



# Potentials of Collaborative Educational Welfare Research - Theorizing Voice Plurality and Social Empowerment

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## Abstract

Childhood marginalization is the result of complicated processes that appears difficult to address for policymakers worldwide. Neo-institutional theory enables studies of the complexity of educational organizations, showing how they evolve in responses to their contradictory surroundings and generate unintended social inequality. Three Nordic municipalities are currently participating in a project that focuses on the increasing polarization between exposed and privileged schools in urban areas and on the significance of institutional and organizational factors in their local welfare models in ensuring childhood equity. The project we report on combines data in contrasting urban school areas. After showing some examples of voices in the project, the authors discuss how municipal actors are informed about social problems in school organizations yet lack research-based tools to counteract social inequality in education. They theorize how collaboration between researchers and welfare providers can contribute to counteract social inequality. Lessons from the project indicate a need for further collaboration between different stakeholders that includes different voices to ensure that research on childhood inequality is relevant and has an impact.

**Keywords** Educational welfare · Childhood marginalization · Flourishing individuals · Research collaboration

## Introduction

In this article, we take a step back from our ongoing research project Nordic Unequal Childhood (n.d), and ask: *How can researchers and educational providers work together to understand the organizational complexity and adaptation needed to ensure childhood equity?* As the authors hold different roles in a collaborative project between researchers and municipalities, we use this article to communicate and

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reflect upon its potential to give alternative understandings on an important topic. We also visit emancipatory theory to illustrate how our interests in childhood equity joins us as partners. A new examination of children from the world's richest countries offers a mixed picture of their health, skills, and happiness (Gromada et al., 2020). We argue that childhood inequality is a major societal problem, even in countries that have been regarded as successful in addressing inequalities such as the Nordic nations. Scholars have found that the social gradient on health inequalities (see for example Arntzen et al., 2019) is unequivocally reflected in the social gradient on educational attainment, employment, income, quality of neighbourhood, and so forth (Local Government Association, 2010; Marmot, 2020). Nordic early childhood education is often described as being deeply rooted in the idea of lifelong learning, where democracy plays a significant role even among the youngest children in the educational process (Emilsson & Johansson, 2018). Childhood marginalization can be understood in terms of poverty (Povlsen et al., 2018). It can also be related to health outcomes (Pedersen & Madsen, 2002), learning possibilities (Barone, 2006), and life chances (Esping-Andersen, 2005), and it follows social patterns connected to social background characteristics, such as social class, ethnicity, gender, and disability (Riele, 2006; Scherr & Mayer, 2019). While the intention of a strong welfare state in the Nordic context is to provide high-quality education for all citizens independent of their social background (Antikainen, 2006; Blossing et al., 2014; Nordic Co-operation, n.d; Simola, 2014; Telhaug et al., 2006), research indicates that both new and old social divisions generate persistent childhood inequality (Hansen, 2017; Knudsen, 2021). This inequality is imminent in terms of educational outcomes (OECD, 2019) and when focusing on living conditions and life chances for different groups of children. Social inequality in education can be understood in terms of socioeconomic background (Hutmacher et al., 2001; OECD, 2018) and in terms of completed education and school results (Grek, 2009; Ozga & Lindgard, 2007). Family background, area of residence, and socioeconomic status are important factors for how well children perform in the educational system (Boudon, 1974; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Grusky, 2008; Lareau, 2011; Logan & Darrah, 2012; Martinez & Sparks, 2018). Nevertheless, research clearly shows how a child's lifeworld and educational attainment is strongly connected to sociodemographics (Andersen & Bakken, 2015; Bakken & Elstad, 2012; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019; Ljunggren, 2017; Hansen 2017; Øia 2007). Hence, several key factors, such as ethnicity, level of poverty, geographical location, and immigration, relate to school achievements (Logan & Darrah, 2012). All of these factors need to be considered by schools when they organize themselves around the welfare and learning of children. Even though social inequality is shown to be a persistent problem in Nordic countries, existing welfare efforts seem to be insufficient in preventing inequality and marginalization because the school as a welfare institution and other services are extraordinarily complex and difficult to integrate. While there are several rationalities in the different welfare state institutions, not all of them correspond to the inclusive ideology of the Nordic welfare systems. This discrepancy results in the continuous reproduction of inequality and marginalization for vulnerable groups. Therefore, there is a need for research which highlights the institutional intricacy built into modern educational systems.

