

The Impact of Institutional Pluralism on Governmental Reforms in the Public Sector: Choice, Monitoring and Licenses in Swedish Schools

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate the influence of institutional pluralism on the expansion of reforms in the public sector. The paper seeks to contribute to the Scandinavian institutionalism perspective where previous analyses of reforms have often used a case-study methodology and focussed on one, or a few, reforms attributable to the same institution. The focus of this article is to describe and analyse the reform history in order to capture the dynamics between reforms attributable to different institutions. An analysis of the reforms of the Swedish school system between 1990 and 2013 is conducted revealing that more than 70 reforms were implemented during the period. The reforms were based on different institutions such as ‘the market’, ‘the state/bureaucracy’ and ‘the profession’. This plurality of reforms casts new light on the expansion of reforms as it suggests that the dynamics are not only characterised by *completions* as has previously been shown, but also by *counterbalances* in relation to the institutions involved.

Introduction

What is the character of reforms in the public sector and what are the driving forces behind them? These questions have had a particularly strong foothold among organisation researchers within the Scandinavian countries (e.g. Czarniawska 1989; Brunsson and Olsen 1993; Jacobsson 1994; Christensen and Laegreid 1998; Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 1998; 2000; Forssell 2001; Brunsson 2009; Røvik et al. 2015) and have been referred to as ‘Scandinavian institutionalism’ (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Johansson, 2002; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008; Eriksson-Zetterquist 2009). The Scandinavian institutionalism perspective has its roots in a tradition combining political science theory and organisation theory (March 1997; March and Olsen 1976; 1989) and has provided valuable theoretical contributions on reforms to areas such as public administration, institutional theory and organisation theory. However, as theoretically and practically fruitful as this perspective has been, many studies have typically been based on the same kind of method (case studies of single reforms; Sahlin and Wedlin 2008, p. 220) and have assumed that the reforms are attributable to one institution – broadly referred to as ‘the organization’ (Jacobsson 1994; Blomqvist 1994; Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 1998; 2000) or ‘management’ (Engwall and Sahlin-Andersson 2002). Most of the important, theory generating, reform studies within this perspective were built on empirical data of the 1980s and 1990s, a period which is known as the ‘New Public Management’ (NPM) era (Hood 1995; Christensen and Laegreid 2001; 2007). The studied reforms therefore often shared the same ideological, neo-liberal underpinning. Besides that, institutional coherence was also in line with the predominant theoretical assumption of institutional theory at the time – that of the rationalised environment

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(Meyer and Rowan 1977; Scott and Meyer 1994). The notion of one dominating institutional order, according to which much, empirical observations could be explained, was very strong in institutional theory at that time (Lounsbury 2007). In recent years, however, the idea of institutional pluralism (Kraatz and Block 2008) stressing the simultaneous existence of several institutional arrangements has gained increased attention. This is reflected not least in the many studies that adopt an institutional logics perspective (Thornton et al. 2012; Greenwood et al. 2010; 2011).

In this article, we want to contribute to the body of knowledge generated by the reform studies within the Scandinavian institutionalism tradition. We argue that the methodology and timing of the previous analyses have had consequences for the theoretical understanding of the institutional foundation of the reforms, as well as the driving forces behind them. As a few decades now have elapsed since the heyday of the New Public Management era, when most of the reform studies were conducted, it is time to open up to the possibility that the picture has now changed. Societies are predisposed toward oscillation between a focus on private interests and public issues (Hirschman 1982). This means that current reforms can be issued as a backlash to previous ones. If we study the reform history, we may thus find that the different reforms align with a plurality of institutions and we may be able to perceive the dynamics between the reforms. Current research on public sector reforms has been criticised for providing few new contributions to the existing body of knowledge and new approaches have been called for (Beijerot and Hasselbladh 2013). We argue that an approach which takes the interrelatedness of several reforms based on different institutions into account offers new opportunities to understand the driving forces behind reforms.

The research question in this article is what influence institutional pluralism has on governmental reforms in the public sector and the driving forces behind them. Kraatz et al. (2008) define and explain ‘institution’ and ‘institutional pluralism’ in the following manner:

Institutional pluralism is the situation faced by an organization that operates within multiple institutional spheres. If institutions are broadly understood as “the rules of the game” that direct and circumscribe organizational behavior, then the organization confronting institutional pluralism plays in two or more games at the same time. Such an organization is subject to multiple regulatory regimes, embedded within multiple normative orders, and/or constituted by more than one cultural logic. (Kraatz *et al.* 2008: 243)

We depart from these rather broad definitions of institutions and institutional pluralism in the paper. We focus on a public domain that has been intensively reformed in recent decades – the Swedish school system. By means of an analysis of the reform history during the period from 1990 to 2013, we will show that the reforms of this period represented institutional pluralism rather than coher-

ence, as they drew on such different institutions as ‘the market’, ‘the state/bureaucracy’ and ‘the profession’. Furthermore, we will suggest that the expansion of reforms is explained by reform dynamics characterised by both ‘completions’ and ‘counterbalances’ in relation to these institutions.

