences of following such paths. Our interest is in understanding how parents are scripted to interact with different public school choice systems. As such, our analysis highlights the expected/unexpected actions in the texts, and not the motivations or the intentions of their authors.

To explain the connection between different parent configurations and ideas about the purpose of education, we turn to educational theory and the notion of education as a public and a private good. Schooling is hardly only an individual affair; Lubienski (2003, p. 480) describes that "mass schooling has public effects – that is, the consequences go beyond just those immediate parties getting an education". Wilson (2008) argues that the notion of public and private always is relative to each other and cannot be understood as static, separate terms. As such, concerns regard school choice should be on "how education fulfils and balances both private and public aims" (Wilson, 2008, p. 9). She argues that different kinds of choice regimes need to be examined in detail to determine how to balance public and private aims.

From a historical perspective, Labaree (1997, p. 43) describes that in an American context "public education has increasingly come to be perceived as a private good that is harnessed to the pursuit of personal advantage". In his analysis, parents in the American system increasingly take on the role of consumers concerned with education as a product, rather than of citizens concerned with education's role in society, or taxpayers concerned with education's role for the economy. He connects the role of the consumer to the purpose of education for enabling social mobility, where "education is seen as a private good designed to prepare individuals for successful social competition for the more desirable market roles" (1997, p. 42). When education is viewed as a private good, it is for "the individual student to gain an advantage in the composition for social position" (Labaree, 1997, p. 51). Labaree defines public good as "one where benefits are enjoyed by all the members of the community, whether or not they actually contributed to the production of this good" (1997, p. 51). In our own analysis, we follow Labaree's definition of public and private goods when mapping the configurations of parents to different ideas about the purpose of education.

## Materials and method

This paper reports on a qualitative study about how school-choosing parents are configured in Sweden. Methodologically, we examine variations in how parents of children are instructed to use municipal systems for public school choice from pre-school to first grade. In our study, we use the notions of scripts, configuration and education as a public and private good to further understand how parents are imagined and expected to interact with different public school choice systems, and in extension to contribute with empirical work to the already extensive conceptual work on the public consumer.

Sweden is divided into 21 counties and 290 municipalities. Our data covers 27 of the 33 municipalities of Skåne County in southern Sweden, and these municipalities display large variations in size. This factor has been shown to affect the existence and size of school choice architecture, as larger populations and urban settings usually indicate more schools to choose from (Sandström & Bergström, 2005). Although our choice of region is based primarily on our existing familiarity with the organisation of the region, our study design can be applied to other regions, or it can be used for constructing studies at larger scales regarding school choice information.

We collected this data in January 2024 by browsing all municipalities' websites (=33) and downloading the guidance and information regarding the school choice process on each website. Our collected data are from publicly available sources which present information to parents with children who will begin school the next year. In most of the cases, this information is accessible on the homepage of the municipality by clicking on the "primary education" icon. As six of the municipalities do not provide such information on their website, our resulting dataset contains information retrieved from a total of 27 municipalities.

We started our analysis of the collected data by reading the information provided to citizens in their role as parents of children who are about to start in first grade. Then, we classified the municipalities into two groups based on whether their information explicitly expressed that parents are expected to make a school choice. We identified two types of scripts in the data; one that expects parents to make a choice and one that does not expect such a choice. In a third step, we applied the concept of user scripts to code the data further. We used the code "the script" to mark paragraphs and sentences that declared the steps of each script, and we used the code "deviation from script" to mark paragraphs and sentences where parents' actions were assumed to deviate from the expected script. One example of such a deviation within the script is a description of what will happen when parents fail to follow the instructions, and the application becomes invalid. The two classifications also contained script-specific deviations, for example, when describing what would happen when parents who are expected to make a choice forget or refuse to do so. Within the samples where parents are not expected to make a choice, the deviation from the script was the exact opposite, with the texts describing what will happen if parents make a choice even when they were not expected to do so. We applied two additional codes throughout the data: "Justification", pertaining to descriptions that justified the specific system, and "vague", pertaining to a use of official language that is hard to make sense of. To ensure the reliability of the qualitative coding, we conducted all the coding together. We also translated all the quotes presented below from Swedish to English. [Table 1](#) summarises our categorisation of the scripts from each municipality.

