Marks of distinction: Branding responses to market logics in schools

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Abstract

This study explores how public sector schools respond to marketization, especially related to branding strategies, and the consequences for governance and administraton of schools. Findings are analyzed in light of institutional logics theory. Drawing on a diverse set of data on public upper secondary schools in Oslo, Norway, the study reveals that market position dictates schools' responses to marketization, as privileged schools demonstrate branding of a more differentating character than the more generic branding of marginalized schools. Another finding is that marketization makes branding an inescapable feature of running a school. Consequently, a negative response, such as to avoid or defy branding, is not a realistic option for schools. For governance measures, however, it seems to be an effective marketization tool. However, as school responses are dictated by market position and economical resources, marginalized schools may become even more marginalized. The negative spiral represents a challenge to public administrators' effective governance of schools.

Introduction

Do we see a parallell shift towards full-blown marketization of public upper secondary schools, more school branding, and a dominant institutional market logic at the expense of a professional logic? These issues are explored using data from public upper secondary schools in Oslo, Norway. After introducing New Public Management ideas in the public sector in the 1990s, deregulation of public services, including education, has been the norm in many countries. The Norwegian capital of Oslo has, not unlike Chicago in the US and parts of Sweden, introduced market measures based on neoliberal ideas to public education (Hovdenak & Stray, 2015). In Norway Oslo has been a zone of experimentation in access to upper secondary education the last decade. Authorities in the city have implemented a high degree of marketization of upper secondary education, involving free choice of school combined with test-based accountability and per capita funding where funds are tied to the student (Haugen, 2020). When schools compete for students, they have to find ways to make themselves attractive to possible applicants and try to avoid feats that make them less attractive. As a result, school principals in Oslo are under pressure to build and maintain a solid school brand.

Branding in schools has so far received little scholarly attention, and it remains unclear how public schools respond to market-induced branding pressure. Thus, and as a response to calls for research into "the potential benefits and possible shortcomings of using branding principles in public organizations" (Leijerholt et al., 2019), the present paper seeks to examine these issues by providing insights into these guiding questions:

1. To which extent do upper secondary school leaders respond to the market logic within the upper secondary school field by seeking to brand their schools?

2. To which extent do branding efforts by privileged schools differ from branding efforts by marginalized schools?

3. In general , what are the implications of such branding efforts for municipal governing of upper secondary education?

Firstly, this study contributes the literature and research on branding in public sector organizations, and especially, public organizations exposed to market mechanisms, by bringing attention market position as a driver of branding strategies. Relatedly, it sheds light on how a low market position goes along with challenges to effective branding efforts, as unpopular schools have few distinguishing features suited for branding. Secondly, the study provides insights into how market exposure covaries with a shift in institutional logics towards a market logic, and how such a double whammy of organizational change set the scene for branding. Thirdly, the paper highlights how marketization limits and even hinders certain responses to a market logic, which has implications for governance of the upper secondary school field. Fourthly, the study contributes to the sparse literature on branding in public sector schools by bringing attention to factors affecting how public sector schools respond to market exposure, and the ways that branding reflects their position in the school market.

In the next section of the paper research on branding in general, branding in schools, and branding in public sector schools in relation to institutional logics theory, including organizational responses to institutional logics, is presented. Then the research context and methods are laid out, followed by empirical findings and

discussion, particularly on how the findings contribute to scholarship on branding in schools.

Theoretical observations

Organizational branding is defined as the "systematic effort to develop and present the organization as one unified brand" (Christensen et al., 2008, p. 64). If organizations are to operate successfully, they should "put themselves out there, to convey who they are, what they do, and what they stand for" (Fombrun et al., 2004, p. 95; Wæraas, 2019). In contrast to prior notions, organizational identity is now seen as subject to unstability and change, and not as durable (Gioia et al., 2000), which sets the scene for building organizational identity through branding. The internal dimension of organizational branding involves establishing employee support of the desired brand (Miles & Mangold, 2004; Wæraas & Dahle, 2020), while the external dimension is about establishing emotional bonds with external stakeholders (Leijerholt et al., 2019). This paper explores the external dimension of organizational branding.

In the present paper the concept of *public sector brands* is conceptualized as "public organizations, public services, or public policies that among stakeholders are associated with unique and attractive values, meanings, and characteristics", while *public sector branding* involves "process of systematically creating such associations in the minds of stakeholders" (Dahle & Wæraas, 2020, p. 3). There are similarities with corporate marketing, but marketing involves establishing awareness and purchase decisions among customers, while branding forms identities, values, and meanings.