Analyses of governmental reforms within Scandinavian institutionalism

Institutional analyses of governmental reforms is a research tradition that has, to a large extent, been inspired by the work of March and Olsen (cf. 1976; 1989) as it has challenged the rational, instrumental perspective on organisations and decision-making (Brunsson and Olsen 1990; 1993). The perspective has attracted many Scandinavian organisation researchers and has sometimes been referred to as ‘Scandinavian institutionalism’ (Czarniawska and Sevón 1996; Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008; Eriksson-Zetterquist 2009). The studies have shown that reforms are no exception to an otherwise organisational ‘normal state of stability’. Reforms are rather the norm, the routine (Brunsson 2009). Sharing the same theoretical foundations as other early neo-institutional researchers (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983), these studies showed that reforms were not the rational instruments for decision making that they were reputed to be, but rather rationalised myths which organisations adopted to garner legitimacy while everyday practices remained fairly unaffected. Reforms which aligned with long-term trends in society had better chances of being successful than others (Olsen 1990). Generally, reforms were easy to initiate but hard to implement and researchers showed that reforms were often decoupled from daily practices and became a type of window-dressing (Czarniawska and Jacobsson 1989; Czarniawska, 1989). Although ‘unsuccessful’ or decoupled, the reforms were nevertheless important for the survival of the organisation as they showed that it was modern and legitimate. The recurrence of reforms was explained with reference to the fact that their failure would create need for new ones and as there existed ‘mechanisms of hope’, and hence faith in reforms would be maintained regardless of whether they achieved their aims or not (Brunsson 2009). The typical approach used in this perspective was to conduct qualitative case studies of one reform at a time (Sahlin and Wedlin 2008). By means of these close studies of individual reforms, researchers were able to develop and deepen our understanding of reforms and their impact in practice.

The driving forces behind reforms were seen in this perspective as departing from the same source. Following the thoughts of John Meyer and others on the rationalised environment (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Scott and Meyer 1994), the institutional transformation captured by the reform studies was described as the ‘construction of organizations’ (Jacobsson 1994; Blomqvist 1994; Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 1998; Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000). ‘The organization’ was thus considered to be a dominant institution of the time. Hierarchy, rationality, and identity were the most important traits of ‘the organization’ and public sector reforms of the 1980s and 1990s consequently aimed at strengthen-

ing these traits within welfare providers such as schools, hospitals and universities (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000). By these endeavours, the service providers were reformed according to an idealised conception of what a proper and ‘complete organization’ was. It was argued that the reforms participated in ‘creating organizations, confirming and stabilizing our conceptions of organizations, and giving rise to new reforms’ (Brunsson 2009, p. 9).

Later on the vocabulary of the researchers changed and the meaning widened as the reforms increasingly were referred to as ‘modern management ideas’ and were not only limited to politically introduced changes. Several studies of market experiments in organisational settings such as county councils, municipalities and public agencies were conducted (Jacobsson 1994; Christensen & Laegreid 2002; 2007). Empirically, ‘modern management ideas’ referred to those initiatives that could be gathered under the label of ‘New Public Management’ (NPM). Researchers’ attention also shifted from the failure of the reforms towards what they accomplished, albeit not from a rationalistic perspective. Although the modern management ideas had small chances of being realised in their ideal form, they still brought about changes. It was argued that organisations picked up some of their features – although not all of them – and adapted them to local practices and routines. It was thus not a question of copying, but rather a translation process ending up in organisations that were simultaneously similar to and different from each other (Czarniawska and Sevón 1996; Sahlin and Wedlin 2008). Røvik (2008) described how management ideas were decontextualised and contextualised in a translation process that resembled a virus infection. The translation perspective opened up for other outcomes of institutional change processes than isomorphism (Lounsbury 2007, p. 289). It paved the way for many empirical studies, but the approach to study one or a few reforms/ideas at a time continued to dominate (cf. Morris and Lancaster 2005; Muller and Whittle 2011; Hult 2012; Wæraas and Sataøen 2014; Vebostad 2014). Likewise, the institutional ideals that the translated ideas carried with them still seemed to come from one source, often broadly referred to as ‘management knowledge’ (cf. Engwall and Sahlin-Andersson 2002).

Institutional pluralism in the public sector

The issue of institutional pluralism has received increased attention among institutional scholars lately. Concepts such as institutional pluralism, institutional multiplicity, multiple institutional logics and institutional complexity have been used – sometimes interchangeably – in order to describe the simultaneous existence of various institutional arrangements within field boundaries (Kraatz and Block 2008; Greenwood et al. 2010; 2011; Dunn and Jones 2010). Similar perspectives have also been used convincingly by researchers who were not specifically part of the new institutional research tradition (cf. Hernes 1983; Friedson 2001).

