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Differentiation as a Consequence of Choice and Decentralization Reforms—Conditions for Teachers' Competence Development[1]

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Abstract: This paper examines the conditions for teacher competence development as they relate to the current restructured governance of the education sector in Sweden. In reviewing the literature, contextual factors in the workplace are often pointed out as central to conditions for competence development. However, we argue that a sector-level approach is useful in examining and explaining competence development conditions, especially in times of governance change. We describe how a workplace's geographical location and budgetary situation, along with its size and age, relate to how teachers experience their working conditions. The findings indicate that the organization of work at a local workplace level impacts the conditions for competence development. Moreover, various regional and local characteristics seem to affect the conditions for competence development in that the organization and governance of the education sector create different conditions for competence development.

Keywords: Welfare sector professionals, teachers, competence development, governance change, differentiation

Welfare-sector professionals find themselves in a time of significant change. For example, teachers in Sweden are working in an environment characterized by reform agendas such as choice, privatization, marketization, competition as well as decentralization (Parding & Berg-Jansson, 2016; Lundström & Parding, 2011; Parding & Lundström; 2011). Similar trends can be found in the Nordic context and elsewhere, such as Taiwan and Australia (e.g., Kamp, 2016; Huang, 2016; Parding, McGrath-Champ, & Stacey, 2017). Indeed, competence development[2] is an essential

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[1]After the publication 26.05.2017, a mix-up with regards to labels describing the three different market types where data collection has been carried out has been identified. Whilst this does not change the results in any way, this mix-up has been rectified in this version of the article, with labels being revised at three places (p. 6 and p. 8).

[2] By conditions for competence development, we mean conditions for formal competence development (e.g., courses) and informal competence development (e.g., daily exchange of ideas; Jansson & Parding, 2011). While we discuss conditions for competence development, which is an umbrella term for various forms of learning and development, both formal and non-formal, we also use the terms "professional development" and "professional learning," as these terms are used in some of the research referenced in this paper.

aspect of professional work. Prior to the current school choice reform and the decentralization reforms (municipalization) at the beginning of the 1990s, when the Swedish education sector was the state's responsibility, and non-public schools hardly existed, the state was responsible for organizing and catering for formal competence development for all teachers. Informal competence development, on the other hand, has always been more local in nature. We argue that the labour market in the education sector can be described in terms of a differentiation of teachers' working conditions, including those relating to competence development. For example, between 2015 and 2016 there were 1303 school units at the upper secondary level, 860 public schools (842 municipal and 18 county council) and 443 non-public schools (Swedish National Agency for Education [SNAE], 2015a). These figures can be compared to between 1992 and 1993 when there were 599 schools, including 542 public (387 municipal and 155 county council) and 57 non-public schools (SNAE, n/a). Before the municipalization reform of 1990, there were only a handful of non-public schools and all other teachers were employed by the state. While the figures for 2015 to 2016 refer to school units, where one school can consist of several units, and the figures for 1992 to 1993 refer to entire schools, the trend is clear: the number of employers has increased significantly. As both municipal and non-public employers today themselves decide on what formal and informal competence development to organize for, it can be assumed that teachers' current restructured labour market means that competence development conditions differ depending on workplace context. This paper examines and discusses teachers' competence development conditions as they relate to the Swedish education sector's current restructured governance system. This paper is guided by the following research questions: How do teachers describe their conditions for competence development, focusing on content and organization of work? How can these experiences be understood as they relate to municipalization and school choice reforms?

