

'Bursting With Activities': Impression Management as Edu-Business in School-Age Educare

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Abstract: Starting from an understanding of contemporary society as occupied with a dominant trend in image-boosting, the study explores how school-age educare centers engage in edu-business when promoting themselves through self-presentations on their websites. Using a qualitative method with an analytical attention directed towards unexpected angles, these self-presentations are problematized in terms of discursive impression management and with a focus on how messages are communicated by using different discursive resources to make the presentations trustworthy and selling. The edu-business logic found on the websites is not primarily about competition between different school-age educare centers, but is instead about competition between compulsory school and school-age educare, as well as the choice to participate or not in the education offered in the school-age educare centers.

Keywords: websites, School-Age Educare, Edu-Business, Image-Boosting Business

Edu-Business the Swedish Way

Sweden has, through a political willingness to stage market-liberal ideas, quickly changed from a state-run, micromanaged and uniform education system to a deregulated and liberal ditto building on a free school choice with a voucher system (Holm, 2013; Hudson, 2011). This transformation can be considered part of an international reform trend in which freedom of choice is highly valued, and where streamlining – along with increased quality for both the individual and society – is a desirable goal. It also implies that greater freedom of choice is equated with flexibility, pluralism and enhanced professionalism among teachers (for in-depth discussions see, for example, Ball & Youdell, 2009; Erixon Arreman & Holm, 2011a, 2011b; Lubienski, 2016; Lundahl, Erixon Arreman, Holm, & Lundström, 2013). This has led to massive activity in terms of visibility, measuring and comparing results and quality based on ideas concerning a customer choice model, where consumers are expected to base their choice on available information about various educational establishments. In this regard, education is considered a product that needs to be marketed for prospective customers, namely children, young people and their guardians (Rönnerberg, 2017). Today, the marketplace where offers about the products and services available to choose from is main-

ly on the Internet. Information technology thereby functions as an incorporation of a freedom of choice system that makes the public sector exposed to competition (Holm, 2013; Lubienski & Lee, 2016). Nevertheless, the system is still tax-funded and therefore currently described as a market hybrid, as public services do not operate on a completely free market. They are today a mix between political decisions and competition. Referring to this form of governing and organization, the term 'quasi-market' is commonly used. Another way of describing this approach is through the now established expression New Public Management (Lundahl, Erixon Arreman, Holm, & Lundström, 2013). Activities that increase visibility and highlight comparisons in this kind of management can be seen as edu-business (Ball, 2007; Erixon Arreman, & Holm, 2011b). Operating in this so-called quasi-market are public (municipal), as well as private, actors. During the school-year 2017-2018, there were a total of 4255 school-age educare centers (hereinafter referred to as Saec) in Sweden. 3552 of these were operated by municipalities and 689 were driven by a private actor. In total, 484 399 children were enrolled (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019a).

In a report, the Swedish National Agency for Education (2000) states that the main problem with school-age educare is its invisibility, something that still seems to be the case today. In comparison to preschool and compulsory school, less attention is paid to school-age educare when it comes to both research and media. Nevertheless, due to recent political changes, including a reinforced regulation of school-age educare in the Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800) and a clarification of the educational assignment in a new separate part of the curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019b), it seems that even the Saec need to engage in edu-business, since more and more of these are made visible on websites. With the market as a model, Saec – as well as all other forms of education – need to listen to what the customers want, and to remain competitive it becomes necessary to engage in some kind of marketing to put forward an attractive image. In the fight for a good reputation, branding becomes important (Ball, 2007; Lubienski, 2016; Oplatka, Hemsley-Brown, & Foskett, 2002).

Previous research about the contemporary phenomenon of edu-business almost exclusively involves upper secondary or post-secondary education, and only in some cases addresses compulsory school (see for example Lubienski & Lee, 2016 and Chapple, 2015). One study examines material similar to what is analyzed here, but in a preschool context (Holmberg, 2018). Thus, as no other such study focuses on school-age educare, this article will take a closer look at this particular institution.

Aim and Research Questions

This article aims to explore how competitiveness can be discursively managed in the Swedish education system. More precisely, an edu-business logic is studied as found on 350 Saec websites, where self-presentations are available. These are analyzed in terms of impression management and image-boosting business. The analytical focus is directed towards the following research questions:

1. What recurrent basic messages are communicated through the websites?
2. What discursive resources can be distinguished in the self-presentations found on the websites?