Public organisations are typical examples of organisations facing institutional pluralism as they are subject to strong institutional influences emanating from

professional norms, political control, state regulations, public concerns and commercial interests (Pache and Santos 2010). These various influences are attributable to different institutions which guide how public organisations such as schools and hospitals should be organised, controlled and monitored. Three such institutions that have been particularly salient in the public sector are: 'the profession', 'the market' and the 'state/bureaucracy' (cf. Freidson 2001; Goodrick and Reay 2011; Reay and Hinings 2005; Scott *et al.* 2000). Alongside other broad institutions such as 'the family', 'religion' and 'the corporation', they have been recognised as amongst the most well-known and established institutions of Western societies (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton *et al.* 2012). The previously discussed institution of 'the organization' (Jacobsson 1994; Blomqvist 1994; Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 1998; 2000) is closely related to the development and strengthening of 'the market' as a governing institution in the public sector.

The institution of 'the profession' builds on expertise as a central value. By means of extensive education and training, professionals acquire a substantial amount of abstract knowledge on which they rely in order to carry out their work. Professionals largely control and organise their own work; the quality of the occupational group's services is secured and controlled by the group itself, often by means of peer review. The institution of 'the state/bureaucracy', on the other hand, centres round democratic principles and rule of law. These values are maintained by state authority and bureaucratic principles such as: hierarchical structures of accountability as well as a high degree of formalisation, monitoring and control. Lastly, in 'the market', the free choice of the consumer is an important value. The quality of the services is supposed to be regulated by the free and rationally enlightened choices of the consumers. Competition among the producers ensures the best possible price, quality and power of innovation, since customers will simply opt out of doing business with the sellers who do not live up to their standards.

While a general theme in institutional analyses of transformations of public sectors has been that different institutions have succeeded one another and dominated different time periods, it has also been pointed out that neither of them have been completely absent during any point in time (Scott *et al.* 2000, p. 171). Conversely, it has been argued that the non-dominant or subordinate logics may become more influential over time. The existence of multiple institutions allows actors to envision alternatives to a dominant institution, which is necessary for institutional change to occur (e.g., Friedland and Alford 1991). If we transfer this line of reasoning to public sector reformers, we can thus conclude that there at any point in time are different established institutions to draw on, amongst the most well-known ones are 'the profession', 'the market' and 'the state/bureaucracy'.

Methods

The public sector in Sweden has been reformed intensively in recent decades. The Swedish school sector does, however, stand out as a particularly compelling case for an investigation of the influence of institutional pluralism on the expansion of reforms, as it has been an arena for intense reforming and political concern (Jarl and Pierre 2012; Rönnerberg 2014). The Swedish school system was until the beginning of the 1990s characterised by strong central control and a detailed bureaucratic structure (Jacobsson and Sahlin-Andersson 1995; Ahlin and Mörk 2005). In 1991, this changed drastically towards a decentralised structure and the introduction of market-models. Many reforms, pointing in different directions, have been implemented since then (cf. Sahlin and Waks 2008; Fredriksson 2010), but despite the fact that the reformed Swedish school had been a recurrent theme in public debate, we found little systematic research on the extent of the reforms from the 1990s onwards. This motivated us to enter the field with the ambition to describe and understand the reform history of Swedish schools during the years 1990-2013.

Data collection

As many other researchers studying reforms from an institutional perspective, we refer to the concept of reforms as conscious and actual attempts to change organisations in order to improve their actions and performances (Brunsson and Olsen 1990, p. 11; Røvik et al. 2015, s. 15). The organisations we focus on in this article are the Swedish compulsory and upper secondary schools. We are interested in all types of reforms that affect these organisations. This means that both reforms that concern the whole educational system – such as funding principles – are included, but also reforms directed towards certain groups, such as teachers and students. The studied reforms thus vary considerably as to their scope and significance (cf. Røvik et al. 2015). A reform such as the Swedish Municipality Reform (Government bills 1988/89:4; 1989/90:41; 1990/91:18) was a reform that fundamentally changed the whole Swedish educational system, while a reform establishing rights to special support for certain groups of students (SFS 2010:800) implied considerably smaller and more limited changes. In this paper, we specify the definition of reforms by only taking those reforms initiated by the Swedish government into account. This specification is motivated by our research question and a need for making the analysis of the reform history manageable. The delimitation means that in practice, the control and practices of Swedish schools are even more complex than we are able to show here, as there are change attempts initiated by others than the Swedish government.

We collected data by means of archive research methods (Ventresca and Mohr 2001). In the broadest sense, archive research methods aim at facilitating analysis of documents and textual materials, often of historical character. In order to be able to describe and analyse the reform history of the Swedish schools, we collected governmental reports and bills, public documents, and

scientific articles and books on the subject. Two Swedish government official reports (SOU 2014:5) and (2013:30) were particularly helpful in our search for relevant material as they thoroughly described the political events of the Swedish school sector during different time periods. The first report – SOU 2014:5 – focused on the background, implementation and effects of the municipalisation reform that was implemented in Sweden in 1991. This report provided a detailed account of the reforms in the school sector from 1990 to 2008. The second report – SOU 2013:30 – sought to evaluate the effects of the reforms implemented from 2007 to 2013 and consequently covered the reforms of the second half of the studied period. The reports provided contexts and analyses of the reforms, and also guided us into further literature searches. Eventually, we ended up with a list of a bit more than 70 governmental reforms. We presented the list in different fora and asked researchers and officials engaged in Swedish school research and practice to comment on the list. On the basis of their suggestions, we were able to make some corrections and also find more reforms.

