EDUCATIONAL MARKETISATION AND THE HEAD’S PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING: A SPECULATIVE CONCEPTUALISATION

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ABSTRACT: One of the most important changes in the environment of schooling during the last decade has been the establishment of educational markets and inter-institutional competition which, in turn, has led to the development of a new management culture in schools. In the light of these developments, this paper draws together the research on heads’ responses to marketisation and suggests theoretical hypotheses on the impact of its underlying features on their psychological well-being. Our argument is that the major features of educational marketisation may promote the emergence of both the determinants of professional growth and self-renewal and of occupational stress and job burnout among headteachers. These determinants, in turn, lead to the appearance of two types of well-being among school heads. To support our hypothesis we refer to the work of others and empirical findings from various fields of study.

Keywords: marketisation, burnout, self-renewal, growth, new headship, job stress.

1. Introduction

The environment in which headteachers function has changed dramatically over the past ten years (Evetts, 1996; Hall and Southworth, 1997) leading, among other things, to the implanting of a new management culture in schools (Gewirtz et al., 1995). One of the most important changes has been engendered by the ideology of educational marketisation, which has led to more competitive environments for schools (Foskett, 1998a; Woods et al., 1998).

Advocates of markets and choice in education have been highly influential in restructuring public education in many western countries. For example, in the UK, the introduction of open
enrolment and per-capita funding established quasi-markets within the education system (Maguire et al., 2001), and similar developments have occurred in other countries (Power et al., 1997). Such marketisation focused on making schools accountable and consumer responsive, providing parents with information on which to make judgements about the relative performance of schools and ensuring that funding followed pupils. Furthermore, marketisation injected competition into the system, so that every educational provider is compelled to compete for pupils if it wants to survive financially.

However, in spite of their ‘competitive nature’, educational markets are conceived to be different from the markets found outside the public sector, mainly due to their high level of regulation, which is manifested by strong government funding and curriculum policies (Foskett, 1998a). Therefore, some writers (e.g. Le Grand and Barlett, 1993; Woods et al., 1998) prefer to use the term ‘quasi-market’ which indicates that the market forces introduced into the educational system differ in some major aspects from classical free markets both in respect of the demand and supply sides.

Surprisingly, while there has been considerable interest in the subject of educational markets and marketisation from diverse points of view (e.g. Bowe et al., 1992; Foskett, 1998a; Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Gray, 1991; Woods et al., 1998), there has been little published research which has concentrated on the interaction between this new reform and the psychological well-being of those who are supposed to manage their schools in the new educational environment; the primary and secondary school heads. When this sort of interaction was explored, great emphasis has been given to the negative effects of marketisation upon heads such as job stress, burnout, frustration, dissatisfaction and turnover (e.g. Grace, 1995; Portin et al., 1998).

The purpose of the current paper, then, is to examine the interactions between two key processes; educational marketisation and the head’s internal psychological process. More specifically, this paper draws together the research on head’s responses to marketisation to propose four theoretical hypotheses of the impact of its underlying features on their psychological well-being. These hypotheses are suggested for further empirical enquiry.

Illuminating the potential interactions between marketisation and the head’s well-being, it is suggested here, is of significance for the understanding of market-led reforms, for overlooking and underestimating the human and organisational components of change, as Evans (1996) has commented, can disrupt or even defeat programmes of institutional change.
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2. Four hypotheses concerning marketisation and headteachers’ well being

The combination of theoretical arguments and empirical findings from the literature of various fields of study (e.g. job stress, professional growth, educational markets), and logical-theoretical analysis of concepts makes it possible to suggest four theoretical hypotheses concerning the interactions between some features of educational marketisation and four types of heads’ well being; professional growth, self-renewal, occupational stress and job burnout.

H1. The features of marketisation may promote the professional growth of school heads, through the stimulation of its contextual and organisational facilitators.

H2. The features of marketisation may evoke a sense of self-renewal among school heads.

H3. The features of marketisation may increase the levels of occupational stress in headship, through the stimulation of contextual and organisational stressors.

H4. The features of marketisation may enhance heads’ levels of job burnout.

The hypotheses imply that the features of marketisation in education may promote the emergence of the determinants of professional growth, self-renewal, job burnout and occupational stress. Using the verb ‘promote’ is not to assume a cause-effect relationship, but rather that a link between the two is likely to be present. The writers do not make assumptions about the inevitability of either negative or positive effects of marketisation, but rather wish to take a balanced approach to exploring the possible effects.