There are both theoretical and practical motives for analysing and discussing competence development conditions. For instance, competence development can be seen as an essential aspect of professional knowledge development. In fact, professional occupations are based on theoretical knowledge, which is then applied by professionals who put their theoretical knowledge into practice (Brante, 2011). Moreover, according to Freidson (2001), professionals should prioritize interpretation over developing specific theoretical knowledge. As the teaching profession has been subject to governance changes, one can assume that the conditions for competence development are also affected. At the same time, changes in professionals' demands amplify the need for continuous competence development (Billett, Harteis, & Gruber, 2014). Therefore, it is important to take a closer look at these conditions. However, studies have shown a lack of focus on competence development, even though interest has been growing in this area (Dellgran, 2015). There has also been a relative lack of focus on the workplace contexts in which professionals are situated, and the point has been raised that there is a need to consider the specific work organizations and the organization of work within them (e.g., Svensson, 2008; Muzio, Brock, & Suddaby, 2013).

In addition to the theoretical relevance of examining professionals and their competence development conditions in times of changing governance, practical motives must be addressed as well. It is widely known that the work environment of welfare-sector professionals, such as teachers, is highly strenuous. Their problems can be summarized as an increase in work demands and high levels of stress (NUT, 2011; NUT, 2013a; TCO, 2013; Sveriges företagshälsor, 2014). In their seminal study on working conditions and health, Karasek and Theorell (1990) found that one way to combat problematic work environments, such as high-stress levels, was for staff to be given good learning conditions. Therefore, the conditions for competence development can be considered crucial for the work environment. For example, Lancaster and Di Milia (2015, p. 442) state, "organizations that develop their learning capabil-

ity reportedly benefit from increased job performance, employee self-efficacy, customer satisfaction and profitability." In fact, ample research on the relationship between the organizational context and turnover supports the importance of competence development. For instance, Smith and Rowley (2005) found that increased participation in professional development was related to lower teacher turnover and that teachers who reported less control over classroom practices and less influence over school policy were more likely to change schools or leave the profession altogether.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: we present previous research on competence development conditions as it relates to the organization of work. Thereafter, we describe the Swedish case in order to contextualize and provide a base for generalizations in similar contexts. Subsequently, we describe the qualitative interviews that form this paper's empirical base. Next, we present our findings and identify three factors that influence how competence development conditions are experienced, namely, the geographical location, budgetary conditions, and size and age of the workplace. Finally, a discussion and conclusion are presented where we argue that the competence development conditions in school choice and the decentralization reform context can be described in terms of local and regional differentiation.

Previous research on the organization of work and competence development

This section presents previous research on the conditions for competence development. The first relevant field is the sociology of professions (SoP), which focuses on professional groups and their conditions for work, but with less emphasis on competence development and local organizational contexts. The second field of relevance is a workplace-learning theory, which focuses on the importance of the organization of work in relation to learning, although it does not specifically examine professional work. The third and final field of relevance is education research, which focuses specifically on competence development for teachers. Each of these three fields contributes different aspects that help us understand the conditions for competence development for teachers. In fact, all three fields are interconnected. For instance, a recent handbook on professional and practice-based learning (Billett et al., 2014) has gathered researchers from both the SoP and workplace-learning fields, as well as from the education field. It should be noted that the presentation below is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of all previous research, but is intended to present different strands of thoughts that are relevant to this paper.

Research on competence development has been rather scarce within the SoP, although more studies have started to appear in recent years (Dellgran, 2015). In their overview of the research on professional development among professional groups, Havnes and Smeby (2014, p. 932) claim that research has shifted from a transmission-oriented approach (meaning there is a transmitter and a receiver of certain transmitted content) to learning as "situated in social practice, institutional cultures and structures in which learning revolves around work." This also includes a shift from decontextualized to situated learning, from the individual to the organizational and from content to the design of the learning processes (Havnes & Smeby, 2014). However, Havnes and Smeby claim that practice is still primarily based on the transmission-oriented model in work organizations. Moreover, in the SoP, the governance of the professions, including professionalism and the relationship between the profession and the state is a recurrent theme, not the least manifesting itself in studies on state reform in relation to professions (e.g., Dent, Bourgeault, Denis, & Kuhlmann, 2016; Molander & Terum, 2008; Evetts, 2009). Indeed, the state is an actor that influences the conditions of professions. Therefore, it is necessary to consider state reform in studies that examine the conditions for competence development.