Data analysis

Data collecting and analysis was done in tandem and was based on extensive readings of the material we had gathered. We started off by coding our data according to when the reforms were implemented, their motivation, purpose and content. The initial coding was done by a research assistant and later on was double-checked by one of us. The reforms described in our material varied in scope and orientation, and our ambition was to capture the essential developments during the studied time period. After the initial coding, we applied a narrative strategy (Langley 1999) as we constructed a story out of the data. This meant that we often needed to go back to our data again in order to understand different events and how they were related. Narrative strategies can serve different purposes and Langley (1999) argues that the most interesting and compelling ones are not the descriptive narratives, but those with embedded plots or themes that act as sense-making devices. The institutions of ‘the market’, ‘the profession’ and ‘the state/bureaucracy’ acted as sense-making devices in our narrative. These institutions are well-known, established institutions (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton et al. 2012) which have been used in many studies of public sector transformations (cf. Scott *et al.* 2000; Freidson 2001; Blomgren and Waks 2014). We could have opted for other and more categories than these three. Thornton et al. (2012) do, for instance, specify ‘the state’, ‘the market’, ‘the profession’ and ‘the corporation’, where ‘the corporation’ have close resemblance to the institution of ‘the organization’ as Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2000) describe it. We chose a simpler categorisation which allowed for the narrative to be relatively clear and understandable, and which also meant that it was easier to verify with practitioners in the field. Besides, a more fine-grained analysis would not have contradicted one of the main conclusions of our study – that the reforms of the studied period have not aligned with multiple institutions – but rather strengthened them.

Institutions do not exist in their pure form in reality, but are rather a type of ‘ideal forms’ or ‘imagined worlds’ (Friedland (2001). Friedland (2001, p. 2) argues that: ‘...faith in those imagined worlds, each operating from a different set of assumptions, lies behind policy choices.’ This could be equalled to how Kraatz et al. (2008) define institutions as ‘the rules of the game’. In accordance with this, we have assumed that the reforms are expressions of policy choices based on such different ‘imagined worlds’ or ‘rules of the game’. We have thus classified the reforms according to our interpretation of the reformers’ primary intent with the reforms – did the institutions of ‘the market’, ‘the state/bureaucracy’ or ‘the profession’ act as the mental frames of reference when the reforms were decided upon? The reforms were denoted as referring to the institution of ‘the profession’ if the value it primarily sought to promote was the professional expertise of the teachers. This meant that reforms aimed at improving teachers’ expertise and theoretical knowledge, and reforms aimed at strengthening their jurisdiction were seen as departing from the institution of ‘the profession’. On the other hand, if a reform sought to promote democratic principles and rule of law by increasing state authority controls by means of extended rules and monitoring, it was interpreted as referring to the institution of ‘the state/bureaucracy’. And lastly, those reforms that aimed to make it both possible and easier for parents and students to choose schools, or those which opened up schooling to institutions other than public providers, were interpreted as referring to the institution of ‘the market’.

The approach to code empirical material according to categories inevitable meant simplifications. We are aware of these simplifications in our study. First, our approach meant that we did not analyse how the reforms actually turned out in practice. Whether or not a reform based on one institution actually turned out supporting another institution in practice has not been included in our analysis. Second, we are also aware that reforms may be associated with several institutions. The introduction of teacher career positions in Swedish schools (U2012/4904/S) was such an example. The reform meant changes that aimed to make it easier for teachers to make a career in the Swedish school system. As it aimed to increase teachers’ ability to exercise their expertise by means of a bureaucratic hierarchical structure, it could both be seen as based on ‘the profession’ and ‘the state/bureaucracy’ as institutions. The guiding principle when analysing the motives behind the reform was to search for the primary value the reform sought to promote. In the case of the career teacher positions, it was clear that the overarching value put forward was to increase teachers’ ability to exercise their expertise. The reform was therefore coded as referring to the institution of ‘the profession’. While our approach has meant that the complexity of the situation has been reduced, this has, at the same time, helped us to recognise patterns and connections within the material. As understanding the pattern or dynamics between different reforms has been at the core of our research question, we have opted for this approach.