The Clarification of Concepts

The concepts included in the four hypotheses need further elaboration and clarification before presenting them for discussion in this paper. ‘The features of marketisation’ include a customer-oriented attitude, uncertainty and ambiguity, an external relations focus, quality assurance and performance accountability, competition and marketing-led management. We discuss each of these characteristics in the next section. ‘Professional growth’ is conceptualised in terms of improving performance-related knowledge, skills and abilities, improving adaptability, resolving issues regarding attitudes towards career, life, and developing and extending identity (Ruohotie, 1996).
‘Self-renewal’ is conceived of as a new start, a rebirth and as a means of breaking the inevitable routine, where people refill their internal energy and rebuild their self-concept (Hudson, 1991). Among other things, the concept includes a search for new opportunities and tasks, that is, looking for challenging, new goals and objectives, rather than just adhering to the known and safe; and enthusiasm and replenishing of internal energy, characterising people in renewal, people who perceive their jobs as very exciting, and feel satisfied with life (Oplatka, 2001; Oplatka et al., 2001). It is important to note, however, that neither systematic conceptualisation of self-renewal, nor an operational definition and measure of the concept has been developed to date.

The concept of ‘stress’ is unclear and variously defined (Holt, 1993). The major source of confusion is whether to conceive of stress as a situational factor (the distressing circumstances external to the person) or a reaction (the disturbance of a person’s normal state, viewed either physiologically or psychologically). For this paper, stress is viewed as an interactional phenomenon, which occurs when the perceived demands of a situation are considered to be greater than the individual’s perceived resources for dealing with those demands (Smylie, 1999). Seven of the various factors in the external environment that induce occupational stress among people exposed to them (stressors) are role conflict, role ambiguity, constraints on individual autonomy, work overload, responsibility for other people, and/or lack of preparation for the job. ‘Job burnout’ is a syndrome that results from prolonged exposure to stress. It consists of three components: the first component, emotional exhaustion, refers to feelings of being overextended emotionally and drained by contact with people. The second, depersonalisation, refers to a detached and callous response to clients, and the third, reduced personal accomplishment, refers to a decline in one’s feelings of competence and achievement at one’s work (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Studies of the causes of school heads’ burnout point to heavy workload, relations with staff, lack of support, the need to solve conflicts, working conditions and job responsibility (Borg and Ridding, 1993; Gmelch and Gates, 1998).

Basic Assumptions

The suggested theoretical hypotheses are based on three assumptions. First, school heads, who are considered central actors in the emergent educational markets, may experience one or more of the internal psychological phenomena noted above. Second, marketisation does
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not affect all heads in precisely the same way and heads’ responses to the features of marketisation vary. Third, the simultaneous implementation of several educational reforms such as budgetary devolution, devolved management, and educational marketisation combine to alter what Evetts (1996, p. 120) terms ‘the work culture of headship, i.e., the tasks, work relations, responsibilities etc., leading to the “new managerialism” of schools’ (Gewirtz et al., 1995).

Limitations

It is important to note, however, that the interactions assumed in the four hypotheses may be influenced by mediator variables, although we are unable to be specific on the nature of their impact. The writers acknowledge the problem of identifying marketisation factors specifically, as opposed to other legislative changes occurring over the last ten years. We are also aware of the potential influence of career stage, existing public image and reputation of the school, location of the school (inner city/outer suburb etc.), local education market conditions, years of experience of heads, gender of heads, category of school, size of school and socio-economic context etc., on the interaction between marketisation and the concepts mentioned in our hypotheses. One of these mediator variables – heads’ interpretation of marketing – has been clearly described by Foskett (1995) and seems to have some influence upon the interaction. For example, a positive perception of marketing is assumed to strengthen the promotion of professional growth determinants rather than those of stress.

In the remainder of the paper we will seek to clarify the sort of interaction speculated in the hypotheses. The analysis begins with a theoretical analysis of the term ‘marketisation’ and its major features, and then goes on to outline the impact of marketisation upon head’s internal psychological processes. The paper concludes by discussing the theoretical implications of the issues stemming from this logical analysis.

3. The Characteristics of the Marketisation Process in Education

The discourse of markets and marketisation in education needs further explanation and clarification if one aims at analysing its structure and characteristics.

A comprehensive description of marketisation is suggested by Marginson (1999):
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(Marketisation) is apparent in the growing role of private costs, in the increasing inequalities between the resources and status of education in different institutions, and in the varying experiences of ‘consumption’ within common systems. It can be recognised also in the growing role of competition between institutions, and in the plethora of corporate activity, such as marketing, business plans … (p. 230)

Based on previous analysis (e.g. Le Grand and Barlett, 1993; Marginson, 1999), it seems that educational marketisation comprises six recurring characteristics and aspects which are highly relevant for the head’s well-being and state of mind: customer oriented attitudes, uncertainty and ambiguity, the importance of external relations, quality assurance/performance accountability, inter-institutional competition, and marketing-led management of educational institutions.