## A Neo-Institutional Inspired Research Design

Our international research project is based on some core assumptions about modern organizations and employs a combination of methods to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between inequality as it is observed in research and the educational systems that surround childhood inequality in Nordic cities. The idea of the municipality as a tightly organized entity has, in recent years, been questioned as neo-liberal ideas have become increasingly prominent in the Nordic countries together with the emergence of new governing technologies (Hammer, 2020; Karlsen, 2006). Neo-institutional theory highlights invisible mechanisms between official policy programs and non-formal practices that uphold organizational stability. In general, neo-institutional theory traditionally focuses on the institutional gap where organizations are often loosely coupled with their formal agenda (Brunsson, 2006; Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2009, Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Therefore, even though childhood equity is an explicit goal in Nordic education, organizations such as municipalities, welfare services or schools may still contribute to reproducing and even creating inequality as their everyday activities involves negotiations between several considerations; for example goal attainment, school-family collaboration, different juridical requirements, professional cultures, and much more. The educational system can be understood as an organizational landscape that both enables and inhibits equity through its many institutional connections. This is especially prevalent in Nordic societies, as they have ambitious goals for their education in connection to other welfare instances.

Inspired by neo-institutional theory, we seek to understand how complex municipal organizations with many sub-departments have different institutional environments and therefore need to be legitimate to their contradictory expectations. Through an institutional focus, it is possible to understand how municipalities tackle existing social inequality, specifically how they perceive it and how they are organized to counteract it. Further, one can investigate the potential that lies in the collaboration between different actors in education and research to generate new and potentially influential knowledge. The municipalities of Norrköping, Tampere, and Trondheim are currently participating in a project that focuses on the increasing polarization (Bjordal, 2016; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019; Rapp, 2018) between exposed and privileged schools in urban areas and on the significance of organizational factors in their local welfare models in ensuring childhood equity. While educational inequality is a major research field internationally (Lareau, 2011), for a Nordic population, injustice in public services is a threat to the strong trust in the state as a provider of public goods (Esping Andersen, 1990, 2005; Lundahl, 2016). Therefore, researchers are interested in understanding and explaining the gap between policy and practice in education. At the same time, municipalities seek to understand how they can reach their goal of social equity within their mandate and the existing framework. Municipalities are responsible for providing high-quality education and a range of welfare services for children, such as general and specific health services, child welfare, day care, dental health services, social and psychological services, playgrounds and sports facilities – public transport, leisure and school afternoon care, cultural activities, and music schools, amongst other things. The many services for children and youth means that the legitimacy of the Nordic municipality is dependent on public acceptance that they

**Table 1** Data Included in the Project

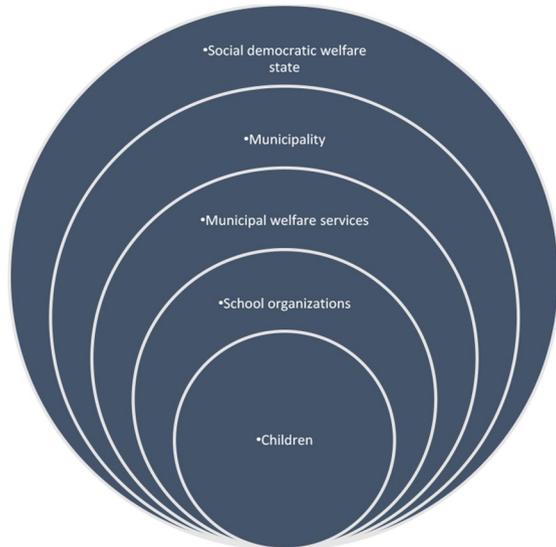
Country	Municipal workers	Schools	Professionals	Children's group interviews
Norway	21 informants	3 schools	25 informants	11 group interviews
Sweden	17 informants	4 schools	21 informants	13 group interviews
Finland	8 informants	2 schools	13 informants	11 group interviews