Branding of schools

Scholars have generelly devoted little attention to public sector branding. Exemplified, Leijerholt et al. (2019) identified only 92 relevant papers all in all in their review of the literature. As one subfield of public sector branding, branding in public sector schools has hardly been researched at all. Some studies explore branding of private or independent schools, but few focus on public sector schools. The few who do mainly explore niches, for example promotion materials (Lubienski, 2007), visual techniques (Gewirtz et al., 1995), and consequences of rebranding public sector elementary schools (Cucchiara, 2008). Dahle and Wæraas (2020) found that marketization led both privileged and less privileged schools to engage in branding efforts.

School markets and institutional logics

In this study institutional logics theory is utillized as a framework for analysis of the relationship between marketization of the organizational field, as a recognized area of institutional life (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148), of upper secondary schools, positioning responses to marketization, and school branding. Institutional logics set up broad belief systems that shapes the cognition, behaviour and communication of actors in organizational fields (Alford & Friedland, 1985; DiMaggio, 1979; Friedland & Alford, 1991). Hence, an institutional logic is defined as "the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time

and space, and provide meaning to their social reality" (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 804). In addition, the prevailing institutional logic functions as a guide so as to "interpret the organizational reality" (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 804).

Institutional logics have been interpreted as being embedded with central institutions in human societies, namely capitalism, the bureaucratic state, democracy, family, and truth (incorporating religion and science) (Friedland & Alford, 1991), and, later, the market, the corporation, the organization, the professions, the state, the family, the industry, religion, inter-organizational networks, and geographic communities (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999; Thornton et al., 2015). Such institutions "provide a distinct set of often contradictory logics that form the bases of political conflicts" (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, p. 805). In light of this, the field of upper secondary schools is seen as a market with a prevailing institutional logic rooted in economic principles (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015). Simultaneously, the teaching professions may work according to a *professional logic*, based on "common values and beliefs about quality standards" and pedagogical methods in schooling of children and teenagers" (Hattke et al., 2016, p. 238). Additionally, "*bureaucratic logics*, based on process control, democratic participation, and state intervention" (Hattke et al., 2016, p. 238), may be present as well as market and professional logics.

Organizational responses to prevailing institutional logics may vary and take on different forms, for example acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, and manipulation (Oliver, 1991, p. 152). Acquiescence implies that organizations adhere (habit) to institutional logics, mimick institutional models based on logics (imitation), or abide logics (compliance). Compromise entails to balancing, accommodating, or bargaining between stakeholders, with compromise as the main goal. Avoidance

means to preclude, buffer, or escape from institutional pressure or logics. Defiance is to resist institutional pressure or logics, while manipulation is done to change or influence the forces that express the reigning logic. Thus, in the present paper reactions are viewed as responses to market exposition, and analyzed according to the responses laid out by Oliver (1991).

Methodology

Data collection

The present study builds on and expands the studies on branding in Oslo city high schools by Dahle and Wæraas (2020). It is based on several sources of data. New schools admission statistics for 2019/2020 provided by the Oslo municipal administration showed necessary admission grade levels for the Specialization in General Studies for each school. This admission level is seen as a proxy for the schools' popularity and market position. By purposive sampling (Silverman, 2013) 15 schools, which represent two-thirds of the public upper secondary schools in the city, with different admission levels were identified. Five schools were on the lowest admission level (10 to 29.9 admission points necessary for admission), and are viewed as marginalized. Five schools were on a medium admission level (30 to 44.9 points), while five schools were on the highest admission level (45 to 60 points) and are viewed as privileged. Furthermore, the web pages and social media profiles of the schools, especially the 'About us' and 'Our profile' sections, were studied to explore the extent of their branding further, including how school management choose to brand their schools. This analysis was based on distinctiveness as the aim

for the branding (Fombrun et al., 2004), specifically "empasizing the distinctive characteristics that make it different from its competitors" (Kapferer, 2008, p. 96), which desired outcome was branding with differentiating qualities. All statements were translated from Norwegian to English by the author. Official documents and documents made official by media were studied to get insight into the governance of the school market, including issues that were given extra attention. Official, national maps from Kartverket were utilized to get a grip on the schools' geographical location within the city.

