

# School in Times of Social Change

## An Empirical Analysis of Marketization in the Field of Schooling

PhD project outline as of September 22, 2025

### 1. Abstract

The education system fulfills several reproductive functions for society. Among other things, the social structure of society is reproduced through the selection of students (Fend, 1974/2022). A large part of later economic inequality within a society is therefore already prefigured in school (Solga, 2017). While changes in schools are achieved through school reforms (Bohl & Schnebel, 2022), the outcomes of these changes, in turn, influence society. School reforms are thus embedded in the dynamics of social change (Tippelt, 2018).

A central change in the school sector since 1945 has been the introduction of marketization processes in schools. Although these were particularly discussed in the context of New Public Management reform in the 1990s (Schröter, 2019), marketization processes can already be observed in earlier reforms (Geiss, 2023). According to Ebner (2014), who refers to Polanyi (1944), marketization refers to the institutional establishment of market mechanisms in previously primarily non-market-structured fields (for example, in the social sector), making them the dominant structural principle. Competitive rules and norms, based on the economic logic of profit-oriented commodity production, are thereby imposed at both individual and collective levels (Ebner, 2014; Polanyi, 1944). In short, previously non-economic sectors such as healthcare and education are increasingly being economized (Schimank, 2019). By now, almost all societal subsystems are affected by marketization (Schimank & Volkmann, 2016).

In response to various problems in the education system, attempts at improvement were undertaken as part of educational reforms (Herrmann & Oelkers, 1994), which led to the increasing spread of marketization processes in education. These were largely based on neoliberal ideology (Pysz, 2014), which advocated a retreat of the state from state institutions. The aim was to achieve a reduction of bureaucracy and liberalization of institutions. In the school sector, this was to be realized, for example, by generating competition between individual schools. Schools were expected to operate like private enterprises, competing for students. Poor offerings were to disappear from the market, and schools were incentivized to improve the quality and efficiency of their offerings. It was also assumed that this would improve equal opportunities, as high-performing students from low socioeconomic backgrounds could gain access to excellent educational offerings, for example through vouchers (Friedman, 1962; Friedman & Friedman, 1980; Le Grand, 1991; Tooley, 1996).

Existing research findings on the outcomes of these changes contradict both the promoted improvements in quality and efficiency and the intended enhancement of equal opportunities. Both students and teachers are equally affected by the negative consequences of marketization processes. The implementation of competitive rules and norms can conflict with professional norms for teachers, potentially affecting job satisfaction (Cohen, 2024; Schimank, 2019). Particularly for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, strong negative effects can be observed at various levels, especially regarding equity (Bartlett et al., 2002; Bray, 2021; Cohen, 2024; Resnik, 2020; Zancajo, 2019). Institutionalized competition and pressure on an individual level increase performance pressure on all students (Bergh & Forsberg, 2024). At the collective level, schools must increasingly invest resources in marketing rather than in the quality of educational offerings to compete for the highest-performing students and perform well in rankings. The pressure increasingly also leads to cheating, like teaching-to-the-test or falsifying test scores. Significant international problems regarding equity have therefore been exacerbated, rather than improved, by marketization processes (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2024; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2017; The World Bank Group, 2018; Zancajo, 2019). The situation is particularly severe for students who cannot meet performance requirements. Due to the meritocratic legitimation of social inequalities, their situation is viewed as self-inflicted, and they can hardly rely on solidarity, even though the criterion of equity in their educational trajectory was not fulfilled (Markovits, 2019; Sandel, 2020).

Currently, the school sector is confronted with various pressing problems, such as the declining attractiveness of the teaching profession, teacher shortages, declining student knowledge alongside grade inflation, increasing school absenteeism, and rising mental health issues (Henrekson & Wennström, 2019). Although the current state of research cannot establish causal relationships between marketization processes and these problems, existing findings highlight the importance of further research on marketization processes in the school sector.

## 2. Research questions

1. In which of the nationally debated reforms of the Swiss public education system (1945–2025) can marketization processes be identified?
  - a) What social dynamics can be traced in the context of these reforms?
  - b) How are economic and social contexts related to school reforms that particularly reveal processes of marketization?
2. How have marketization processes, introduced through school reforms, manifested in the everyday work of education and special education professionals?
  - a) Are there differences between mainstream, special, and private school settings?

### 3. Links to the thematic focus of PROWEL

PROWEL thematically engages with Social Problems and Welfare. This dissertation focuses on processes of marketization with particular attention to the field of schooling. Although these processes have so far been empirically under-researched, existing findings indicate that marketization contributes to the emergence and intensification of social inequality. This study therefore reveals intersections with both the field of Social Problems and that of Welfare.

### 4. Research goals

This dissertation investigates the diffusion of marketization processes in the field of schooling. In the first part, the spread of these processes within the Swiss public school system since 1945 will be analyzed through the lens of school reforms. Against this backdrop, the contextual conditions of the various reforms will be examined, with particular attention to how economic and social contexts have influenced the diffusion of marketization processes in the framework of school reforms. The second part explores how these processes manifest in the everyday practice of special education professionals. It further asks whether a discrepancy exists between the diffusion of marketization processes and their perception by practitioners in the field.

### 5. Research gap/originality

To date, there is relatively little research that addresses marketization processes in the field of schooling. Existing studies are usually qualitative in nature, often relying on structured or semi-structured interviews with actors in the field of education. The originality of this dissertation therefore lies, on the one hand, in the application of quantitative research methods to the study of marketization processes in schooling and, on the other hand, in linking this perspective to the field of school reform.

### 6. Theoretical frame

This study applies to an organizational sociology (Tacke, 2010) perspective. It can be situated within the theoretical framework of neo-institutionalist theories (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hasse & Fünfschilling, 2021), as it examines changes in the organization of schools. Diffusion theory (Rogers, 1983) is applied to the concept of the spread of marketization processes. The underlying societal transformation is addressed within the context of transformation research (Kollmorgen et al., 2015), drawing on theories of social change (Zapf, 1994), systems theory (Luhmann, 1987), and modernization theory (Flora, 1973; Wehler, 1975).

## 7. Methodological approach

Methodologically, Research Question 1 is addressed through a quantitative content analysis of historical documents in the context of various school reforms since 1945 (Topic Modeling). This analysis is complemented by a diffusion analysis (Latent Growth Curve Modeling).

To address Research Question 2, a survey of educational and special education professionals in Switzerland will be conducted (Lime Survey). The survey will be distributed via professional associations. It will measure the perception of the diffusion of the innovation marketization in the school context. To create the survey, existing surveys that measure the diffusion of innovation will be considered. The results will be related to the findings from the analyses conducted for Research Question 1 to reveal possible discrepancies.

## 8. Time schedule

The project began in August 2024 and is expected to run until 2029.

## 9. Other information

This project is supervised by Prof. Dr. Winfried Kronig from the Department of Special Education at the University of Fribourg. For questions or comments, the following address can be contacted: [nora.gnos@unifr.ch](mailto:nora.gnos@unifr.ch).

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