Research on workplace learning widely emphasizes that learning is indeed situated. As Eraut, Alderton, Cole, and Senker (2000, p. 254) explain, "the organization of work, social relations in the workplace, the effect of challenge and support on individual competence, self-efficacy and risk taking were key factors affecting the level and the decision of the learning which occurred." In fact, Ellström (2010) describes how the last two decades have seen increased research on learning at work, as well as on the workplace as a site for learning. At the same time, the research emphasizes that workplace design, or the organization of work, as it were, either enables or constrains learning possibilities (Ellström & Kock, 2008; Ellström, Ekholm, & Ellström, 2008). These ideas are still emphasized today with researchers claiming that "during both initial and ongoing professional development, individual learning processes are influenced and shaped through their professional environment and practices" (Billett et al., 2014, p. xviii), which indicates that workplace circumstances are essential for understanding how competence development conditions can be experienced. Fenwick emphasizes the importance of seeing schools as workplaces that are continuously changing and where "space is open, relational and multiple, socially produced and productive of social relations: unfinished and always becoming" (Fenwick, 2013, p. 361). This view implies considering the specific features of a workplace when discussing when discussing professional work and learning.

The education literature tends to focus on the usefulness of competence development, and to some extent, looks into what conditions enable or constrain its usefulness. Timperley (2011) describes going from professional development to professional learning, which means going from teachers partaking in learning activities somewhat passively to teachers being engaged in their own learning. For this to happen, the principal must lead the staff and organize work in a manner that allows for this kind of learning. Much of the current research claims that competence development needs to be job-embedded, instructionally focused, collaborative, ongoing and frequent in order to be considered useful among teachers (Hunzicker, 2011; Field, 2011; Bryan, 2011). This perspective aligns well with ideas on workplace learning. Furthermore, researchers in the education literature mention specific contexts as essential for understanding the conditions of competence development, as emphasized in the field of SoP and workplace learning theory. In line with Timperley, Webster-Wright (2009) argues that when professional development is organized into external courses that are outside of the everyday workplace, they become decontextualized and, thus, difficult to apply. Another voice on this theme is Kelchtermans (2006, p. 221) who claims "collaboration and collegiality [which is assumed to be a prerequisite for professional development] do not happen in a vacuum, but—on the contrary—always appear in the particular context of the school, at a particular moment in time." Regarding the organizational context, Kelchtermans (2006) claims that cultural, as well as structural working conditions, determine the conditions for professional development.

The examples from the three fields mentioned above acknowledge context as central to examining and understanding competence development conditions. In the education and workplace learning literature, context refers to specific local workplace contexts, whilst in the SoP we can see how the relationship between professions, state reform and professionalism is discussed, indicating that it is also of relevance to include context in terms of organization of and governance of the sector in which the professionals are situated, when examining conditions for competence development. The number of employers in the education sector—each with its own way of organizing work, including competence development—has increased substantially; therefore, the changed governance and organization of the education sector can also be seen as amplifying differentiated conditions. Put another way, conditions for competence development are shaped not only by specific workplace contexts but also by local and regional characteristics where the workplace happens to be located. While it can be presumed that local and regional differences

have always been present, one can also assume that the decentralization of responsibility and the marketization of education would amplify these differences.

Organization and governance of competence development: The case of the Swedish education sector

Before 1990, the national government was responsible for formal competence development; therefore, the conditions were the same for all teachers (SOU, 2014, p. 5). As mentioned initially, two reforms have profoundly changed this. First, municipalization reform at the beginning of the 1990s (Proposition, 1990/91:18) meant that the Swedish parliament and government would determine the overall national goals for the Education Act, the curricula and the syllabuses for subjects that were common to all upper secondary school programmes. However, each local municipality (approximately 290) became responsible for their schools' budgets and, therefore, took over responsibility for employment. This meant that working conditions, including competence development conditions, devolved to the local and municipal level, which created condition differentiation. Second, around the same time, the so-called "school choice" reform was introduced, opening up for non-public school providers and owners (SOU, 1991/92:95; SOU, 1992/93:230). This allowed for further differentiation of conditions for competence development, as even more employers were established and each employer was allowed to decide how, when and what to offer their employees competence development.