Insert Table 1 about here

Analysis

Branding statements were analyzed with content analysis with thematic coding (Kuckartz, 2014), using the software Provalis QDA Miner. Content analysis as a research method is rooted in "systematic examination of communicative material" (Mayring, 2000, p. 266) based on classification of codes, and "breaking down the text into single units of analysis, and oriented to a system of categories" (Mayring, 2000, p. 267). During the first data-driven step of coding, first-order codes were assigned to

branding statements. As a result of this process, 32 codes were identified and assigned to statements. To reduce the codes into second-order categories, axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) was utilized in the second step of coding. Exemplified, 'common characteristics', 'good enough', and 'for all' (first-order) were coded as 'generic' (second-order), while 'better than others', 'top results', and 'university affiliation' (first-order) were coded as 'differentiating' (second-order). The procedure led to three second-order categories: 'Generic', 'middle', and 'differentiating'. The full coding scheme with categories is shown in Table 1.

Results

Responses to branding pressure.

Dahle and Wæraas (2020) unveiled that the marketization of upper secondary education resulted in schools at different admission levels engaging in branding efforts, in order to cope with the competition for students and, thus, public funding. Thus, both privileged and marginalized schools actively try to improve their brand. An expanded exploration of their websites and profiles on Facebook and Instagram revealed that all of the schools use slogans, 13 of 15 have unique logos, and generally their branding include values regarded as positive, e.g. 'cooperation', 'diversity', 'flexible' and 'open'. However. the analysis also revealed differences between them. The marginalized schools demonstrate an indistinct and less boastful branding, with focus on generic features instead of differentiating characteristics, than the privileged schools. Thus, most of their branding statements were coded as 'generic', as exemplified in Table 2. School nr. 12 states that it is "open, international

and innovative", which are characteristics used by other schools and arguably does not represent differentiating features that may improve the school's brand. Similarly, school nr. 13 states that they offer an "inspiring learning environment", "well-being" and "mastery", while school nr. 15 says that it is "proud, varied and united", and characterized by "diversity" and "variation". The marginalized schools also use supportive words and statements, for example "caring", "safe", "have your say", and "low threshold", which is far from the more competitive language used by some of the privileged schools. The marginalized schools do not brand themselves as schools for the future academic elite. Instead, the goal is simply graduation. School nr. 13 admits that their goal is "that every student graduates from high school with as good results as possible". Relatedly, school nr. 11 declares that they try hard to "reduce absence" from classes and strive for their students to "complete and graduate".

Insert Table 2 about here

Schools on the middle level use branding with varying differentiating qualities, and some combine generic, supportive, and differentating characteristics, for example "a diverse school with university cooperation". Privileged schools, on the other hand, demonstrate a distinct branding characterized by features which obviously have differentiating qualities. They do not shy away from using generic words like "adventure", "colourful" and "inspiring", but unlike the less popular schools,

they have chosen an angle meant to brand them as schools with unique characteristics. These statements were coded as 'differentiating'. School nr. 3 brands itself as a school with "ambitions" and a "school of the future", related to its cooperation and colocation with a prestigious research institution. School nr. 5 is proud of its location in an old, prestigious building which formerly has housed an art college and an art museum, and brands itself as a "creative school" with a curriculum strong on music, dance, art, design, and architecture. ~~One of the~~ Finally~~, and perhaps surprisingly~~, school nr. 1 ties its celebrated and well-known principal to its brand, stating that "**[**the principal's name**]** wants education to be something more - it should be an experience". Moreover, it profiles itself as a progressive school with modern teaching methods, interdisciplinary programs, and its own research program for talented students. Another school boasts of being the school of a former Nobel Prize winner, a famous mathematician, and a former prime minister of Norway.

Insert Table 3 about here

Consequently, the schools' popularity, measured by grades necessary for admission, and thereby their position in the Oslo school market, affects how they respond to the branding pressure exerted upon them by marketization. The privileged schools utilize

a more distinct and differentiating branding than their marginalized counterparts, whose branding efforts can be characterized as indistinct and generic.

As shown in Table 3, other school characteristics, specifically the area, distance from the city centre, and status as a developing school, may play a role, as well. All the marginalized schools both are situated in the less affluent eastern parts of Oslo, as they are in average 7,2 kilometers away from the city centre, compared to 2,3 kilometers in average for the privileged schools and 3,6 kilometers for schools on the middle level. All the marginalized schools have been identified as developing schools (dubbed "G8 schools") in need of extra funding and support from the municipal school administration. The privileged school do not have G8 status, and are situated in the more affluent central and western parts of the city. All in all, it seems that the branding pressure established by marketization of upper secondary education in Oslo is being reinforced by school characteristics like market position, distance from city centre, area and developing status. These factors, when working together, may explain why privileged schools utillize a more differentiating branding than marginalized schools.