Customer Oriented Attitudes

Under the marketisation process it is the consumer who becomes the centre of the school’s attention (Foskett, 1998b). The marketing concept holds that achieving organisational goals depends upon determining the needs and wants of target markets and delivering the desired outcomes more effectively and efficiently than do competitors (Kotler and Armstrong, 1999). The school’s management is expected to acknowledge the primacy of the marketplace and of customer needs in shaping the school’s plans, curriculum and other educational activities. In particular, in its new market, the school is encouraged to examine carefully the needs of its clients and customers, and to seek to meet those needs more precisely (Gray, 1991; Hanson, 1996). Schools are encouraged to be responsive to parents’ needs and desires, thereby increasing their satisfaction, which is in itself necessary for the creation of good school image and word-of-mouth communication with the external stakeholders (Lumby, 1999).

One aspect of school responsiveness is expressed by the huge amount of time heads are expected to devote to support and counsel parents and pupils. Indeed, in one study heads felt that they had to spend more and more time with parents’ problems, with more demanding parents who need counselling (Jones, 1999a). In another study (Portin et al., 1998) 83 per cent of the respondents reported that interactions with parents regarding pupil or general school concerns had increased in a manner they considered
Marketisation brought about new elements of uncertainty and complexity. The school and the head have to work and survive in a very complex, changing and turbulent policy environment. This, according to Murphy and Hallinger (1992), represents a significant increase in the degree of uncertainty and ambiguity of the school environment. Moreover, the freedom given to parents to choose their child’s school means that schools can no longer know for sure how many pupils they will have the next year. This new situation substantially increases the level of environmental uncertainty for schools, because school management cannot accurately predict prospective students’ preferences and needs as well as the effectiveness of their marketing process.

Importance of External Relations

The marketisation process highlights the importance of external relations in the school organisation. Thus, whereas in the past schools could be administered as relatively closed systems, in the 1990s they were facing more turbulent, rapidly changing environments (Murphy and Hallinger, 1992). In order to survive in their competitive environment heads need to pay more attention to external relations. They are expected to display independent initiative and power over their environments to achieve both organisational effectiveness and efficiency (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 1999).

Systems of Quality Assurance and Performance Accountability

Marketisation is intended to create schools that are more sensitive to the needs of parents/pupils and in which educational providers are more accountable for performance. Put simply, if parents are to make informed choices, they must be able to assess the alternatives in terms of performance and ‘measurable’ outcomes. To this end, performance-based systems of management have been established in the educational market, through which standards are stated, aims are set and performance against targets are measured (Walsh, 1994). Further, quality assurance systems are concerned with how well prior specifications have been met. League tables of assessment results in England are one example of this development.
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several measures of quality in education performance and a development of a unified national curriculum, regular testing and monitoring of pupils’ achievements is periodically undertaken in schools. The results are published and rated so that parents seeking a school for their child will be able to compare schools’ achievements and make their own decision (Walford, 1994).

Inter-institutional Competition

The marketisation process further intensifies competition in which schools have to respond to various stakeholder groups (Grace, 1995; Herbert, 2000). In the context of a group of schools it is quite clearly possible for each school to face considerable competition from existing providers and from new schools for finance, resources, examination success, pupils or public esteem (Aitchinson, 1997). The competition can be quite intense and the degree of threat depends on factors such as distance to the nearest alternative, quality of product, entrance policies and marketing strategies. In this new situation all schools will compete to attract and retain pupils, and aim to achieve a reputation as a successful and effective school (Grace, 1995).

Marketing-led Management

The process of marketisation contributed, as Grace (1995) noted, to the discourse of ‘market leadership’ and market management. One major feature of educational marketisation is an increased priority being given by heads to the marketing of their schools (Foskett, 1998a; Hanson, 1996; James and Philips, 1995; Maguire et al., 2001). Greater competition led to the need for heads to adapt to the ideology of an educational market (Grace, 1995; Hall and Southworth, 1997) and their public relations function was becoming increasingly more significant (Murphy and Hallinger, 1992). The survival of their schools is dependent on their capacity to maintain or increase the school’s ‘market share’ of pupils, results and resources and to market their school to the external environments (Grace, 1995).