## Results

Based on our analysis of the information from municipalities' websites we identify two scripts which we call the *Parents will choose (PWC)* script, and the *Municipalities will assign (MWA)* script. Below we present these two scripts together with moments where the texts recognise the possibility for the users to deviate from the expected script. We highlight these moments of anticipated deviation, as they help us clarify the assumptions, intentions, and expectations behind the text.

**Table 1.** Overview of municipalities and scripts

Number	Municipality	Script
1	Bjuv	MWA
2	Bromölla	N/A
3	Burlöv	PWC
4	Båstad	N/A
5	Eslöv	PWC
6	Helsingborg	PWC
7	Hässleholm	PWC
8	Höganäs	PWC
9	Hörby	MWA
10	Höör	PWC
11	Klippan	N/A
12	Kristianstad	PWC
13	Kävlinge	PWC
14	Landskrona	PWC
15	Lomma	PWC
16	Lund	PWC
17	Malmö	PWC
18	Osby	PWC
19	Perstorp	N/A
20	Simrishamn	N/A
21	Sjöbo	PWC
22	Skurup	PWC
23	Staffanstorps	PWC
24	Svalöv	N/A
25	Svedala	PWC
26	Tomelilla	PWC
27	Trelleborg	PWC
28	Vellinge	MWA
29	Ystad	PWC
30	Åstorp	MWA
31	Ängelholm	MWA
32	Örkelljunga	PWC
33	Östra Göinge	PWC

**Script 1: parents will choose (PWC)**

Twenty-two municipalities display the PWC script on their website. Within this script, parents are configured as individual right-holders in relation to the public school system. As right-holders, their chance of getting the school that they want for their child is described to increase if they make an active choice. Lund Municipality expresses the script in the following way:

You have the right to a free choice of school. This means that, subject to space, you can apply for the school you want. There is no guarantee that your child will be allocated to a school of your choice, it depends on how many others have applied to the same school and where your child lives in relation to the school. But by making an active choice of school, the chances increase that the child will go to a school of your choice. Just over 90 percent usually get the school they wanted in the first place. (Lund Municipality)

In the excerpt, parents are directly addressed as individuals using the second person pronoun “you”. It exemplifies how the PWC script prioritises the relationship between parents and the public authority in the school allocation process. The emphasis is placed not on the child’s right to education in a public sense, but on the parents’ individual right and responsibility. We read the estimate that “90% usually get the



school they wanted” and the unspoken but implied 10% who do not get what they want as pointing at the possibility of making the wrong choice. On the other hand, the highlighted 90% can be viewed as a promise to the majority that *almost* everyone gets their choice of school. This configuration emphasises both private and public values of education; the focus on the individual parent’s choice point to value of education as a private good that can enhance the individual, while the focus on the majority (the 90%) points to a narrow sense of public education that are about benefits for *almost* all members of society. Parents are asked to make choices that have consequences both for their children and for others, but those consequences are also tied up with how the parents declare their choices. For example, in Höör Municipality, the PWC script advises and encourages parents to prioritise and rank different schools that they want for their children:

It is possible to choose three schools for your child, some schools are short of places, and we recommend that you choose more than one school for your child. By choosing a school during the time that school selection process is open, you increase the chance that your child will go to the school of your choice. (Höör Municipality)

In this case, the script instructs parents on how to optimise the outcome of their school choice based on their individual preferences. The script uses a language with words such as possibility, increasing of chance, the school of your choice – a vocabulary associated with competition, winners, and losers (see, e.g., Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Vandebroek et al., 2022). In short, what makes the choice meaningful is the possibility that there are wrong choices, but the PWC script argues that the worst outcome is making no choice at all. The script highlights the benefits for the individual within the education system, which is associated with the idea that education is first and foremost a private good.