Today, apart from each school being able to organize and set aside funding for their own competence development, there is the possibility for employers and public schools to apply for government grants related to competence development.[3] The Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE) allocates funds based on regional and local factors, such as population and county size (SNAE, 2015b). For example, metropolitan municipalities and large cities have the highest allocation of funds, while commuter, suburban and sparsely populated municipalities lie at the other end of the spectrum and do not participate in national competence development programmes to any large extent. There is also a significant variance between Sweden's 21 counties. Therefore, differentiation in formal competence development conditions depends on what region and local workplace context a teacher is situated in.

Furthermore, it seems that professionals are highly dissatisfied with the current conditions for competence development. The National Union of Teachers (NUT) found that 50% of their teachers thought they lacked the competence development they needed (NUT, 2011). The same results reappear with approximately 50% of teachers in physical education, modern languages, and mathematics reporting that they do not get what they identify needing (NUT, 2013b; NUT, 2016). In fact, in the modern languages, 50% claim not receiving subject related competence development in the last five years (NUT, 2016). The latest Teaching and Learning Survey (TALIS) (SNAE, 2014) shows that the share of teachers who claimed to partake in competence development activities was lower in Sweden than the TALIS mean. Moreover, an evaluation of larger national programmes and efforts shows that learning obstacles exist when work is organized in such a way that it becomes practically difficult to partake in the programmes or efforts. In line with this finding, the latest TALIS report (SNAE, 2014) shows that schedule clashes and high costs prevent Swedish teachers from participating in the competence development programmes they wish to attend. Another obstacle is that programmes and efforts are often based on the individual's rather than the organization's need for competence, which makes it difficult to spread new competencies to other teachers (SOU, 2013:30).

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[3] The government grant contributes to competence development programmes but does not cover all the costs, which means that the applying school needs to find additional funding.

In a recent Swedish government official report (SOU, 2014:5) it is emphasized that teachers, and the teaching profession more broadly, have lost some of their ability to influence their competence development as a result of the municipalization reform. This is because the responsibility for competence development has shifted from the state to the local municipalities. This is considered problematic, as "teachers competence development fills an important function in that teachers should be able to keep their knowledge base and in the long run have the power over what it means to be teachers" (SOU, 2014:5).

The description of local school organizations owning the formal competence development of teachers reflects Fenwick's (2013) discussion on transitions in professionals' working conditions. One transition involves regulation, governance, and accountability, where an organization gaining control over the regulation of an occupation. This paper will apply this argument to Swedish teachers and draw upon Fenwick's (2013) claim that professional identity and learning are affected by this transition. First, we will describe how this study was designed.

Methods

Qualitative interviews in three market contexts

This article builds on qualitative interviews with Swedish upper-secondary school teachers, which is based on a large research project funded by the Swedish research council for health, working life and welfare (FORTE, 2013-0177). The project focuses on teachers' working conditions as they relate to the education sector's recent reforms. This paper examines teachers' experiences with competence development within their specific local employment contexts. We have analysed approximately 30 interviews with teachers from eight schools. The SNAE (2011; 2012) identified six markets types:[4] city areas, large regional centres, small regional centres, large local centres, small local centres and municipal centres. We chose to situate our study in a region where the most common market types (small regional centre, large local centre and small local centre) were represented. This was a strategic choice, as previous research has focused largely on the areas with the heaviest competition. The interviewees were situated in both public and non-public workplaces. There was only one school in the small local centre, and it was a public school. There were public and non-public schools in the small regional centre, so we selected two public schools and two non-public schools. We aimed for the same quota in the large local centre; however, we were only able to find two public schools and one non-public school that were willing to participate in this study.