Marketing is considered to be an indispensable managerial function without which the school would not survive in its new competitive environment, on the grounds that it is not enough for a school to be effective – it needs to have an effective image for parents and stakeholders. As is implicit in definitions of marketing (Davis and Ellison, 1997; Hanson, 1996), marketing is a process comprising several stages: (1) marketing research and analysis of the
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environment; (2) formulating a marketing plan and strategy; (3) implementing the marketing mix; and (4) evaluating the marketing process. Thus, in practical terms, heads that adopt a marketing orientation are expected to implement these stages as well as investigating the needs of the parents and pupils (Herbert, 2000). This may include a need to re-write school brochures, have more active links with primary schools, exert efforts to gain enhanced press coverage and advertising, and improve the school’s physical appearance.

Studies conducted in order to explore the practice of marketing in schools have revealed that most heads and staff do not hold a coherent marketing ideology, have little direct experience of marketing practice, and do not employ a marketing research strategy or plan (Bell, 1999; Foskett, 1998b; Oplatka, 2002). Nevertheless, more time is spent by the head on promotional activities, the encouragement of prospective parents, fundraising, glossy brochures, open evenings and league tables (Bell, 1999; James and Philips, 1995; Jones, 1999a; Woods, 1994). In one study (Portin, et al., 1998) 83 per cent of heads indicated they spent a considerable amount of time and energy on issues related to public relations and in making school presentations to the external community. In another study (Herbert, 2000) all heads had become aware of the importance of promoting and marketing their schools, whether to retain children in the catchment area or to attract others from outside the catchment areas.

However, in order to survive their competitive and uncertain environment, heads also need to become entrepreneurial managers, which requires anticipating and responding to new initiatives, challenges and opportunities in their external markets. They are encouraged to adopt a more entrepreneurial point of view. Entrepreneurship involves the identification and exploitation of an opportunity, taking risk, and adopting a perspective of creative opportunism. It is the process of creating something different with value by devoting the necessary time and effort, assuming the accompanying financial, psychological and social risks (Hirsch and Peters, 1998).

4. The Impact of Marketisation on Heads’ Professional Growth and Self-renewal

As we have assumed in hypotheses 1 and 2, some heads may experience professional growth and self-renewal as a result of the emergence of marketisation in education. However, consistent with Grace (1995) and Portin et al. (1998), it is possible that positive responses
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to marketisation are a minority phenomenon among school heads. For example, Grace found that positive reactions to marketisation applied to only about 30 per cent of his sample and was largely expressed by male secondary heads of already successful schools. Similarly, Portin et al. (1998) indicated that only 30 per cent of the heads in their study felt more enthusiastic about their job than they did five years before, that is, before the establishment of marketisation in their country.

Following Ruohotie’s (1996) conceptualisation of professional growth, presented in section two of this paper, it is suggested that those heads who experience professional growth following the marketisation of education might have new experiences, greater responsibility, new competencies, new attitudes and a feeling of self-improvement. From the subjective point of view career growth entails the development of a more positive sense of self-identity, achieved through the acquisition of new competencies (Hall and Kram, 1981). Support for the ‘growth hypothesis’ comes from previous studies that have partially illuminated the professional growth trajectory of school heads operating in the educational market.

For some headteachers, the transformation in schooling culture and the transformations in school leadership which they required generated no major problems. New constructs of school leaders as empowered local managers and as successful market entrepreneurs were experienced as modern, progressive, dynamic and stimulating developments … in general, they experienced few dilemmas in negotiating the changed culture of school leadership. (Grace, 1995, pp. 138–9)

Similarly, Woods (1993) cited a school head who came to a conclusion about the impact of pupil-led funding and competition, by saying that he and other heads feel ‘the masters of our own destiny … competition has been really at the back of my mind a lot because I have tried to create a different type of school’. In other words, this head felt some kind of challenge, empowerment and innovation, which may be related to one’s professional growth.

Notwithstanding previous insights into the growth opportunities of heads in the educational market, our hypothesis is based on the assumption that features of marketisation may stimulate the appearance of several determinants and facilitators of professional growth, which have been identified in the literature from various fields of study (Hall, 1986; Hall and Kram, 1981; Jaffe and Scott, 1998; Ruohotie, 1996; West and Farr, 1989). These factors and facilitators include: challenges posed by the specific task or job; unpredictable
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and varied tasks; perceived freedom; rapid creation of knowledge; required level of technical skills and knowledge and uncertainty about how to reach goals. Furthermore, when organisations are changing the nature of work expectations for employees, workers need to adapt and redesign how they do things and at the same time produce improved results. They have to develop the new competencies, the new capabilities and attitudes that seem to enhance their professional growth (Jaffe and Scott, 1998).