Municipal governance of the schools

Documents and media clippings reveal that the municipal school administration has acted both as promoter of a marketized upper secondary school field in the city, particularly by tying it to the schools' good results in national tests, and as administrator of the marketized field. This indicates that the market logic to a certain extent has become interwoven with the bureaucratic logic. Through its administrative role, the school administration has been a proponent for what can be characterized

as a *system supporting approach*. This has materialized itself on several levels. First, the administration has been the governing body of frequent testing of students in Oslo, where the test rate is markedly higher than in schools in other parts of the country. Second, the administration has implemented widespread reporting of different indicators on school level and put pressure on schools to achieve the expected results. Third, the administration has introduced training of its teachers and principals in how to speak publicly about the "Oslo school"[1]. Fourth, the administration has introduced a point-based system where principals get a score based on student results, staff performance, staff presenteeism, and principals' loyalty to the administration[2]. Fifth, to build and protect the schools' brands and probably also the brand of the "Oslo school", the administration has directly imposed restrictive measures on employee voice (Dahle & Wæraas, 2020). These efforts represent a governing approach reflecting a market logic, in some instances in combination with a bureaucratic logic.

Lately, however, there has been a shift in the school administration's governing of the upper secondary school field, possibly due to a change of leadership both in the administration itself and in the city government. Governing has moved from being almost entirely based on and supportive of the marketized field to introducing measures meant to curb negative implications of the marketization. The main measure is a support program, including extra funding, for eight schools, termed 'G8 schools', deemed as marginalized and in need of help. In addition, some of the tests have been made voluntary on school level. So far the changes have not had much impact on marketization consequences. Still the field is characterized by

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[1] Source: https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/95aPW/osloskolen-kjoeper-medietrening-til-rektorer-for-30000-kroner-dagen
[2] Source: https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/Lw4BV/oslo-rektorer-beloennes-for-elevresultater

pronounced differences between privileged and marginalized schools. While changes take time to take effect, another clue may lie in what the city council and school administration have *not* changed. What remains the same as before is the admission system based on free choice of schools. Instead on geographical zoning of students to schools, which is common in other parts of the world, students in Oslo may still choose freely among upper secondary schools. Dahle and Wæraas (2020) showed how this freedom, combined with per capita funding, creates an iron cage effect, with similarities to Weber's *stahlhartes Gehäuse*, termed "iron cage" by Talcott Parsons in his 1930 translation of Weber's work, trapping people in systems of rationalization, effiency, and control (Weber, 1958). Here, marginalized schools come into a negative spiral they struggle to escape from: Unpopular schools achieve mediocre results which leads to huge funding cuts, something which ultimately leads to less quality, a suffering reputation, few opportunities to be selective in admission of students, which then again results in mediocre student results.

Insert Figure 1 about here

A core finding is that the iron cage effect rules out some of the possible responses to marketization presented by Oliver (1991). Figure 3 shows how the iron

cage effect works, and how it practically eliminates the possibility of Oliver's responses of defiance and avoidance. Since the tie to funding is strong, management in schools on all three popularity levels find it hard to defy the market pressure. Instead they have no choice but try to engage in some form of branding. Whereas the marginalized schools demonstrate weak branding, it seems to be more a cause of necessity than will; their schools have fewer positive differentiating features to use for branding purposes than privileged schools. The schools' responses to the marketization are of the more positive kind. Some of the privileged schools and some of the middle-level schools respond by taking on the market pressure and engage in branding of their schools. Their management seem to choose what Oliver calls acquiescence; they acquiesce to the market logic by habiting, imitating and complying with the 'patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules' of the logic. Some of the privileged schools seem to respond by compromise, as well. As they struggle to attract and keep students, and thus funding, their executives are not entirely happy with the governing of the field of upper secondary education in the city. But, in act of 'pacifying tactics' they keep mostly quiet so as not to "bite the hand that feeds them" (Oliver, 1991, p. 154).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was twofold: First, the study explored factors affecting upper secondary schools' responses to marketization, especially the introduction of free choice of schools and per capita funding. Secondly, it explored both the extent and the nature of the schools' branding efforts as response to market pressure. A

privileged market position and location in or near the city centre or western districts seem to covary with strong branding.