The study: Governmental reforms in the Swedish school system from 1990 to 2013

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the school system in Sweden and other countries has been the arena for intense reforming and political concern (Jarl and Pierre 2012; Rönnberg 2014). The Swedish school system was, at the beginning of the 1990s, characterised by a strong decentralisation and marketisation trend. Earlier on, the system had been characterised by central government regulations and controls. Teachers and school leaders had been centrally employed and a system of central government grants was in use (Ahlin and Mörk 2008). Over time, school governance was accused of being too rigid and bureaucratic and it was argued that detailed state control should be abandoned and that decentralisation and ‘management by objectives’ should become the central governing principles (Jacobsson and Sahlin-Andersson 1995). By means of a comprehensive municipality reform in 1991, the responsibilities of staff, resource allocation, and of organising, evaluating and developing school and teacher activities, were transferred from the state to the municipalities (SOU 2014:5). This comprehensive transformation required several adaptations of the Swedish school system and spurred many new reforms. A grant reform was implemented as the municipal responsibility needed to be accompanied by a local capacity to affect and allocate schooling resources. This meant that the central grants targeted to specific school costs were abandoned and replaced by a single lump-sum grant to the school sector as a whole (Ahlin and Mörk 2008). Teachers’ jurisdiction was deregulated as the formal requirements for a specialised subject competence was abolished (Skolförordningen 1971:235; SFS 1990:1215). Instead, it was up to the municipalities to see to it that the hired teachers had the required competence. The central governmental control of teaching materials, which had had a strong controlling effect on school practices, was also abandoned (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006:13) and later this opened up to teachers being able to choose their teaching materials on their own. All in all, there were several reforms during this period that fundamentally transformed the organisation of the school system. The outcome of this was that Sweden became one of the most decentralised school sectors in the OECD (Ahlin and Mörk 2008).

Reforms aimed at creating a market

In 1992 and 1993, the central-right wing coalition government reinforced a school choice reform and an independent school reform with the support of the Green Party (government bill. 1991/92:95; government bill. 1992/93:230). The changes meant that a market for educational services was introduced. Independent schools that organised as for-profit corporations, non-profit organisations, and private foundations competed with public schools by means of a voucher system. Schools competed for students and faced the risk of having to shut down if they were not attractive enough. Later on, venture capitalists entered the school sector, which sparked an intensive political debate on whether or not it should be possible to earn huge profits out of publicly funded businesses. By

means of the reforms, the system had gone from one where students attended the municipal school of their catchment area, to one where students opted for schools of their choice that were either publicly or privately run. The previously public and uniform school system of Sweden had, by way of these reforms, turned into a system where private corporations could be publicly financed (Blomqvist and Rothstein 2000).

The reforms challenged the previous work practices in schools in different ways. Among the problems that were put forward was the fact that it had become harder to work on a long-term basis with educational development as more energy had to be put into branding and marketing tasks (Lundström and Parding 2011). Stenlås (2009) argued that the Swedish teaching profession had been deprofessionalised as a result of market and managerial reforms of the 1990s. Core values, such as scientific knowledge, had been de-emphasised by ideals of management, control and efficiency.

Reforms aimed at increasing governmental monitoring

During the second half of the 1990s, school performances of Swedish students deteriorated. The decline was general, throughout all subjects and grades, but was most obvious when it came to mathematics and natural sciences (Fredriksson and Vlachos 2011). The Swedish school system was still organised according to a decentralised market structure where public and independent schools competed for students, but the government intensified its efforts to address the problems by launching several new reforms that aimed at sharpening governmental control and monitoring (Nytell 2006; Rönnberg 2014). Among the changes were: re-introduced school inspections (SFS 2002:1160) and later on the introduction of an independent school inspectorate (government bill 2008/07:50;), mandatory quality reporting (SFS 1997:702), new curricula (Lpo 94; Lpf 94), grading systems (government bill 2008/09:66) and more national tests (SKOLFS 2009:3; government bill 2008/09:87).

The Swedish school had a long tradition of governmental inspections and evaluations (Ekholm and Lindvall 2007). However, this tradition was broken as a consequence of the transfer of the responsibility of the schools from the state to the municipalities and dominating ideas of decentralisation in the beginning of the 1990s. The then newly established Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket) was to govern through its solid knowledge and expertise in the field of education, and not by means of inspections, rules and financial incentives (Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson 1995). This form of state governance was later criticised by leading politicians (Ekholm and Lindvall 2007, p. 10) and in the spring of 2003, the Swedish National Agency for Education was re-established and given more explicit mandate to inspect schools and local authorities. The emphasis on governmental control and auditing was reinforced even further in 2008, when a new and independent auditing authority, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen) was established and funded (government bill 2008/07:50). The purpose of the new authority was to create a more distinct structure where the nature of the authorities' work would become 'less school

consultancy and more of governmental supervision' (Blomgren and Waks 2009). Schools were to be inspected more often and the inspections were to focus on the performance of each school, and on student progress and achievements. The authority performed quality audits and also performed regular supervision as it monitored whether public and private schools obeyed rules and regulations (Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2013).

Reforms aimed at strengthening the teaching profession

The problematic situation concerning student performances did, however, continue. The Swedish National Agency for Education had repeatedly warned that the school performances of the Swedish students had declined (SOU 2013:30, p. 32). The international Pisa (Programme for international student assessment) surveys measuring the proficiency of 15-year-old students in mathematics, reading and science, had, during the period from 2000 onwards, shown that Swedish students' performances were steadily declining (OECD 2015, p. 7). Furthermore, the level of qualified teachers in Swedish schools had also been declining, and at the end of the studied period, the teaching programmes at the country's universities were in a state of crisis, as it was hard to get enough applicants and the knowledge level among those recruited was declining (Ekström 2014).