The interviews were semi-structured. The interviewees were asked to describe their specific workplaces, how their work was organized, how they experienced the local governance, the conditions for competence development, the ethical considerations and market logic. Finally, they were asked to describe how they viewed the competition, along with the positive and negative aspects of the school choice reform. We also asked the interviewees to reflect upon changes related to each of these themes over time. The interviews lasted approximately one hour with some conducted individually and others carried out in pairs, based on the preference of the interviewees. All of the interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim.

While our study initially aimed to examine if and how experiences of working conditions (and ultimately the organization of work) differed between public and non-public workplaces, a much more complex picture emerged. We found that the

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[4] These groupings are based on the size of the local market, in terms of number of pupils and other regional characteristics (SNAE, 2011; 2012).

interviewees explained their views primarily in relation to their workplace's local and regional conditions. The interviewees described how the competence development programmes were organized, and how they would have wanted it to be. Our analysis showed that the answers could be linked to one of the following contextual factors: the geographical location, budgetary conditions, and size and age of the workplace. It should be noted that while these are three separate analytical themes, they seem to interact and even overlap with each other and in practice. This analysis followed the steps described by Gibbs' (2007), moving from descriptive codes to the thematic level, and finally, to the analytical level.

The generalizations derived from this qualitative study are analytical rather than statistical. The interviewees work in organizations that can be described as relatively horizontal. Moreover, teaching has been described as an autonomous profession, i.e., teachers work mainly for themselves or with professional peers (Abbott, 1988). In addition, the teaching profession involves direct contact with citizens where basic services (defined as rights in the welfare state) are provided (Blomqvist & Rothstein, 2000; Caspersen, 2007). Lastly, the school choice reform and decentralization drive are central to this study. Therefore, our findings may be valuable for other professional groups in similar circumstances and for teachers in similar governance contexts.

We will now present the empirical findings, which reveal three factors that explain why the interviewees describe their conditions differently.

Results

Local and regional conditions and their impacts

A point of entry for this paper is that the school choice reform and decentralization at the beginning of the 1990s paved the way for further differentiation in teachers' working conditions, including conditions for competence development. The state is no longer responsible for competence development. Instead, each employing organization is responsible for formal competence development conditions, as well as informal competence development conditions.

One of the main findings of this study is that differences cannot be explained simply through the lens of public and non-public employers. Rather, regional and local characteristics seem to be of primary importance. For example, geographical differences exist throughout the country in terms of urbanization levels, including proximity to bigger towns or cities where there are more formal courses to choose from. Geographical differences in terms of high and low urbanization levels also exist, which result in different levels of competition. For example, the level of competition is generally lower in remote places. We can also see a differentiation in terms of the development of distinct regional and local conditions. In fact, a rather complex combination of factors influences how interviewees describe the conditions for competence development. The interviewees' answers can be linked to their school's geographic location and related budgetary conditions, as well as workplace size and age. The workplace's geographic location, together with its budgetary conditions, seem to be more strongly related to formal competence development, while the workplace's size and age appear to be more closely related to informal competence development. However, of course, any statistical correlations would need to be tested using quantitative measures.

Geographical conditions

Geographical proximity to larger towns is an enabling factor for good formal competence development conditions. However, proximity itself is not enough because it

does not make competence development happen. Interviewees working in so-called "peripheral" schools far from university towns or bigger cities seem to find formal competence development problematic. The geographic distance makes it difficult to attend courses, and the interviewees say they experience this as a constraint. One example is a teacher who works in a relatively large public school in a large local centre with no university who stated, "We live where we live. Sometimes it would be good if it were a bit cheaper to get a flight to Arlanda [Stockholm]. There is a totally different supply there." It is not only the price associated with travelling for competence development but also finding enough time to do so; being able to hand over ones teaching to someone else is a problem for teachers who want to attend formal competence development in a different city. It seems that the organization of work does not easily adapt to this type of need, which is about more than the geographic location of the workplace.