have fulfilled their social mission of offering all of these services in interaction with the school as an organization. Fulfilling this social mission is a complex task that requires policy alignment and interaction between a large number of public branches within multifaceted organizations. As research indicates, inequality can manifest in many dimensions. Therefore, we intend to show why neo-institutional approaches can be used both to ask questions on the importance and function of legitimacy in welfare terms and to understand how a collaboration on counteracting social inequality can be informed.

The potential that lies within Nordic education is connected to the legitimacy of the welfare state as a welfare provider. In a Nordic welfare model, it is believed that social inequality is somehow managed through a rational and standardized organizational structure that is informed by all its activities to ensure a known result (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 1998). When we apply a neo-institutional perspective to the institutional landscape of educational welfare, the complexity of how the internal organization creates and reproduces inequality becomes observable. Neo-institutional theory is strong in highlighting how educational organizations are created by complex interactions with their institutional environment (Brunsson, 2006; 2014; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Rapp, 2018; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021). Although it is a complex and not always coherent theoretical framework (Alvesson & Spicer, 2019), it can contribute to robust analyses of how politics and ideas emerge, diffuse, and translate into organizations (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2009). A neo-institutional approach is particularly well suited to studies that focus on equity and the relationship between official policies and social practices (Smeplass, 2018). Furthermore, it is useful for analysing organizational practices in schools and the interaction between schools and municipalities (Brunsson, 2014; Hasse & Krücken, 2014).

The research design used in our project includes various sources of information that go beyond the formal structures of municipal organization and give voice to children and welfare providers in combination. A total of nine schools, 140 interviews, and approximately 600 questionnaires with children ensures a comprehensive entrance to discover various institutional gaps in the current organization. Each school represents a distinct case study that gives valuable insights into relationships between children's living conditions and their schools' institutional surroundings. Each school was chosen for the research project based on comprehensive information given by the municipalities, while our data was collected in collaboration with the schools and municipalities. Table 1 illustrates an overview of qualitative data in the project. In addition to this data, the project includes survey data with children willing to participate in each school, as well as area-specific statistics and policy documents.

**Fig. 1** Organizational Levels for Investigating the Landscape of Childhood Inequality



Through this rather complex research design, we can identify key aspects in the existing organization, critical points of integration between schools and other services, and interactions between municipal services and other systems. We find that a neo-institutional perspective is useful to investigate legitimacy (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008) as organizations are part of an organizational field (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983). Figure 1 illustrates the various levels taken into consideration in our project and shows how we consider the organizational landscape between horizontal and vertical connections in Nordic education.

Some institutions influence the educational organizations that represent different rationalities, and these rationalities can be observed through the combination of actors' voices. Since a complex organization such as a municipality must be legitimate in a plurality of directions, it creates a multitude of variations within municipalities even if they are governed by state legislation and rationalized quality assurance mechanisms (Christensen et al., 2009). With insights from neo-institutional theory, the research design in the overall project seeks to investigate inequality and marginalization through a horizontal strategy. This involves comparing national influence and policy, while a vertical research strategy entails in-depth tracking within the national context. Furthermore we can compare the municipal work on ensuring educational equity, through exploring schools in privileged parts of each city in contrast with urban segregated, exposed areas. Although a focus on organization is prevalent in the research design, both researchers and municipal actors realize the importance of including children's voices in the project by interviewing them about their lifeworlds.