Besides the efforts to increase governmental control, several efforts were therefore made during the period to strengthen the professional role of the teachers. This was done by means of launching two advanced teacher training initiatives (government bill 2006/07:1; U2011/5531/S); renewing the teacher training program, introducing new teaching degrees and re-introducing a teacher training programme for special education teachers (government bill 2009/10:89); carrying out special initiatives, among other things strengthening teaching skills in maths (government bill 2012/13:64) and by implementing a teaching licence (government bill 2010/11:20). To become licensed, teachers were required to have a degree in education and had to complete a probationary year under the supervision of a senior teacher. The school principal then assessed, in relation to standards established by the Swedish National Agency for Education, whether or not to recommend that the teacher should be registered as a licensed teacher.

The reforms of the studied time period are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Governmental reforms in the Swedish school sector 1990-2013

Year	In English	In Swedish
1990	Deregulation of teacher jurisdiction	Behörighetsreglerna för lärare togs bort
1991	Deregulation of teaching materials industry	Läromedelsindustrin avreglerades
1991	The municipalization reform	Kommunaliseringen av skolan
1991	School law change	Förändring i skollagen
1991	Swedish National Agency for Education established	Statens skolverk etableras

1991	Upper secondary school reform	Gymnasiereformen
1992	Independent school reform	Friskolereformen
1993	National school leadership training programme	Rektorsutbildning
1993	School choice reform	Valfrihetsreformen
1993	The 1993 grant reform	Förändring av statsbidragssystemet
1993	Deregulation of qualifications assessment	Meritvärderingsreglerna förändras
1994	New curriculums, grading systems elementary school	Nya läroplaner och betygssystem grundskolan
1994	New curriculums, grading systems gymnasium	Nya läroplaner och betygssystem gymnasiet
1995	Introduction of performance reviews	Utvecklingssamtal införs
1996	Local governance – parental majority	Lokalt styre – föräldramajoritet
1996	Certain school issues	Vissa skolfrågor
1997	Local governance – pupil majority	Lokalt styre – elevmajoritet
1997	Extended curriculums	Läroplan för skola, förskoleklass och fritidshem
1997	Quality reporting in schools	Kvalitetsredovisning
1999	Quality reporting in schools	Kvalitetsredovisning
1999	National quality review board	Kvalitetsgranskningsnämnden inrättas
2001	Schooling for asylum seeking children	Asylsökande barns skolgång
2001-2006	Governmental grants for personnel reinforcement	Personalförstärkning
2001	New teacher training programme	Ny lärarutbildning
2001	Quality reporting in schools	Kvalitetsredovisning
2001	Independent schools – clarifications	Fristående skolor – förtydligande rätt till bidrag
2002	Termination of the development dialogue	Skolverkets utvecklingsdialog avslutas
2003	National inspections start	Skolverkets skolinspektioner startar
2003	Extended training plans	Utveckling av utvecklingssamtalen
2003	Swedish National Agency for School Improvement	Myndigheten för skolutveckling inrättas
2004	Knowledge and quality in the gymnasium	Kunskap och kvalitet i gymnasieskolan

2006	Written development plans	Skriftliga individuella utvecklingsplaner införs
2006	Security, respect and responsibility	Trygghet, respekt och ansvar
2007	Advanced teacher training program I	Läraryftet I
2007	Measures to improve the study environment	Åtgärder för ökad studiero
2007	Extended choices in the gymnasium	Frisökning – ökade valmöjligheter i gymnasiet
2007	Changes in written reviews	Skriftliga omdömen i utvecklingsdialogen ändras
2008	Education goals in third grade	Införandet av mål i årskurs 3
2008	The Swedish Schools Inspectorate	Statens skolinspektion inrättas
2008	Reviews from first grade	Skriftliga omdömen från årskurs 1
2008	National Agency Special Needs Education	Specialpedagogiska myndigheten inrättas
2008	Teacher training program (special education)	Speciallärarutbildning återinförs
2008	New grading scale	Ny betygsskala
2008	Extended programme syllabus	Utökad omfattning på utbildningsplanerna
2008	Change in home language instructions	Förändringar i modersmålsundervisningen
2008	Additions to curriculums	Kompletteringar av kursplaner
2008	Extended controls of records	Utvidgad registerkontroll
2009	More national tests	Fler nationella prov
2009-	Special initiatives: read, write, count	Specialsatsningar läsa, skriva och räkna
2009	Special initiatives: maths, science, engineering	Satsningar på matematik, natur och teknik
2009	Centralized correction of national tests	Central rättning av nationella prov
2010	New teacher training programme	Ny lärarutbildning
2010	Compulsory job training for new principals	Befattningsutbildning för nyanställda rektorer
2010	Grades from sixth grade	Betyg från åk6
2010	Licensing of teachers	Läraryftet I
2010	Clarification of the role of the principal	Förtydligande av rektors roll
2010	Compulsory job training (principals and etc.)	Obl. befattningsutbildning rektorer m.m.
2010	Expanded opportunities for accountability	Utökade möjligheter för ansvarsutkrävande