Another feature of the PWC script is that it requires that parents have access to and knowledge of digital technologies, as the choices are submitted digitally:

In January the same year that your child turns six, you as the guardian must apply for a school for your child before the autumn semester when the child will begin preschool class. You do this via our e-service with a bank ID during the period that the application is open. If the child has two guardians, the application is made by one guardian only. The other guardian then confirms the application in question via their own login in the e-service. (Tomelilla Municipality)

In the excerpt, the script configures school-choosing parents as digitally competent citizens and displays ideas of skilled and informed public consumers. Parents are not only expected to search and evaluate information about different municipal schools but also to have access to and have the expertise required for using digital identification services. These are not novel technologies in the Swedish context, but the assumption that they constitute mundane and easily accessible technologies configures parents as individual digital citizens (Isin & Ruppert, 2015; Perriam & Kjær, 2024). Additionally, while applying for the schools digitally by default may make it easier to access and use for some residents, case studies from other countries show that these gains come at the expense of the already marginalised (Schou & Pors, 2019; Yates et al., 2015).



### *Deviance from the PWC script*

From the information provided on the websites we examined we could see that parents are not always anticipated to act in accordance with the intention of the script. The expectations written into the PWC script become clearer when we look at the undesirable deviances from the expected script, as it is expressed on the website information towards parents. One such deviance occurs when two parents fail to communicate with each other or disagree on which school to choose for their child. Svedala Municipality addresses this deviance in the following terms:

If guardians enter different choices, it is registered as a disagreement, and the child may then be placed at a school that neither guardian wanted. (Svedala Municipality)

In this case, the consequence of the deviance from the script is that the parents' free school choice might be lost. In other words, the PWC script requires parents of children to agree and communicate with each other, configuring them as a joint family unit that needs to agree with each other. Unlike many other market and consumption objects, education is not a commodity that can be purchased several times. The individual child only attends school once, and such, the consequence of the vanished choice could be severe for the child. This realisation makes the user script central to preventing public consumers from acting in ways that delegitimize the script.

Another deviance from the PWC script is when one or both parents fail to provide signature, or when they fail to make a choice in time. Landskrona Municipality formulates this deviance in the following way:

What happens if I don't sign the application or don't make any choices? If the application is not signed in time by both guardians, the student will be placed at the nearest school with available places in relation to his/her civil registration address, the so-called guaranteed school. (Landskrona Municipality)

As before, the consequence of the deviation is that the possibility of school choice being taken away, and the child being assigned to "the nearest school with available places" which may or may not be in line with parents' preferences. The PWC script does not describe the notion of a guaranteed school as a desired outcome. Instead, it positions educational choice as something that parents should strive for and not miss out on.

In Trelleborg Municipality, parents are offered help to make their school choice if they lack a Swedish social security number or digital identification, if they live with a protected identity, or if they need help with their application for "another reason":

Do you need help with the school choice? If you lack a Swedish social security number, e-identification, have protected identity or need help with your application for another reason, you can contact the administration at one of our elementary schools to get help with your application. It is also possible to contact the Contact Center for help with choosing a school. (Trelleborg Municipality)

In this example, we can trace the expected user script through its deviant non-users. Those who can follow the script are the "normal" parents that the script expects to meet, and the deviant non-users are those with different requirements not fulfilled by the regular procedure. The school choosing parents are expected to have a Swedish social security number, to have access to e-identification, and to live without protected

identities. The original script does not work for parents that lack one of these qualities, and such parents are given the less clear suggestion to contact the “administration at one of our elementary schools”. Mirroring the expectation of the individual digital citizen we explored above, the deviant non-users of the PWC script include the non-digital citizens that cannot or do not use digital technologies.