On the other hand, interviewees in workplaces close to or even in university towns (small regional centres and large local centres) have quite different opportunities to attend formal competence development programmes, although this depends on the subject one teaches. One interviewee who works at a large public school in a small regional centre described the problem as follows:

> Since we are situated in a university town, they have so many useful courses to offer, but it differs from subject to subject. The teachers in natural sciences, they have the Tuesday and Wednesday [during the yearly competence development week] at the university, and they get super good things, and every year there is like a smorgasbord with lots of researchers presenting their stuff.

This quote illustrates the different conditions for formal competence development, even within the very same workplace. To sum up, the geographical factor seems to play a primary role in conditions for formal competence development. Where the workplace is situated (e.g., the distance from a good supply of courses) affects the opportunities available to teachers. Generally, when the workplace is located far away from a range of options for formal competence development, it constrains possibilities. This can be linked to how work is organized, such as whether teachers are given free time to pursue competence development opportunities. However, the next section will show that such opportunities are also linked to the employer's budgetary situation.

Budgetary conditions

We also found that the problems related to competence development in geographically peripheral workplaces tended to be linked to budgetary conditions, as this corresponded with precarious municipal economy, much in terms of out-migration. Thus, in more remote workplace contexts, not only did geographical distance constrain the conditions for competence development in the form of distance from external courses, but the strained economy also made competence development less of a priority. One interviewee employed at a public school in a small local centre said, "There are restrictions in terms of what budgetary resources there are. A lot of good competence development is arranged at different places and in the best of worlds we could go." This quote illustrates how the employer's budget constrained the opportunities to participate in formal competence development in other towns. In workplaces with bigger budgets, interviewees described the conditions for competence development as abundant. One interviewee working in a public school with good resources in a large local centre said he had the opportunity to travel to Stockholm for a yearly subject-related conference, which he considered "the most beneficial competence development factor." Interestingly, the interviewee showed awareness that this was not a reality for teachers at other schools in the same town or in other towns. "I know that at other schools they can't go," as the interviewee put it.

In sum, the budgets of public organizations largely depend on municipal budgets. This means that teachers in wealthy municipalities have better resources than those that are struggling financially. In addition, the municipality's public servants decide how to allocate funds to the municipality's operations, including schools. The non-public employing organizations, on the other hand, often work more like enterprises in that they dispose of their own, while at the same time they may have partly different aims and goals. Therefore, the type of competence development that is offered and how it is organized seem to be linked to budgetary circumstances that vary between employers, as well as between and within sectors.

Workplace size and age

The analysis of the interviews indicated that the size of the schools affected how teachers experienced the competence development conditions. In larger, usually older public schools, colleagues had the ability to able to share and discuss their ideas with peers. Work was often organized in such a way that colleagues teaching the same subjects shared offices and belonged to the same team, thus creating an opportunity for daily sharing. When asked about collaboration and learning with colleagues (i.e., informal competence development) one interviewee in a relatively large public school that was situated in a large local centre said, "Us, history teachers, we are building up that [a collegial learning platform]. We have talked about even building a little database with tips and tricks that one can do, a little local learning platform." This indicated that the subject was the most important factor for the competence development of upper secondary level teachers, which was not a new finding (e.g., Parding, 2007; Parding & Abrahamsson, 2010). However, such opportunities for competence development relied on having several teachers in the same subject, preferably sharing offices or corridors, which was only the case for schools of a certain size. Smaller workplaces, on the other hand, presented their own opportunities, as described in more detail below.