## Voices and Potential for Societal Impact

The project *Nordic Unequal Childhood* entails mapping and comparing how three municipal/city models work to counteract social inequality amongst children and youth. Such a collaborative project can contribute to innovation and obtaining rigorous knowledge about system functions and dysfunctions. Furthermore, it can create legitimacy for its engaged partners: researchers, municipal leaders, and professional groups, and it can engage children and their families. Through communication systems within and between these organizations in relation to the institutional surroundings in the welfare states of Sweden, Finland and Norway, we can create shared understandings where new ideas and opportunities can emerge. This is ensured through information sharing in formal networks and by creating opportunities for informal contact between researchers and practitioners to accommodate the different rationales for collaboration (Luhmann, 1995, 2018). The collaborative model enables municipal actors and practitioners to influence the researchers' design, case studies and analysis of these.

While the researchers are responsible for the ethical considerations and project design, the network between the municipalities and with the research group ensures dialogue that influences the research design. Municipalities, schools, and universities are traditionally quite constrained institutions (Ahrne, 1998; Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005), especially cooperation. The project is designed as an active collaboration between researchers and stakeholders, in this case, representatives for each country's welfare state through the local government and the education and welfare systems, which might ensure internal and external legitimacy in several ways (Brunsson, 2006). Through a series of joint dialogue conferences (Nordic Unequal Childhood, n.d), research results are disseminated from the cross-national study on themes connected to the organization of education and welfare in the three Nordic cities. The conferences enable active collaboration between academic and municipal actors and promote equity and sustainability in the Nordic welfare state policies at a local level. As we have discussed, interactions between the school as a system and other services are extraordinarily complex and difficult to integrate (Rapp, 2018). For this reason, we facilitate a comparison of municipal welfare services affecting educational equity in order to develop new insights for policy design and management in the field of preventive work. Trondheim (Norway), Norrköping (Sweden), and Tampere (Finland) all represent cases of the Nordic welfare model built on a free-to-all education system, which is characterized by policy goals to ensure equal opportunity through legal rights, such as adapted education (Smeplass & Leiulfstrud, 2020). Nonetheless, the similar inclusive ideology manifests in each case somewhat differently through various institutions that are designed to minimize a risk of childhood marginalization. This collaboration design empowers partners by exchanging experiences and contributing to an active dialogue while ensuring the knowledge-sharing network. Furthermore, it includes the voices of those who are recipients of educational efforts. Table 2 summarizes how we can understand the potential impact of highlighting different data types and informant groups' voices in the project. As shown in the right column, the various types of data and actor's voices have different potentials for impact through our project, as they represent alternatives to established organiza-

**Table 2** Overview of Project Voices and Potential Impact

Data Types	Voices	Research Intentions	Potential Impact
<b>Survey data</b>	Children Teachers	Focusing on social factors in specific school locations. Reporting to schools	Providing stakeholders with new instruments for self-understanding within the organization. Presenting alternative ways to understand social factors and organizational mechanisms through a social science lens
<b>Interview data</b>	Children Teachers Municipal actors/ Welfare providers	Highlighting individual perceptions in relation to institutional surroundings	Enabling an anonymous impact on existing knowledge and ideas. Revealing gaps between intentions and experiences people have within structural systems
<b>Policy documents</b>	Politicians and bureaucrats	Connecting policy to narratives from within	Highlighting intentions and organizational factors that have built-in contradictions. Creating legitimacy for welfare providers and educational leaders

tional myths which can dominate external communication that is often generated to seek legitimacy in seemingly rational organizations. Moreover, incentives exist for municipalities to collaborate with the research community. As the bottom right box indicates, the project can potentially highlight built-in contradictions between conflicting goals.

Through the knowledge-sharing network, partners ensure that the research has innovative and practice-relevant perspectives on the complexity of social inequality in the educational system. Furthermore, the network enables the research to be utilized to organize each municipality in the future. To generate an innovative and robust model for such a collaboration, we must work towards a stronger symmetry in power and knowledge relations as each partner's and individual's interests may vary. In this manner, the project highlights the question of inequality in education through the perspectives of the individual child's lifeworld and the individual professional that has a role in providing equitable education. However, it also sees organizational hindrances for reaching national policy goals through the educational system. An important aspect of the collaboration is how researchers have research methods and ethical responsibilities that ensure anonymity, reliability and validity in research output that also serves as alternatives to the municipalities' own evaluation systems.