In Malmö Municipality, the potential deviance of non-participation of parents in the process of school choice is also recognised by providing parents the possibility of actively opting out:

If you do not want to participate in the school choice you need to say no via the e-service or a form. (Malmö Municipality)

In this excerpt the configuration of the parents resembles those of previous examples, with one key difference in that these parents actively declare their choice to make no choice. Our interpretation is that this version of the script allows for potential resistance of the role that parents as public consumer are otherwise ascribed through the script. Parents are invited to reject the possibility of school choice. This possibility of rejection articulates that there are alternative ways of being scripted as a user of the school choice system.

To sum up, the PWC script configures parents as active school choosers and enacts individual parents as consumers of educational commodities for private gain, rather than citizens concerned with education as a public good. The overall language of the script emphasises competition, the importance of individual preferences, and the possibilities of losers, and winners depending on if and how the system is used. Furthermore, the script privileges parents with digital skills who have Swedish resident permits and live with unprotected identities. By tracing the detected deviances from the script through the analysis – for example disagreement between two parents – we could trace how the ideal user of the system is configured through different versions of the script. The PWC script highlights the parents’ individual responsibility as parents are configured as individual right-holders and consumers in relation to the public school system. In our analysis, the script prioritises the relationship between parents and the public authority in the school allocation process which could downplay the child’s right to education as a public good.

### ***Script 2: municipalities will assign (MWA)***

We have identified that a total of five municipalities use the MWA-script on their website. The MWA script configures the parents differently in that the relation between the public authorities and the child’s education is highlighted, in contrast to how the PWC script emphasises the relation between public authorities and parents. For instance, Bjuv Municipality highlights the educational entitlement of the child:

Your child is always entitled to a place at the school in the principal’s area where the child is registered, which is called the child’s reference school. This usually means the school closest to the child’s home. (Bjuv Municipality)

In this excerpt the parents’ wishes are largely absent. Parents are only addressed as parents of the child who is entitled to a school close to home, and the notion of the

public consumer is absent. The school allocation seems to be a concern involving the child and the municipality, and not something that the parents and their individual preferences need to be involved in. In the words of Labaree (1997, p. 51), education as public good can be viewed as “one where benefits are enjoyed by all the members of the community, whether or not they actually contributed to the production of this goods”. By downplaying the public consumer role, the script highlights that the public officials primarily are those who assign children in the municipality’s schools. In Hörby Municipality, the municipality is the only visible actor within the script:

In Hörby, we start from different catchment areas when we place students in the different schools. (Hörby Municipality)

In this example the municipality is the main actor responsible for allocating the students, and there is no invitation for parents to be involved in the process. However, there are examples of when parents are invited to make a choice even within the MWA script. In such cases, the choice is framed as an optional wish and not an obligatory task for the parents.

Important within this script is that parents do not have to do anything if they accept the school that the municipality assigned to their child. Ängelholm Municipality writes:

If you want your child to attend the assigned school, you do not need to make an active choice of school, your child is automatically given a place at that school. (Ängelholm Municipality)

Here we see how the script stresses that the municipality will assign the child a school allocation. The MWA script stresses that the parents do not need to make a choice, which configures parents as passive receivers of information rather than as active choosers. In this script, the public sphere is responsible for the school allocation process and the public consumer is absent.

### *Deviance from the MWA script*

The moments of deviance from the MWA script we have identified below could be understood as a way for the script to deal with unrequested school choices by parents. From the information provided on the websites we examined we could see that parents not always are anticipated to act in accordance with the intention of the MWA script. The expectations written into the MWA script become clearer when we look at the undesirable deviances from the expected script, as it is expressed on the website information towards parents. Bjuv Municipality writes the following:

If you apply to another school, the child may go there subject to availability. This means that you are allowed to apply to any school, but that the school must first of all offer places to students who live in the school’s catchment area. (Bjuv Municipality)

In the excerpt above, we can see how the script emphasises that even if the parents were to declare a choice, it would not be permitted to affect the municipality’s allocation of other children. The MWA script therefore downplays the role and responsibility of parents in the school allocation process.