Theoretical implications

The findings are in line with institutional logics theory, as they provide empirical support for the core assumption within the theory, namely that broad belief systems are in existence in the upper secondary school sector in the city and shape cognitive and behavioural patterns of human activity. Through neoliberal reforms the sector was transformed into a market where schools compete for students and, thus, funding, introducing a market logic at the expense of the professional logic of educators. The paper indicates the presence of parallellism: Marketization of public upper secondary schools, more school branding, and a dominant institutional market logic at the expense of a professional logic occurs in tandem. Such a parallellism constitutes a powerful shift towards a situation where school experimentation, as in the case of Oslo, is settling into lasting patterns steered by market forces.

Successively, the paper expands theory related to responses to institutional logics. Contrary to responses described by Oliver (1991), the findings reveal that institutional arrangements, in this case a link between free choice of schools and funding, in reality makes negative responses an almost impossible option for schools. Instead, they respond by branding in an effort to attract students and, thus, funding. As a consequence, the number of possible ways of respond to market pressure is reduced. No negative responses to a more dominating market logic implies no resistance to such a logic, which may lead to the professional logic of educators

waning even more. Ultimately, the link between free choice of schools and funding sets a spiral towards a completely dominating market logic in motion.

Practical implications

For decision and policy makers, especially in the municial school administration and politicians in the Oslo city government, this proves to be an effective mechanism of steering in line with market logic terms. By linking free choice of schools to funding they lock school executives in a systemic iron cage where resistance and disobedience is costly, with the price being funding cuts as a result of few and/or not very successful students. Seen from a governing viewpoint, this seems to be an effective way of getting schools to act on market terms and according to common market rules. However, this seems to be no solution to the divide between privileged and marginalized schools, which can be ascribed to free choice of schools in a city with socially segregated areas and a prominent east/west divide. Decision and policy makers will possibly have to deal with this situation as long as they allow for free choice of schools. Even if they succeed in getting school management to compete in the market, for example with the help of branding, they will still have to struggle with the division between schools.

Relatedly, the division may even increase. The present paper unveils that schools with the most desirable market position, like the high achievers, utilizes the most effective branding. Such an outcome may lead to privileged schools being even more popular due to effective branding, while the marginalized schools, such as the survivors, to a certain extent lack distinguishing features fit for differentiating branding and falls even more behind their more privileged counterparts in terms of student

intake, funding, and thus, quality of the education they provide. Since weaker students with mediocre grades can only gain entry to the marginalized schools, weak students may become even weaker. An overall outcome of such a negative spiral may be more prominent differentiation in the form of A and B level players among both schools, students, and teachers. On the other hand, it may give a boost to both privileged schools and students and lift some of them to elite status, something which probably will be desirable for some policy makers.

Limitations and avenues for future research

The present study, like other studies, has limitations. One limitation is that the question of institutional logics is not present in the data, which could have bolstered the link between the empirical and the theoretical part of the paper. In itself this represents an avenue for future research, that is, to examine empirically the shift from a professional to a market logic. A second limitation is that the focus on branding is not as pronounced in public upper secondary schools in Norway as in similar school in the Angloamerican and Asian world. As these schools in Oslo demonstrate a low to middle level of branding (Dahle & Wæraas, 2020), they may not be as representative for public sector secondary schools as desired, yielding slightly different results than elsewhere. On the other hand, Oslo as a zone of school experimentation represents an exciting setting for a study of school marketization and branding in light of institutional logics.

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Codes	Categories
Table 1: Codes and categories extracted from the schools' branding efforts.	
Codes	**Categories**
Better than others	Differentiating branding
Top results	
Ambitious	
University affiliation	
Business cooperation	
STEM focus	
Famous alumni	
Awards received	
History	
Future-oriented	
Progressive	
Specializations	
Talent programs	
Both generic and differentiating	Middle-level branding
Both supportive and challenging	
Competent staff	
Modern buildings	
Up-to-date equipment	
Extra-curricular activities	
Special vibe	
Few signs of branding efforts	
Common characteristics	Generic branding
Good enough	
Graduation focus	
Reduce absence	
Student attachment	
Extra help to students	
Student voice	
For all	
Mastery	
Supportive	
Safety	

Table 2: Examples of statements coded in relation to their differentiating qualities.		
Privileged schools	Differentiating	"Proud academic traditions" "The mathematician Niels Henrik Abel's school" "Nobel prize winner Trygve Haavelmo went to school here" "Among the country's leading schools" "Good results for many years"
Middle level schools	Middle	"Traditional and forward-looking" "Oslo's second oldest secondary school" "A diverse school with university cooperation" "Oslo's best school for entrepreneurship" "An inventive school"
Marginalized schools	Generic	"Inspiring learning environment" "Proud, varied and united" "Safety and well-being for all students" "Everyone fits in" "Low threshold, high tolerance"