## Making Voice Plurality Visible

In the following section we do not present a full analysis of the data material, but rather some characteristics of the nature of its potential. As previously mentioned, the project is informed by the fact that inequality can manifest in many dimensions and therefore might be perceived differently to individuals in certain groups, roles, or life situations. In this article, we examine how we can work together to ensure childhood equity. Due to space limitations we focus on the potential that lies in this type of complex project with a neo-institutional inspired research design (Ahrne, 1998; Brunsson, 2006; Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2009; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Rapp, 2018; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021). The sources of data in the project can be analysed

in many ways. The interviews we conducted with actors in the educational organizations represent a variety of voices and are used both by senior researchers and students to investigate a multitude of specific research questions on urban segregation, how education is organized, and municipal efforts to ensure inclusive education (see for example Corral-Granados et al., 2022). One of the major strengths in a project such as this is that those who might not be represented in the formal organization are also given a voice by being given the possibility to be included in analyses that show how social inequality can manifest itself in the intersection between the individual and the system.

One data example we have chosen to highlight here is how children's interviews can be a source of information that is framed in a different way through the research lens. In our focus groups, children in the different sociodemographic areas explained to researchers how they perceive their lifeworlds. These explanations were given after the children had been asked questions that were theoretically informed by Allardt's (1975) value dimensions 'having', 'loving', and 'being'. The data collected from these focus groups shows that adults' assumptions of what has value in education is not necessarily coherent with children's perceptions of what gives their life quality. We could, for example, assume that children of parents with a generally higher socioeconomic status and level of education than the average population would experience fewer problems than other children. However, in privileged areas, children can feel pressure to be successful academically but also socially, as pressure to have the same brand of clothes or attend the same leisure activities as others for example, can come from their peer group. Hence, urban segregation in social demographical terms can create strong normative pressure for children who grow up in areas where one is expected to succeed from a young age. Furthermore, researchers and professionals tend to use a majority perspective as a standard for what a good life is or should look like. This adult normative perception of childhood can prevent us from acknowledging children's perspectives on what gives their life quality. In the interviews with children who live in exposed urban areas, children who have different cultural backgrounds or home situations explained how they enjoy close relationships to their families and peers. The interviews that were undertaken for this project can assist researchers in questioning some of our own assumptions regarding how to operationalize living conditions or how we tend to understand educational attainment as the main tasks of our educational systems. Children can experience being happy and being brought up in a safe environment even if they live with a big family in a small apartment.

Another useful aspect of these children's interviews is the fact that they make us consider the more direct consequences of social inequality for children and their families. The contrasts between our nine school areas (see Table 1) are, in many ways, very strong, especially when it comes to material living conditions and access to welfare goods, which are taken for granted in privileged contexts. In the following excerpt, a child explains to the researcher how they have limitations of choice based on the family's financial situation: *'I used to go to gymnastics, but not anymore. You are able to try it for 6 months [for a free trial period], but then it started to cost a lot of money. I told my mom that I would quit, because she thought I was nagging too much about it'* (child in an exposed school area). Some of the children in our exposed

areas have far fewer possibilities than others to attend leisure activities, to go on family trips, or to attend enjoyable culture arrangements such as concerts or festivals. It is possible to take for granted that those who live in Nordic countries have the same access to what we consider to be a good childhood with equal access to social and material goods. The perspectives of the children in our project remind us that we should not only examine educational attainment or cultural differences while studying childhood inequality but also seek to understand how children's lifeworlds are connected to the economy and social relations beyond the schools they attend.