In Ängelholm Municipality, the language is even clearer as they specifically request that school choices are to be made only by those who move to Ängelholm Municipality or those who “want to go to a different school”:

The application for school choice/change of school must only be made when moving in or if you want to go to a different school than the one you belong to. (Ängelholm Municipality)

The MWA script configures the school allocation process as one in which children belong to a specific school (what is usually referred to as catchment areas). It describes a different relationship between the parents, children, and the municipality compared to the PWC script. The MWA script puts the responsibility for school allocation of children on the municipality, while the PWC script configures parents as the ones responsible for their children’s school allocation. In short, the two scripts not only configure the parents and the purpose of public education differently but also allocate responsibility in different ways.

## Discussion

In this paper, we have described and analysed the mundane performance of market-logics in public educational settings by focusing on municipality websites that inform parents about local school choice policies and procedures. In our analysis, we used the notions of scripts, configuration, and education as a public and private good and we investigated how different scripts configure the role of parents in the school choice processes.

The aim of the paper was to 1) identify different ways in which Swedish municipalities configure parents in local school choice settings and 2) relate these configurations of parents to different ideas of the purpose of education. Our analysis above shows that Swedish municipalities in Skåne County use two different scripts in their configuration of parents in local school settings. As such, the results complicate the notion of the all-encompassing presence of the public consumer in Sweden as discussed in earlier research (cf. Karlsson, 2024).

The PWC script is the most common script as it is used by 22 municipalities. The script configures parents as individual right holders, public consumers and as digitally competent citizens who are advised to optimise the system. It is a script that presents education primarily as a private good. The deviances from the PWC script occur when two parents fail to communicate or agree to which school to choose, when the parents lack a Swedish social security number or e-identification, or when they live with protected identities. Within the PWC script, education becomes primarily a relationship between public authorities and the private individuals’ choice in accordance with their preferences. This relationship fits well with the recent development of educational marketisation in which the citizen is seen as a consumer that can and should choose between different welfare products such as primary education (Karlsson, 2024; Karlsson et al., 2016; Lucio, 2009; Magnússon, 2020; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Vandebroek et al., 2022). As previous studies have argued, there has been an increasingly significant trend over the past 30 years of dressing education in the economic language of choice complimented with words such as competition and

calculation (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Vandebroek et al. (2022, p. 94) use the label "consumentality" which signifies "the reduction of parents to clients or consumers, not only in legislative texts and research, but also in the thoughts and minds of parents themselves". We can see above how in particular the PWC script draws on a similar reduction of parents as consumers of educational products.

The MWA script is only used by five of the municipalities and configures parents as having relatively insignificant roles for the relation between public authorities and the private family. In this script, the right of the child to go to a school near their home stands out as a priority and it is the responsibility of the municipality to guarantee that this right is realised. This script highlights education as a public good and is less concerned with the individual as a public consumer. The deviance in the MWA script occurs when parents want to make an active school choice as this goes against the assumptions of the script. The MWA script highlights that the parents' right to choose can never trump the child's right to a nearby school. Within the script, education is presented as a relation between the public authorities and the child's possibility of having an education in a nearby community. The script downplays or even neglects the marketised relationship between public authorities and citizens.

Our analysis above highlights that scripts used in communication with parents within the Skåne County are not homogenous in their content or in their narratives. The study shows that contextual differences are important to consider in research about how global educational policy trends unfold in different national, regional, and local contexts (Plank & Sykes, 2003). As not all municipalities use the language of choice, those who use what we have labelled the MWA script promote education as primarily a public good in the sense that the relationship between children's right to education in the nearby community is scripted as independent of their parents' preferences.