However, there were certain drawbacks related to working in a larger workplace. For example, they way larger schools organized competence development programmes was often described as uniform and standardized, with "one size fits all" solutions and slow and bureaucratic processes. This was highlighted by an interviewee working in a larger public school in a small regional centre:

> Well, they [the competence development days organized by the school or the local municipality] suck, excuse me, but they really do…. It is the usual, the cheapest model possible where we are gathered in a lecture hall somewhere, during [the competence development week], and listening to someone standing there lecturing all of us [from different subjects] at the same time.

Competence development programmes of this type were not described as useful. However, in smaller workplaces, which often meant non-public schools, interviewees were sometimes the only teacher in their subject, meaning competence development in the form of subject-specific sharing between colleagues was very limited. One example was an interviewee who worked at a small non-public school located in a small regional centre who held a shared position. In order to work full time, the interviewee taught at two (non-public) schools. This interviewee did not have any colleagues in her subject; therefore, it was not possible to organize the teachers' workspaces or teams even, based on subject. Not having any colleagues in the same subject was experienced as a constraint for competence development and was even described as an incentive to change workplaces. As the interviewee explained, "That thing of exchanging and sharing ideas can become a concern when working in a small school. Therefore, I think one strives for that collegial collaboration with colleagues who do similar things." At the same time, small schools, which were often

newer and non-public, allowed for the fast and easy organization of competence development programmes when needed. Furthermore, interviewees working in small non-public schools in a small regional centre knew exactly how much yearly funding was available for each of them for competence development, and it their responsibility to ask the principal about accessing it. As one interviewee said, "My view is that if one is curious and has a conversation, a performance review conversation, with the principal, then one can get the competence development possibilities one wants here. That is my opinion." Another aspect that seems to relate to working in a newer and smaller school is that when one teacher learns something new, it spreads to the rest of the collegium. One interviewee said that it hardly mattered who attended a course or learned something new because it was shared widely. As that interviewee described, "Lily is dealing with X [a specific issue]. Well, all that she has done rubs off on to the rest of us, so that we learn from what she has acquired by taking part in a formal course." This might have been because this was a relatively small and new school, and perhaps a sign of how it was physically organized. Such situations indicated that there was a flexible system in place for competence development, both in regards to formal and less formal competence development.

In sum, we did not aspire to present what the conditions *were* at each of the eight schools the interviewees worked in, but rather how the conditions were *experienced* in various workplace contexts. Neither did we aspire to establish any statistical correlations in terms of experiencing the conditions for competence development and whether the interviewees worked in public or non-public, small or large, new or older, more or less prosperous, or in high or low competition. Nonetheless, what we did show was that specific workplaces, along with the local and regional characteristics associated with workplaces, did seem to imply different competence development conditions. This differentiation was obvious in our findings. School characteristics, as well as the local and regional characteristics within which the teacher was situated, affected the conditions for competence development. The common denominator was the variety of contexts the interviewees described.

Discussion and conclusions

Differentiated conditions

The main finding of this paper was that the conditions for competence development, in the context of school choice reform and municipalization, could be described as differentiated. It became clear that the intended—and perhaps unintended—consequences of state reform(s) were complex (e.g. Jansson & Parding, 2011). The analysis of the interviews revealed that the geographic location, budgetary resources, and size and age of a workplace were central to understanding how different interviewees described and experienced their working conditions. These findings can be said to reflect a mesolevel analysis. While we acknowledged that there were differences in the conditions for competence development before the reforms, mainly for informal competence development, our study was not comparative. However, while we did not seek to map out "how much had changed," both the works referenced in the context section and our empirical data indicated that the conditions can certainly be described as differentiated today.

In line with Samuelsson and Lindblad (2015, p. 174), we argued that teachers, as an example of welfare-sector professionals, were situated in specific political and social contexts and that these circumstances affected working conditions. The findings in this paper showed that the organization of work at a school and at a local level affected the competence development conditions for teachers. For instance, in terms of how the workplace opens up for, or constrains, informal competence development, which is whether or not teachers can easily share with subject colleagues.