In general, the need for heads to acquire new skills and knowledge (e.g. dealing with parents as clients, external relations, marketing), their uncertainty about how to reach goals in the market (e.g. how to position their schools? how to attract prospective pupils to their schools? how to meet quality assurance standards?), and the variety of tasks in the headship engendered by the multiple features of marketisation (e.g. responsiveness, marketing), may motivate professional growth.

The competitive process and the search for excellence in performance accountability, for instance, may provide incentives and so evoke a continuous and universal search for improvements and innovative ways of working. In fact, as Gewirtz et al. (1995) claimed, the policy of open enrolment in England and Wales in combination with other educational reforms ‘was designed to unleash the creative potential’ (p. 90) of heads, which is one expression of professional growth.

Furthermore, consistent with Aitchison’s (1997) claim, marketisation made it possible for schools to develop particular strengths, whether in the curriculum, in extra-curricular activities or in specific facilities and to market these overtly in competition with other institutions. The head has the autonomy to redesign the school, provided that he or she has developed an appropriate professional expertise in areas of entrepreneurial and innovative professional practice. New skills and knowledge are also required for headship, due to the incorporation of market-led management in schools. This is related, according to Ruohotie (1996) to a sense of challenge in the work, which stimulates professional growth.

These determinants may have some influence upon heads’ self-renewal, although the lack of clear conceptualisation of the phenomenon makes it difficult to claim for any strong link. Therefore, we can only speculatively suggest, as we do in hypothesis two, that some heads may experience a sense of self-renewal, a notion put forward by Oplatka et al. (2001) and Oplatka (2001), in which heads may feel a rebirth and a breaking of the routine, enthusiasm and replenishing internal energy, and searching for new opportunities.
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and tasks. For example, Woods (1993, p. 211) cited one head who enjoys his new role of ‘marketer’, for this new role makes him feel self-renewed:

One of the very, very positive aspects of the Education Reform Act … is the necessity for most schools, because they are in competition, to actually market themselves … so, I am enjoying it because 50 per cent of my time I suppose is in some way taken up with marketing… I have been a head for 16 years and if I was doing the same job now that I was doing in 1975 I’d probably retire now even at my age. But it regenerated an interest and changed my role and even though I complain about the shortcomings of Local Management of Schools and the national curriculum, etc. it is different and that’s what I like.

This head’s story partially reflects his renewal engendered mainly by his need to develop and exploit particular strengths in his school if he wants to survive in the new competitive, uncertain educational environment.

This new market-led environment may promote heads’ professional growth and renewal, but at the same time may promote heads’ stress and burnout, as will be presented in the next section.

5. The impact of Marketisation on Heads’ Levels of Stress and Burnout

The features of marketisation presented in section three may have some negative influence upon the heads, with regard to higher levels of occupational stress and job burnout, as we suggested in hypotheses three and four. However, the two concepts are not identical; the latter is viewed as a consecutive phenomenon of the former in the workplace, with no clear theoretical framework defining distinctive features and determinants of each concept. Thus, our discussion of the speculative impact of marketisation upon stress and burnout is presented together, with no ability to specify accurately which of the features of marketisation enhance the levels of stress and which increase levels of burnout.

Our assumption (H3, H4) is congruent with previous research and commentaries which indicated that the changes in the traditional roles of headship, and the emergence of educational markets – which necessitates the need to ensure the survival of the school – created greater tension, stress and frustration among school heads in the UK (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Grace, 1995; Hall and Southworth, 1997). McEwen and Salters (1997) clearly presented the interplay
between the new role demands resulting from marketisation and the heads’ level of stress:

Currently, headteachers are under pressure to introduce more commercially based methods of managing their schools in order to promote efficiency, to compete with other schools and ... to tender their own ... performance observable and measurable. (p. 70)

The new need for the head to build a positive school image and to gain public approval for programmes was also identified as a factor in the head’s burnout (Gmelch and Gates, 1998), and a pressing aspect of his/her role (Gewirtz et al., 1995).

The hypotheses (3 and 4) rest also on analysis of the features of marketisation and their relationships with the factors affecting levels of stress and burnout in the workplace. The stressfulness of a situation depends on how individuals perceive the demands and opportunities of that situation in relation to their needs and goals. It also depends on how individuals perceive their ability to deal with those demands and opportunities in ways that are consistent with their own needs and goals (Ostell and Oakland, 1995; Smylie, 1999). We assume that the perceived demands deriving from features of marketisation are greater than heads’ resources in terms of professional knowledge, skills, time and so forth for dealing with these sorts of demands. This leads, in turn, to higher levels of occupational stress in headship.