In conclusion, we wish to emphasise that that our study indicates that children and their families in Skåne County might encounter different understandings of the aims and responsibilities related to education depending on which municipality they live in. As most parents are likely to interact with only one municipality when they make their school choice, it is important to highlight the different ways they might be configured in relation to their choices. Our analysis demonstrates that the rubric of school choice contains different configurations in relation to the parents' responsibility to make choices, the child's right to education and the duty of the municipality to place children in schools. An important limitation of this study is that we have focused solely on website scripts and the ideas of the user that they produce. Our choice of theoretical orientation meant that we paid less attention to the ideological perspectives behind different versions school choice and allocation. We described the richness and the nuances of the scripts by combining STS-perspectives with a theoretical conceptualisation of education as a private and public good.

This study focused on the texts retrieved from websites Skåne County municipalities, and the results cannot be immediately translated to draw conclusions about the wider Swedish context. Our study shows that school allocation and choice can come to mean quite different things when choice policies are interpreted and implemented in local contexts. Thus, the notion of the citizen as merely a consumer does not appear as all-encompassing as some of the previous literatures have argued. Wilson (2008) argues that the notion of public and private values in education can be seen as always relative

to each other. As such, concerns regarding school choice might focus on “how education fulfils and balances both private and public aims” (Wilson, 2008, p. 9). This study set out to explore the language use in a particular regional and local context in which choice policies have been implemented. More studies, with different samples and theoretical tools might reveal even more variations with other consequences for the very meaning of education.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

**Hanna Sjögren** is associate professor in Education at Malmö University in Sweden. Her research is about the relationship between state, family, and school. She has worked on how school allocation, school choice, mandatory schooling, and homeschooling can be seen as negotiations between public and private educational values.

**Baki Cakici** is associate professor in the Technologies in Practice section at the IT University of Copenhagen in Denmark. He works at the intersections of science & technology studies (STS), sociology, and computer science. His research interests include the politics of data, software studies, and identification systems.

## ORCID

Hanna Sjögren  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4833-8292>

Baki Cakici  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1039-8177>

## References

- Akrich, M. (1992). The De-scription of technical objects. In W. E. Bijker & J. Law (Eds.), *Shaping technology/building society: Studies in sociotechnical change* (pp. 205–224). The MIT Press.
- Allbright, T. N., Dhaliwal, T. K., Alonso, J., Bridgeforth, J., Santander, M., & Kennedy, K. E. (2023). Schools as solutions, students as problems: A critical discourse analysis of institutional scripts in high school websites. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 59(4), 845–878. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X231166664>
- Carlbaum, S. (2016). Customers, partners and rights-holders: School evaluations on websites. *Education Inquiry*, 7(3), 29971. <https://doi.org/10.3402/edui.v7.29971>
- Corcoran, S. P., & Jennings, J. L. (2019). Information and school choice. In Mark Berends, Ann Primus, Matthew Springer (Eds), *Handbook of research on school choice* (2nd ed.) (pp. 365–378). Routledge.
- Dabisch, V. (2022). Which child to which school? How local politicians shape catchment areas, school choice and diversity. *European Educational Research Journal*, 22(6), 814–833. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14749041221116252>
- Glazerman, S., Nichols-Barrer, I., Valant, J., Chandler, J., & Burnett, A. (2020). The choice architecture of school choice websites. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 13(2), 322–350. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2020.1716905>
- Greaves, E., Wilson, D., & Nairn, A. (2023). Marketing and school choice: a systematic literature review. *Review of Educational Research*, 93(6), 825–861. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543221141658>



