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Educational providers in the marketplace: Schools' marketing responses in Chile[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a framework for analysing the responses of educational providers in competitive contexts. The evidence presented is based on empirical research carried out in one Chilean municipality. The objective of the paper is to analyse the responses developed by the schools with which to position themselves in the Chilean education market. The results show how the schools' external communication is related to a range of factors such as their perception of competition, their position in the local hierarchy and the characteristics of the local market, as well as the symbolic attributes oriented toward positioning themselves within the market. Different schools' typologies were identified with regard to marketing strategies in terms of the form and intensity they took on.

1. Introduction

Education market policies have dramatically changed the management processes of schools, and how schools engage with their nearby external environment (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowen, 1995; Jabbar, 2015; van Zanten, 2009; Woods, Bagley, & Glatter, 1998). However, research that addresses how schools respond to the incentives provided by the market remains scarce, particularly in terms of the strategies that schools use to position themselves within the education market (Waslander, Pater, & van der Weide, 2010). In this context, marketing strategies are becoming an ever more important way to attract students. Nonetheless, the field of educational marketing in primary and secondary education remains under-analysed. Although the emergence of charter schools in the USA has increased interest in the marketing strategies developed by this typology of schools, schools' marketing has been little analysed and un-theorized in the context of research into pro-market educational reforms research (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004; Olson Beal, Stewart, & Lubienski, 2016), particularly in comparison with other dimensions of these reforms, such as their impact in terms of effectiveness and equity or families' school choice strategies.

For several reasons, the Chilean education system is particularly appropriate for analysing the strategies developed by schools in order to communicate with their external environment. First, the Chilean education system is one of the most marketized in the world (Bellei & Vanni, 2015). The introduction of a universal voucher system, as well as a high level of freedom of school choice, have fostered school competition to attract students. Secondly, the strong knowledge of both the demand and supply sides of the education market rules, after more than 35 years of a market-oriented education system, enables an in-depth analysis of the behaviour and rationalities of the different actors that are part of the system, in both the offer and the demand sides. Although Chile is one of the

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most emblematic cases of the adoption of education market and privatization policies, the evidence for marketing strategies developed by educational providers is scarce. The objective of this paper is to identify the marketing strategies developed by schools in the context of the Chilean education market, as well as the factors (endogenous and exogenous) influencing these strategies. The results presented in this article are based on an empirical research conducted in one municipality of the Santiago conurbation. The fieldwork for this research consisted of in-depth interviews with 14 principals from a sample of schools, selected based on their institutional and socioeconomic characteristics, as well as the analysis of the promotional materials and schools' webpages.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section reviews the evidence concerning the responses of schools to the market environment and synthesizes the main results of the research. The second section presents and describes the analytical framework proposed for the analysis of the marketing processes developed by schools and described. In the third section, the case study approach and the methods used therein are presented. In the fourth section the key mediating factors and the different dimensions involved in educational marketing processes are analysed. In the fifth section, as a way to synthesize the main results obtained, marketing strategies' typologies are presented. Finally, the paper outlines the main conclusions and proposes future research directions concerning school marketing.

2. Schools' responses to marketized environments

Schools' marketing strategies must be understood not as an isolated response, but as part of schools' complex behaviour in competitive environments. In this sense, educational reforms that introduce choice and competition between schools imply the need for important changes in the management strategies adopted by these institutions. In recent decades, many educational systems have adopted this reform approach. Some of the most well-known and emblematic examples are United Kingdom, New Zealand and Chile (Lubienski, 2001). Market theory in education¹ (Lubienski, 2006) expects that, as a result of the incentives imposed by the market, schools will become more responsive organizations, particularly in order to satisfy the demands and preferences of families (Chubb & Moe, 1990)

It is the centrality of schools' expected behaviour as a result of competition and choice policies that make it essential to understand how schools respond, and what kind of strategies they develop within a competitive environment. In fact, the educational improvement expected by the adoption of pro-market policies depends primarily on the capacity of schools to respond as the theory expects. Most of the existing studies on education markets focus on the impact of these reforms according to dimensions such as effectiveness, equity and efficiency (Alegre & Ferrer, 2010; Chakrabati & Peterson, 2009; Rouse & Barrow, 2009; Saporito, 2003), or on how school choice policies have influenced the behaviour of families and specific social groups (Ball, 2003; Ball, Bowe, & Gewirtz, 1995; Karsten, Visscher, & de Jong, 2001). In contrast, evidence regarding how schools respond to competitive environments as a result of these reforms remains relatively limited (Waslander et al., 2010).

It is, however, possible to identify some studies, which, at least partially, describe and analyse the strategies and responses of educational providers in relation to the market. Since educational reforms have been introduced already in the 1980s, some studies published in the 1990s have analysed how schools responded to a newly competitive environment in the case of England (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Woods et al., 1998) and New Zealand (Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Lauder & Hughes, 1999). Scholars focusing on charter schools' programmes have analysed how schools have responded to competitive environments in the USA (Jabbar, 2016; Jennings, 2010; Lubienski, 2006) and Colombia (Termes, Bonal, Verger, & Zancajo, 2015). In the case of Chile, some studies (Contreras, Bustos, & Sepúlveda, 2007; Gauri, 1998; Hsieh & Urquiola, 2006) have identified the main strategies developed by schools for competing in a market environment, particularly as it relates to 'cream skimming'.

Despite the different contexts analysed, the studies presented above show a number of common results regarding the responses of educational providers to the market, which can be synthesized. Firstly, policies oriented towards increasing the level of school choice for families, as well as the competition between schools, deeply affect the management practices of affected schools. Secondly, the responses of schools to the competitive environment are influenced by their characteristics, the socioeconomic and educational characteristics of the local context, and their position in the local hierarchy of schools. Thirdly, to some extent, the main objective of schools – under this market-oriented regulatory framework – is the creation of specific niches of demand through the diversification of their educational product, trying to reduce the level of competition that they are exposed to. Schools' diversification strategies can be based on substantive changes that affect their daily practices, or on symbolic representations designed to shape the image of a school and how families perceive the institution. Fourthly, as a result of these differentiation strategies, the Local Education Market (LEM) has become segmented according to the different typologies of schools. Finally, the need for schools to communicate with their external environment increases in order to positioning themselves in the education market, as well as to attracting students in a context of increasing competition between schools. In this context and as a result of these responses, educational marketing adopts a key role in not only designing a diversification strategy, but also facilitating effective communications with their closest external environment.

3. The role of marketing for schools

As shown above, marketing is one of schools' responses identified in the literature concerning the behaviour of educational providers in competitive environments. However, the field of educational marketing in basic education (primary and secondary level)

¹ Market theory refers to the application of public choice theory principles and prescriptions to the field of education.

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