Another example to illustrate voices in the project comes from the school level, where principals, teachers, and other professional groups work on a daily basis to ensure that children have access to learning and welfare regardless of their social background. From a local school perspective, one must balance the needs of each individual child with the many systems that make the school an arena for upbringing and socialization as well as a learning facility for future citizens. Therefore, voices from the school level can be understood to represent a middle position between the many expectations that our school systems face and deal with daily. School professionals represent both the children and themselves. Although Nordic nations have many systems that are thought to work well together, neo-institutional theory highlights that organizations can be full of negotiations and contradictions in the intersection between different norms and regulations. The many voices of our informants on this organizational level assist us in investigating these contradictions from the view of practitioners. We can point to concrete mechanisms that create tensions in each of the nine schools in our study. For example, we have found considerable differences in how schools perceive the support and assistance they receive from their institutional surroundings regarding their specific challenges with the student population, and the work they experience is necessary to ensure the welfare of their children. An interesting paradox we can highlight here is how schools tend to be measured on certain indicators thought to give relevant insight into the quality of their teaching. Even though child welfare is also part of the Nordic school systems' social mission, educational goals are often the primary goal to be measured, especially since they are easier to operationalize (Smeplass & Leiulfstrud, 2022). In the following paragraphs, we show an example of how this can be problematic for those who are on the front line when receiving children who have higher learning demands as their refugee background inhibits their prior schooling. A principal in an exposed school area explains how the municipal systems for measuring the school's success in assisting children to obtain the attainment goals does not take into consideration the actual work teachers do:

At our school, we are happy to measure the student's development [and goal attainment]. But we had a group of students who came this Christmas. If we go back a year, we were quite happy regarding a specific class that had developed very, very well. And we had like 80% goal fulfilment. Then our new students arriving, only knew a few letters [from the alphabet], and suddenly we had a large group percentage who did not manage a single goal. Not a goal. What happens to our performance results then? Then we get 46% approved results in the sixth grade, when we actually had somewhere between 75–80%. These are the best results we could get. The only thing we can do is to help these students

who came in December to actually know more letters when they finish in June. We can only work to improve their literacy. [Therefore], I cannot be interested in municipal comparison between schools because I have experienced how it does not reflect our actual results.

Another perspective of voice in the project is that of the welfare providers. The Nordic municipalities are expected to manage childhood welfare through many services, professional groups, and sub-organizations from within. All of the three municipals stated in this article had an explicit interest in participating in the research project, as social inequality is recognized as an important issue and as a problem both for the individual and on a structural level but is experienced as difficult to coordinate and manage. One of the educational leaders who was interviewed explains how it is difficult to coordinate and manage services to counteract inequality:

Interviewer: Are [the principals] heard and supported?

Municipal leader: In part, if it is a really serious emergency, fire or police or violence or threat. Then I think, then I'm pretty sure [the principals] feel they have our support, because we are extremely quick to support them in emergency events, but we are not as good at supporting them in long-term difficult student cases. They might work with a difficult student for many years. And we do not really know him/her? How should we deal with this student? And their guardians, the parents? There are examples of long-term, difficult cases, where we are not good at supporting. But that responsibility is theirs, to have long-term contact with guardians and students and find methods for it. When it gets difficult, then principals probably feel lonely. Because they have autonomy to decide on those efforts. It's not me, I cannot decide. Sometimes they need to be supported because they do not know what to do. I think that is a shortcoming. [...] We are much better in emergency events than in long-term events, because in long-term cases, many actors are involved.

Even if there are good intentions and rationalized systems within a municipality, we should not assume that it is a simple task to solve from a leadership perspective. On the one hand, one must follow clear budget restrictions and legislation; on the other hand, one is responsible for a complex organization and for the welfare of one's employees, whilst at the same time understanding which efforts might be necessary at a specific time. The municipal perspective in the project reminds us that even though critique can arise as social problems appears in certain schools or certain citizen groups, there are many reasons why inequality can be difficult to counteract from a leadership position. The complexity of a leader's or a municipal worker's own organization is sometimes one of their main frustrations in their work. Many of the municipal workers explicitly explained in the interviews their experience of working in 'silos', separate structures that inhibit them from collaborating on important matters regarding childhood welfare. The voices of the workers within the municipal organizations themselves remind us how they must handle many dilemmas between budgets, personnel responsibilities, and children's needs and legal rights. These workers also remind us that it is a complex task to ensure childhood equity,

even within the modern and rational organizations (Meyer, 2010) municipalities have come to be over time. All three examples of voices mentioned here illustrate the variety of perspectives that emerge when we strive to understand organizational complexity related to inequality rather than seek coherence and rational decisions.