Several factors and causes of stress and burnout in the workplace have been identified in the literature of organisational behaviour (Bolman and Deal, 1991; Cherniss, 1980; Kahn, et al., 1964) and educational management (Chaplain, 2001; Gmelch and Gates, 1998; Ostell and Oakland, 1995; Smylie, 1999; Torelli and Gmelch, 1993; Whitaker, 1996). Whitaker (1996) was mainly concerned with stress and burnout among school heads in the primary and secondary phases.

More specifically, seven factors were indicated as having positive correlation with stress in the workplace: role conflict, role ambiguity and uncertainty, constraints on individual autonomy, work overload, lack of preparation for the job, and lack of support from colleagues. Work overload and lack of support were also directly correlated with job burnout. It seems that these factors may be promoted by features underlying the processes of educational marketisation. The relevant stress and burnout factors promoted by educational marketisation are: role conflict; role ambiguity; constraints on individual autonomy; work overload; perceived lack of capacity to perform; and little support from colleagues.
Role Conflict

This is defined as two or more sets of inconsistent, conflicting role expectations experienced simultaneously by an individual (Kahn et al., 1964). Change can introduce new roles and performance expectations that conflict with other roles an individual is expected to perform (Bolman and Deal, 1991). Indeed, the process of educational marketisation, as a change process, may evoke job stress through three sorts of role conflicts. The first is a role conflict which derives from a contradiction between heads’ professional and ethical beliefs, values, and attachments and some of the values and ideologies underlying the marketisation (Gewirtz et al., 1995). This sort of role conflict is illustrated by Bell (1999) who uses the term ‘conflict’ to describe the head’s dilemma following marketisation:

What emerges here is a possible, intrinsic value conflict between business methods and education as a public service or, at the very least, business methods and the idea of a comprehensive education. (p. 58)

One head in Grace’s (1995) study explicitly and clearly expresses the role conflict the heads had, due to their need to adopt new values and assumptions stemming from the non-educational system:

Much of what we are being asked to do in terms of marketing and competition is against my basic principles and I find this intolerable that a government should inflict a particular philosophy onto a profession and take no account of their opinions and expertise. The process of education is not the same as producing a tin of beans. Business practices are often inappropriate for what we do. (Primary head, cited in Grace, 1995, p. 136)

The second role conflict is related to the heads’ inability to respond positively to contradictory institutional expectations of him/her. For example, the head, as marketer (i.e., consumer-oriented), is under pressure to deliver a service designed for the pupils. However, as Farrell (2001) has commented, s/he has to promote a standardised National Curriculum which is limited in its ability to respond to particular needs of certain groups of pupils. The third role conflict stems from the need for the head to decide either to focus on ‘image management’ and marketing the school, or on meeting the educational and social needs of the students (Ball, 1994), for the former ones consume a huge amount of time and energy leaving scant time for other role performances. Further, this conflict relates
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also to financial dilemmas, as one head in Foskett’s (1995) research, indicated:

I am quite happy to tell people about the quality of the school, but I hate the massive expenditure on marketing that could be spent on education. Competition is bringing inflation in marketing costs … (p. 168)

The heads’ various expressions of role conflict may considerably increase their stress, a connection already evidenced in previous research (e.g. Smylie, 1999).

Role Ambiguity

This means a lack of clear, consistent information regarding rights, duties, tasks, and responsibilities (Kahn et al., 1964). Role ambiguity is generally associated with vague organisational goals, role definitions and expectations for performance. It is associated with uncertainty concerning what a person must do to perform his or her role effectively. Uncertainty has been defined as the micro (individual level) condition in which the employee is required to, or desires to, make a response or take an action, but is not sure about important outcomes that might follow from their various actions (Smylie, 1999).

Educational marketisation can introduce new uncertainties and ambiguities about school goals, the roles of heads and staff in the school, and the skills that are required to perform new tasks, such as marketing, budgeting, assessing competitor advantage and external relations. Heads may find themselves raising questions regarding how well they perform their job and what their tasks are. Woods (1993) cited a head who relied on his impressions at the school’s open evening, because he lacked accurate information regarding the impact of parents’ evening upon student enrolment:

I sense that that is different now because at the last parents’ evening, although I didn’t do any statistics on it. I didn’t sort of say where have you come from when they came through the door at the last open evening of October last year. I sensed from the questions and from the people who spoke to me that there were more people than ever from those two areas. (p. 220)

The head’s comment is an example of ambiguity and uncertainty about his marketing role in his school, but his question can easily be extended towards other elements of marketisation. For example, heads may be aware of ambiguity and feel uncertain when dealing
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with the appropriate balance between parents’ needs and desires and their own educational ideology, or when posing some constraints on external relationships, lest these relationships undermine school autonomy.