Market position / school category	School area	Distance to city center*	G8
Table 3: Descriptive statistics for the upper secondary schools in Oslo.			
Privileged (school 1 - 5)	Central / central west	2,3 km	
Middle (school 6 - 10)	East / west / central	3,6 km	
Marginalized (school 11 - 15)	East	7,2 km	X

*Average distance from Parliament building). G8 = schools identified by the school administration as 'developing schools.
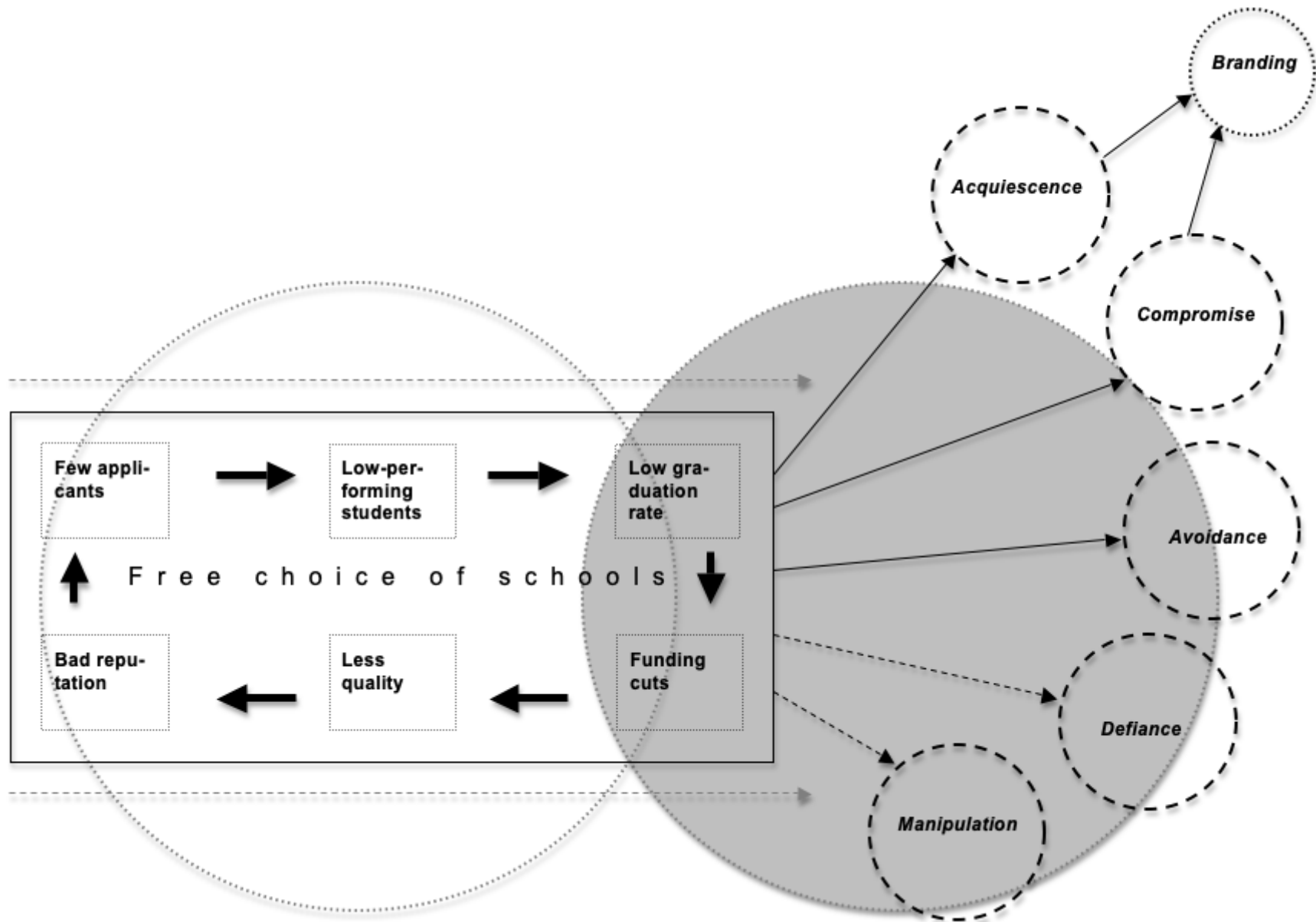
Figure 1: The iron cage effect of free choice of schools, and how it affects responses to the market logic.