## Theorizing Flourishing Individuals

All social scientists learn the celebrated theories and frameworks of their predecessors, using them to inform their own research and observations (Swedberg, 2014). However, in a research project where the actors involved have different sources for legitimacy and realities, it becomes difficult to synthesize researchers', policymakers', and practitioners' understanding while working to counteract childhood marginalization in all the forms it can arise. Then, how can we theorize on the antithesis of marginalization together with those who have a responsibility to strive for equity in the educational organizations that are seemingly failing? And how can we work towards a shared understanding of why childhood equity in education is so important? The transnational project discussed in this article explores value dimensions of welfare and wellbeing in polarized areas and the meeting between individuals with different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and the educational institution.

“The long-term project of social empowerment over the economy involves enhancing social power through a variety of distinct kinds of institutional and structural transformations. Socialism should not be thought of as a unitary institutional model of how an economy should be organized, but rather as a pluralistic model with many different kinds of institutional pathways for realizing a common underlying principle.” (Wright 2010, p. 368).

Erik Olin Wright (2010) was a critical thinker who contributed to emancipatory sociology. He presented the concept of flourishing individuals who own their lives. The concept flourishing therefore concerns the absence of deficits that undermine human functioning (Wright, 2010). Human flourishing is a multidimensional concept, covering a variety of aspects of human well-being, including the absence of deficits that undermine human functioning. The concept includes the ways in which people are able to develop and exercise their talents and capacities and realize their individual potentials. These potentials take many forms: intellectual, emotional, spiritual, physical, and so on. The concept of flourishing individuals is used to explore potentials that enable or inhibit individuals in different social fields and societies. However, when research involves examining why a society causes inequality or harm to groups or individuals, the concept is closely connected to issues of social justice and normative theory. Wright (2010) draws on a radical democratic egalitarian understanding of justice that builds on normative claims. The first is social justice, which is defined as people's broad access to the necessary material and social means to live flourishing lives. The second is political justice, which is defined as people's broad equal access to the necessary means to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives. Political and social justice include giving individuals the freedom to make choices

that affect their lives as separate persons as well as a freedom to increase their capacity to participate in collective decisions that affect their lives as members of a society.