A study aimed at exploring stress and burnout among heads (Gmelch and Gates, 1998) revealed that job ambiguity provided the most significant influence on both depersonalisation and personal accomplishment dimensions of burnout. If heads experience unclear job conditions – not knowing exactly what is expected of them, how much authority they have, unclear goals, and what has to be done – then they are less likely to feel fulfilled and accomplished.

Constraints on Individual Autonomy

Constraints and control over one’s work and work environment may increase one’s stress (Lazarus, 1966). Change can evoke a sense of powerlessness. It can threaten individuals’ discretion and their ability to influence their work environments (Smylie, 1999). Indeed, marketisation introduced stronger elements of choice for parents and their children (Herbert, 2000). This enabled parents to influence the schooling of their child, as well as to be more involved in shaping the school’s policy and practice (Webb and Vuliamy, 1996).

The customer-oriented attitudes underlying the process of marketisation may impose specific constraints on the head’s discretion and ability to manage the school effectively. Empowered parents and the notion that ‘parents are always right’ may largely decrease his or her authority and control over educational issues. The head may feel threatened and powerless, for he or she has to decentralise some of their decision making to parents and other stakeholders. Parents as choosers may demand more influence upon their child’s education thereby increasing heads’ stress and frustration. An example of such a feeling is given by Woods (1993) who tells us about the willingness of one head to respond to parents’ wishes for internal examinations to start earlier in their children’s secondary schooling. This head confirmed that both educational reasons and the view of prospective parents, i.e., competition for prospective students, were a factor in his decision to accede to their request.

Another feature of marketisation, which impinges upon a head’s sense of autonomy, is related to quality assurance and performance accountability. Heads are no longer free to determine teaching and learning aims and indicators of success, for these aspects of their role are transferred to central authority.
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Work Overload

This refers to the perception that one must do more of a difficult task than time permits. Quantitative overload refers to the amount and pace of work to be done, while qualitative overload refers to the characteristics and difficulty of the work to be done (Beehr, 1995). No doubt, as was found in studies about stress and burnout in the headship (Torelli and Gmelch, 1993; Whitaker, 1996), heads may be susceptible to both excessive quantitative and qualitative overload, which leads to emotional exhaustion, stress and anxiety.

However, following the process of marketisation the overload might have been intensified because heads had been compelled to develop new kinds of entrepreneurial perspectives, new external relations strategies and new sorts of marketing plans, and dedicate plenty of time to parents. Jones (1999b) cited one head who noted that in his deprived area there had been:

Most difficulty … in parents coming to me with personal problems … they come up to say ‘my little Johnny’s not well’ but then things emerge. (p. 492)

Along similar lines, Herbert (2000) claimed that heads and their staff were faced with two sources of pressure. The first came from the demands of the National Curriculum with its multiplicity of targets and the second from the need to satisfy parents and attract pupils in the new competitive educational market. These new tasks not only increase the head’s quantitative overload, but also contribute to his or her qualitative overload, for many heads may perceive themselves as incompetent in issues of marketing, public relations, external relations, building a competitive edge and so on. This issue is related also to a lack of preparation for the role.

Lack of Preparation or Perceived Lack of Capacity to Perform

Stress can result when individuals are, or feel they are, ill equipped to deal with problems in their area of work responsibility. It can also derive from self-doubts and insecurities about one’s competence to act effectively and to meet others’ expectations (Cherniss, 1980).

Stress is expected in the face of change as new skills and behaviours are required (Bolman and Deal, 1991). In that sense, educational marketisation, as an environmental change, may create feelings of incompetence, for heads may believe they have insufficient expertise to fulfil their new marketing, counselling, and entrepreneurial tasks. This assumption was evident in previous studies in
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which heads claimed they lacked the necessary skills required for success in some aspects of the changing role, e.g., marketing the school and resolving parent-school conflicts (Borg and Riding, 1993; Portin et al., 1998). Unfortunately, they probably would not be able to seek support from their peers because marketisation and competition seem to decrease levels of support from other heads, thereby promoting heads’ stress and burnout.