These findings were neither new nor surprising; rather they were consistent with our previous studies (Jansson & Parding, 2011; Parding & Abrahamsson, 2010). Moreover, it could be argued that the local differences mirrored regional differentiation. In other words, in relation to our previous research (Jansson & Parding, 2011; Parding & Abrahamsson, 2010), as well as to the empirical data presented in this paper, it can be argued that the issue of context must be seen in a broader sense. The local and regional circumstances of a workplace must be considered when examining the conditions for competence development among welfare-sector professionals, as school choice and municipalization reforms seem to have complex consequences on various levels.

Indeed, the education literature, as well as the workplace learning literature presented earlier, acknowledged that local workplace contexts were central to the examination and understanding of competence development conditions (e.g., Eraut et al., 2000; Ellström et al., 2008; Webster-Wright, 2009; Kelchtermans, 2006). In the SoP, there has been a macro and to some extent micro focus. However, this paper pointed to the relevance of applying a mesolevel approach, which was demonstrated through the themes of the geographic location, budgetary conditions, and size and age of the workplace. It demonstrated how teachers experienced their working conditions and more specifically their conditions for competence development in relation to current reform agendas. Therefore, this paper argues for the relevance of taking a sector-level approach, which means examining competence development by looking at the governance and organization of the sector itself. Applying theories on the temporal and spatial dimensions of work (Herod, McGrath-Champ, & Rainnie, 2010) could be useful in this endeavour. Using a geographically informed approach, we can potentially understand the conditions that professionals experience in their workplaces in relation to the surrounding milieu. We argue that this is highly relevant for a study on the competence development conditions experienced by teachers during times of changing governance, such as decentralization and privatization reforms.

From the perspective of the SoP, our findings also reveal a (perhaps unintended) shift in the actor(s) that are responsible for professional development in the welfare sector. Responsibility previously lay with the state, which was solely responsible for competence development. However, today the responsibility is dispersed across the various municipalities and non-public employers. In practice, a large number of actors are now responsible for both formal and informal competence development. As described above, influence over what competence development and how it is organized and catered for is necessary for a profession to own the profession-specific knowledge development (SOU, 2014:5). As there is no single counterpart (the state), rather there are many, it is questionable whether the teaching profession can be said to have interpretation priority in terms of deciding competence development's content or form. Perhaps there is even less influence than before.

Our findings can also be linked to Kirsten and Wemke (2017) who discuss the formal national competence development programmes offered by the SNAE, which they see as an expression of the governance of the teaching profession, as well as an instrument for controlling the profession. Analysing six competence development programmes over the last 20 years, they argue that power has moved from schools to the state in terms of who gets to determine their goals and plans. This indicates a shift in governance where the state has taken over the role of setting educational priorities. While Wermke and Kirsten see a greater tendency for "top-down" national standardization, this study reveals highly localized and regionalized conditions. However, these localized and regionalized conditions stem from state reforms, thus top-down initiatives. For further research, it would also be relevant to examine workplace micro-political constructions in more detail, as well as who determines the priorities of schools in terms of competence development and how work is organized to enable formal and informal competence development. In fact, profession-specific theoretical knowledge, which can be linked to the issue of competence development,

is seen as essential to professions (Freidson, 2001); therefore, a relevant empirical question would be how this process is shaped in different workplace contexts.

Overall, it is important to advance the knowledge about competence development conditions in the current context of differentiated conditions, as good conditions for competence development, or learning, as Theorell (2015) labels it, are pivotal in professions where there is high-stress, high demands and low control. Providing good learning conditions for individuals and organizations is one way to improve the work environment. Therefore, this is an HRM issue of high importance (Evers, van der Heijden, Kreijns, & Gerrichhauzen, 2011), especially considering the problematic working conditions faced by the teaching profession today.

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