2011	New school law	Ny skollag
2011	New upper secondary school	Ny gymnasieskola
2011	New teaching degrees	Nya lärarexamina
2011	Advanced training for principals	Rektorslyftet
2011	New curriculums (Lgr11) (Gy 11)	Nya läroplaner (Lgr 11) (Gy 11)
2011	New grading system	Nytt betygssystem
2011	Rights to special support	Stärkt rätt till särskilt stöd
2011	Equal opportunities for schools	Lika villkor frist. och kom. skolor
2012	Advanced teacher training program II	Läraryftet II
2012	Special initiatives: teaching in maths	Matematiklyftet
2013	Career teacher positions	Karriärtjänster
2013	Swedish for immigrants	Mer undervisning i svenska för nyanlända
2013	Less administration	Minskad administration

Analysis: Reforms for completion and counterbalance

The account of the reform history of the Swedish school system shows that about 70 governmental reforms were implemented from 1990 to 2013. The reforms have varied in scope and orientation. In the beginning of the period, the ‘municipalisation reform’, the ‘school choice reform’ and the ‘independent school reform’ fundamentally changed the Swedish school system towards a decentralised market structure. These reforms thus paved the way for ‘the market’ as an institution in the Swedish school system. During the second half of the 1990s and onwards, the governmental reforms were increasingly directed towards enhancing governmental monitoring and control and strengthening the professional position of the teachers, which meant that ‘the state/bureaucratic’ and ‘the professional’ institutions, were reinforced.

In relation to previous institutional reform studies, we can thus conclude that our study does not support results showing that public reforms have been uniform in the sense that they have been attributable to one and the same institution. Our study shows institutional pluralism rather than coherency, which is in line with more recent research approaches within institutionalism (Kraatz and Block 2008; Greenwood et al. 2010; 2011; Dunn and Jones 2010). This has consequences, we argue, as institutional pluralism offers new ways of understanding governmental reforms and the driving forces behind reforms. Based on our data, we suggest that institutional pluralism creates a specific form of reform dynamic of simultaneous *completions* and *counterbalances*.

Reforming for completions and counterbalances

The driving forces behind the expansion of reforms have been described in depth by Brunsson (2009). Reforms are driven by a combination of ‘problems to be addressed, solutions to be applied and by forgetfulness’ (Brunsson 2009, p. 14). Reforms are bound to fail because they are built on rationalistic models of decision-making that will never be realised in practice. This failure explains the abundance of reforms. The failure creates the need for new reforms, and as organisations forget about the ‘let-downs’, and as there exist ‘mechanisms of hope’, faith in reforms will be maintained despite the fact that they do not live up to their stated aims.

The assumption that the inspiration for the reforms is derived from the same institution – ‘the organization’ – has meant that the dynamics of the reforms have primarily been described as one of *completion* (Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2000, p. 736 f.). Public sector units such as schools, hospitals and authorities have been considered ‘incomplete’ by reformers who carried the institution of the organisation as ‘the underlying mental image or a mental frame of reference’ (ibid. p. 736) in their work. As each institution forms a system, it is natural to expect that supporting reforms will follow on each other in order to complete the system (Blomgren and Waks 2015). The reason for this is that some practices are seen as so closely associated with other practices that they need to be implemented in order for the system to be ‘complete’. In the case of the reform of the Swedish school system, this was shown by the fact that it was not one reform that made it possible for the Swedish education system to be organised as a market, but several. The comprehensive reforms of the beginning of the decentralisation and marketisation trend in Swedish school governance – ‘the municipalisation reform’, ‘the school choice reform’ and the ‘independent school reform’ – implied several additional adaptations and changes (i.e., deregulations of teacher jurisdiction and the teaching material industry, changes in school-related law, the grant reform and the national school leadership training program, etc.). In this way, by means of both large fundamental reforms and smaller adaptations and changes, the market as an institution was manifested and reinforced in the Swedish school system.