Little Support from Colleagues

One of the major factors of heads’ burnout and stress found in previous studies was a lack of support from colleagues (Borg and Riding, 1993; Chaplain, 2001; Torelli and Gmelch, 1993). In fact, in the era of new managerialism, heads were found to experience more isolation within their schools, as a result of their separation from teaching staff and the installation of hierarchical forms of management in schools (Evetts, 1996; Gewirtz et al., 1995). However, whereas internal isolation is not particularly connected to the emergence of markets, it is assumed here that marketisation, and particularly the element of competition, may curtail considerably the collaboration, co-operation and mutual support among heads which was central, prior to the emergence of marketisation. In a competitive environment one is not expected to support one’s competitors, as Bowe et al. (1992) clearly indicated, ‘The market is seen to be destroying a beneficial educational collaboration’ (p. 62).

The lack of collaboration and of support among heads is evident in two heads’ reflections regarding the issue of competition:

I am realistic enough to know that this spirit of cooperation is fragile and is likely to disappear if one of the schools in the area begins to fear closure because of the effects of falling rolls. (Secondary head, cited in Grace, 1995, p. 135)

Where we are talking about marketing, and I know I see it there in the back of your mind, you are saying: ‘why aren’t they co-operating like they did when they were working in TVEI?’ well, the competition wasn’t there then … (Secondary head, cited in Thomas, 1996)

The increasing decline in institutional cooperation, let alone in mutual individual support, which is added to the existing situation of the head’s isolation in his or her school, enhance the likelihood of job burnout. Further, without support to diminish the stressful events resulting from the need to compete and satisfy clients, heads
are more inclined to experience high levels of stress and burnout in their new roles.

6. Practical Implications

The paper has suggested four hypotheses in relation to the impact of marketisation upon school heads’ well-being, by speculating theoretical-logical interactions among seemingly non-interconnected concepts. In that sense, psychological phenomena such as professional growth, self-renewal, occupational stress and job burnout are assumed to be promoted by some characteristics of educational marketisation, for a variety of logical reasons discussed in this paper. Interestingly but not surprisingly, given the common determinants of stress and growth identified in previous literature (e.g. Ruohotie, 1996; Smylie, 1999), the same features of marketisation may promote occupational stress or motivate professional growth in headship.

Furthermore, the theoretical hypotheses raised here draw attention to the dichotomous psychological responses of heads to the process of marketisation in the education system. This is to say that as opposed to the ‘negative’ notion reflected in many studies in which marketisation’s impact upon heads’ well-being was perceived to be, by and large, negative in nature (e.g. stressful, anxiety increasing), this paper also highlights the potential positive impact of marketisation upon heads’ well-being.

The hypotheses, however, are not intended to comprise all the variables affecting the interaction between marketisation and the heads’ well-being. The impact of changes in the perception of the term ‘educational marketing’ over the years (e.g. from one of selling to the idea of relationship marketing), and of heads’ career stages on the interaction between marketisation and heads’ well being, is beyond the scope of our paper. The speculative assumptions cannot take into account all the variables, however, but it may provide some insights into several aspects of marketisation in schools and the impact on the head. Some theoretical insights may be drawn from the conceptualisation suggested in the current paper. More research is needed to examine short-term as well as long-term effects of educational marketisation upon heads and teachers. Further studies should quantitatively and qualitatively measure and explore the scope and nature of the interactions between educational marketisation and heads’ (as well as staff’s) internal psychological phenomena and processes. More specifically, following our theoretical discussion, three areas of study are worth further empirical investigation.
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First, we suggest a large-scale quantitative survey aimed at examining the scope and content of occupational stress and job burnout among heads in market-like, competitive educational arenas. This study should examine the relationships between features of educational markets (e.g. competition, uncertainty, ambiguity, customer orientation etc.) and determinants of stress and burnout in organisations. Furthermore, the role of mediator variables (e.g. age, gender, school size, pupils’ socio-economic status, school position etc.) in the interaction between marketisation and heads’ stress and burnout need to be tested in this studies.

Second, qualitative investigations are recommended in order to explore the subjective meanings and interpretations heads attach to the potential influences of the features of marketisation upon themselves. In doing so, researchers may gain deeper insights into the relationships between marketisation and heads’ internal experiences: personal and professional growth, self-renewal, elation, and reframing of their management and career perceptions. Qualitative inquiry entails the understanding of phenomena with multiple variables and loose boundaries one cannot study through inventories and predetermined conceptualisations. It seems appropriate, therefore, to explore process and determinants of growth, renewal and even stress from the standpoint of heads.

Third, of particular interest is a study aimed at clarifying the influence upon heads’ and school staff’s well-being of the various elements of marketisation, government legislation, and ways of implementing educational markets. Its main purpose should be to examine the role of hidden, implicit messages indicated in government legislation, and how this impacts on heads’ perceptions of their own well-being following the implementation of markets in education.

7. References


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