- Isin, E. F., & Ruppert, E. S. (2015). *Being digital citizens*. Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Kafka, J. (2022). When information is not enough: School choice, segregation, and the elusive notion of fit. *Teachers College Record*, 124(4), 95–123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01614681221093021>
- Karlsson, M., Garvare, R., Zingmark, K., & Nordström, B. (2016). Customer orientation in a Swedish county council. *International Journal of Quality & Service Sciences*, 8(1), 2–16. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJQSS-06-2015-0053>
- Karlsson, T. S. (2020). Att vara kund till staten. In P. Ehn & G. Sundström (Eds.), *Statlig förvaltningspolitik för 2020-talet: En forskningsantologi*. Stadskontoret. (pp. 91–109).
- Karlsson, T. S. (2024). Exploring the acceptance of the public consumer in Scandinavian governance: An essay about choice as both a right and an obligation. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Administration*, 28(4), Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.58235/sjpa.2024.23113>
- Labaree, D. F. (1997). Public goods, private goods: The American struggle over educational goals. *American Educational Research Journal*, 34(1), 39–81. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312034001039>
- Lovenheim, M. F., & Walsh, P. (2018). (Re)searching for a school: How choice drives parents to become more informed. *Education Next*, 18(1), 72–78.
- Lubienski, C. (2003). Instrumentalist perspectives on the 'public' in public education: Incentives and purposes. *Educational Policy*, 17(4), 478–502. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904803254964>
- Lucio, J. (2009). Customers, citizens, and residents: The semantics of public service recipients. *Administration & Society*, 41(7), 878–899. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399709344056>
- Magnússon, G. (2020). Inclusive education and school choice lessons from Sweden. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 35(1), 25–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2019.1603601>
- Olson Beal, H. K., & Hendry, P. M. (2012). The ironies of school choice: Empowering parents and reconceptualizing public education. *American Journal of Education*, 118(4), 521–550. <https://doi.org/10.1086/666360>
- Perriam, J., & Kjær, K. M. (Eds.). (2024). *Digitalization in practice: Intersections, implications and interventions*. de Gruyter.
- Plank, D. N., & Sykes, G. (2003). *Choosing choice: School choice in international perspective*. Teachers College Press.
- Roberts-Holmes, G., & Moss, P. (2021). *Neoliberalism and early childhood education: Markets, imaginaries and governance*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429030086>
- Rönnerberg, L., Alexiadou, N., Benerdal, M., Carlbaum, S., Holm, A.-S., & Lundahl, L. (2022). Swedish free school companies going global: Spatial imaginaries and movable pedagogical ideas. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 8(1), 9–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2021.2008115>
- Sandström, F. M., & Bergström, F. (2005). School vouchers in practice: Competition will not hurt you. *Journal of Public Economics*, 89(2), 351–380. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2004.03.004>
- Schou, J., & Pors, A. S. (2019). Digital by default? A qualitative study of exclusion in digitalised welfare. *Social Policy & Administration*, 53(3), 464–477. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12470>
- Suchman, L. (2012). Configuration. In C. Lury & N. Wakeford (Eds.), *Inventive methods: The happening of the social* (pp. 48–60). Routledge.
- Vandenbroeck, M., Lehrer, J., & Mitchell, L. (2022). *The decommmodification of early childhood education and care: Resisting neoliberalism*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003218104>
- Wilkins, A. (2012). School choice and the commodification of education: A visual approach to school brochures and websites. *Critical Social Policy*, 32(1), 69–86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018311425199>
- Wilson, T. S. (2008). *Negotiating public and private: Philosophical frameworks for school choice (policy brief, pp. 1-29)*. Education Policy Research Unit.
- Wilson, T. S., & Carlsen, R. L. (2016). School marketing as a sorting mechanism: A critical discourse analysis of charter school websites. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 91(1), 24–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2016.1119564>



- Winblad, U., Isaksson, D., & Blomqvist, P. (2021). Preserving social equity in marketized primary care: Strategies in Sweden. *Health Economics, Policy, and Law*, 16(2), 216–231. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1744133120000092>
- Woolgar, S. (1991). Configuring the user: The case of usability trials. In J. Law (Ed.), *A sociology of monsters: Essays on power, technology and domination* (pp. 58–99). Routledge.
- Yates, S. J., Kirby, J., & Lockley, E. (2015). 'Digital-by-default': Reinforcing exclusion through technology (L. Foster, A. Brunton, C. Deeming, & T. Haux, (Eds.)). Policy Press. [http://www.social-policy.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/IDOW-Complete-text-4-online\\_secured-compressed.pdf](http://www.social-policy.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/IDOW-Complete-text-4-online_secured-compressed.pdf)