However, when analysing the period after the introduction of the decentralisation and market reforms, we found that ‘completion’ as a mechanism was not particularly suited to explain what was happening; or at least it did not seem to be the only mechanism at play. As the idea that the Swedish school was in a state of crisis began to gain widespread acceptance in society, reformers perceived that they needed to do something. But what? Our material showed that the actions that followed were not merely those of ‘completion’ in relation to the market institution. Instead, monitoring reforms emanating out of the bureaucratic institution such as ‘standardised quality reporting in schools’, the establishment of a ‘National Quality Review Board’ and the ‘Swedish National Agency for Education’ and additional changes in the quality reporting in schools were launched. Likewise, reforms supporting the institution of professionalism such as ‘the advanced teacher-training programmes I and II’, ‘new teacher training pro-

grammes', the 'licensing of teachers', and the 'career teacher positions', were also introduced. So, if 'completion' in regard to the market institution could not explain these events, what could? It seemed like 'completion' was not as full an explanation in a situation characterised by institutional pluralism as it was in a situation dominated by one institution. The reason for this was that the term 'completion' implies activities aimed at creating wholeness – in terms of our case – creating a complete bureaucracy, for instance. The term indicates that some aspects of the bureaucracy are seen as missing, and the dynamic it implies is that of addition in order to create 'wholeness' – a complete bureaucracy. However, what 'completion' as a term fails to do is say something about the relationship between different institutions. Thus, it cannot explain why reformers suddenly start to support alternative institutions. In order to explain that, we propose the concept of *counterbalance* as we think it complements 'completion' when it comes to understanding the expansion of reforms during the studied period. The institutional reform perspective has shown us that reforms often fail, but instead of trying to deal with the problems by implementing further reforms supporting the dominating institutions, public reformers seemed in our case to have looked elsewhere, to alternative institutions. This type of situation is described by Hirschman (1982) as he tells us that a societal movement in any direction contains the seeds of its own destruction as people get disappointed by what they get and search for something else. Another source of inspiration for the concept of 'counterbalance' is the idea put forward by Hernes (1983) that problems which arise from using one ideal model of governance are often compensated for by introducing reforms based on other ideal models of governance. Just as the introduction of market models in the public sector were reactions to problems with the previous bureaucratic models of governance in the 1980s and 1990s, the case of the Swedish school sector shows how perceived problems with the market model has been compensated for with reforms based on other models, such as the state bureaucracy and the profession.

So, the mechanism of 'counterbalance' in this context means that reforms based on one institution are introduced as a means to counteract problems perceived to be caused by reforms based on another institution. But it is not a question of a total shift. Introducing 'standardised quality reporting in schools' and the other governmental monitoring reforms did not mean that the bureaucratic institution was established in its entirety, nor that the market system was totally replaced. This again points to the fact that institutions such as the market, the bureaucracy and the profession constitute systems of various parts that supports each other. And while 'completion' indicates that some aspects of an institution are seen as missing in practice and are in need of being added, 'counterbalance' indicates that some aspects of an institution in practice are seen as counteracting aspects of another institution. In our case, the reforms that were seen as being in need of 'counterbalance' were the reforms that had led up to a market situation where schools were striving for profits. The fear was that the striving for profits had led to short-sightedness which, in turn, had lowered school quality. As a way of offsetting these risks that were associated with the market model, bureaucratic

and profession-based reforms emphasising governmental monitoring and strengthening of the teachers were launched.

Furthermore, both movements that we have described here – reforming for *completion* and *counterbalance* – are likely to generate more reforms. This dynamic is also likely to continue in an ongoing cycle as new reforms aimed at counteracting others are likely to lead to a perception of ‘incompleteness’ and thus spur new reforms. In practical terms, our study presents a picture characterised by a ‘more-of-everything’ approach; more state control, more market mechanisms, but also more aims for professionalism. This means that the reform dynamic caused by institutional pluralism does not only spur an abundance of reforms; it also creates and sustains a system full of contradictions. The drive to complete and counterbalance means that there is a complex interplay between different ideals and practices emanating out of different and possibly contradictory institutions. One practical consequence of this is that it becomes extremely hard to evaluate the effects of the reforms. Another consequence is that it is likely to be hard for people within the organisations – such as teachers – to navigate within the realm of reforms. The complexity also accentuates, as reforms normally do not replace each other, but rather are added on top of each other, creating what Røvik (1998) calls ‘multi-standard organizations’.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have asked what impact institutional pluralism has on governmental reforms in the public sector and which are the driving forces behind them? In order to answer these questions, we accounted for the governmental reform history of the Swedish school system during the period from 1990 to 2013. The analysis showed that the public sector reforms of the period represented institutional pluralism rather than coherency, as reforms emanating out of the institutions of ‘the market’, ‘the bureaucracy’ and ‘the profession’ were abundant during the period. Our study provides new theoretical contributions to the existing body of knowledge on the expansion of governmental reforms as our findings suggest that institutional pluralism leads to reform dynamics that are characterised by simultaneous *completions* and *counterbalances*. New reforms are introduced because some practices are seen as so closely associated with other practices that they need to be implemented in order for the system to be ‘complete’. However, besides that, reforms are also driven by ambitions to counterbalance perceived side effects and unintended consequences of reforms. The way to compensate for this is to introduce reforms based on other institutions which emphasise other ideals. Reform dynamic caused by institutional pluralism does not only spur an abundance of reforms, but it also creates and sustains a system full of contradictions. How professionals and others who occupy these public organisations navigate within such contradictory systems is an interesting and important subject for further study. Furthermore, an analysis which includes other public sectors could also shed new light on the mechanisms behind the expansion of reforms.

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