The critical thinker Paolo Freire claims that “Educators need to know what happens in the world of the children with whom they work. They need to know the universe of their dreams, the language with which they skilfully defend themselves from the aggressiveness of their world, what they know independently of the school, and how they know it” (Freire, 2005). Research indicates that ensuring childhood wellbeing is easier when families, children, and schools share the same cultural values, norms, and knowledge (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Lareau, 2011; Lynch, 2019) asks what educators can and cannot change regarding inequality in education. She finds it obvious that inequality has links to many other institutions that contribute to the reproduction of social inequality through education. In Lynch’s opinion, even though education cannot be held responsible for failing to eliminate injustices that are not generated within education in the first instance, educators are nonetheless accountable for their collaboration with the unrealizable myth of meritocracy in increasingly economically unequal societies. Still, it is clear that education has an emancipatory potential if the educational institution believes in and trusts in the equality of intelligence between teachers and pupils. Instilling this attitude would result in every person being treated as a subject with the capability of participating in changing systems. Every individual or every subject has the potential to increase their freedom and obtain a richer life both individually and collectively by freeing themselves from oppressive habits and roles. Hence, to ensure that all children, not only those who come from advantageous groups in the population, live flourishing lives, welfare providers and researchers must pay attention to the ways individuals meet systemic factors that can enable or inhibit their current and future life chances. In the project discussed in this article, this attention is given via a neo-institutional theoretical framework that enables us to study how the normative form of national and local policy on counteracting social inequality can fail when it is translated into educational practice. By exploring these processes through knowledge exchange between educational providers, leaders, researchers, and practitioners, it is possible to identify many factors that can work against good intentions of equity in education. Among other things, a mismatch between global and national policy advice, contradictions in goals, gaps between different institutions, ineffective systems, problems with translating normative goals into effective practice, and so on, contributes to the complexity of ensuring childhood equity. Different voices describe inequality in different ways, and in a neo-institutional perspective, these different voices represent norms in the institutional environment (Meyer, 2010; Rapp, 2018). A common problem for any organization is to adapt to a complex and contradictive environment (Brunsson, 2006). To be able to change social inequality through organizing, it is important to identify the gaps in the institutional environment, something that is possible to do with a research design that gives voice to different actors. It is also important to recognize that some of these gaps needs to be filled, something that requires the use of resources. When actors identify such gaps together, it increases the chances that the educational provider will be successful in their efforts to ensure childhood welfare and equity.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have taken a new perspective to comprehend how different stakeholders can work together to understand the organizational complexity of ensuring a flourishing future for all children. We have done this by focusing on the potential for societal impact that lies in our project. As we have illustrated, the question of how we can reach the educational policy goals in the Nordic context is more about accepting how childhood welfare could be understood in line with Wright (2010) – that there are ‘many different kinds of pathways’ for realizing our goals to ensure a flourishing future for all children. The neo-institutional perspectives that have inspired our research design reminds us that municipalities are intricate organizations and that voices must be seen in conjunction with each other. From the post-WW2 period, the Nordic states have invested largely in strong public services to ensure egalitarian societies. This investment has fostered a dominating understanding of the welfare state systems in Finland, Sweden, and Norway as integrated and coordinated. The growth within the different branches of government is thought to provide a professional and specialized welfare state. In all three nations involved in this project, the municipality is the most prominent provider of welfare: it is expected to serve legal systems and provide solutions for a variety of challenges, many of which have been identified in this article. In this respect, the municipality is a type of organization that needs to be investigated as something more than a constructed organizational map that appears orderly on the surface but is in itself a possible study object for researchers who are interested in the relationship between official and unofficial institutionalized norms and rules and adaptations between them, which is highlighted in neo-institutional theory.

The project we report on in this paper gives us the possibility to more deeply understand how we can work together to secure the futures of children in contrasting situations. While a municipality has certain functions and systems that it must abide by to ensure the goals of the welfare state policy, specific concrete mechanisms still need to be highlighted and discussed within the research community and, maybe even more importantly, in collaboration with those who are part of the complex welfare states and their organizations. Through making institutional gaps visible by listening to enlightened voices ‘from within’, we can work harder in the future to create relevant research for organizations and citizens. We believe the research design is important to explore the concrete mechanisms in the intersection between systems and individuals in our welfare system.

Our ongoing Nordic research project aims to compare how three similar education systems work to counteract inequality among children and young people. The three partner municipalities of Norrköping, Tampere and Trondheim represent the ideology of a so-called Nordic model. The model, which is based on a general and free undergraduate education, is characterized by values and goals that rest on all students’ equal opportunities, rights and duties (Antikainen, 2006, 2010; Lundahl, 2016; Smepllass & Leiulfstrud, 2020; Telhaug et al., 2006). Inclusive ideologies are cemented in education acts through the use of regulations in all three states. However, these ideologies take different forms at the local level, where the institutions that must contribute to supporting students and reducing the risk of marginaliza-

tion differ in how they are organized. Municipalities, educational institutions, and universities are traditional institutions that are all represented by a certain inertia (Ahrne, 1998), especially when it comes to collaboration. With theoretical inspiration focusing on institutional aspects (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2009; Luhmann, 1995, 2018, Rapp, 2018) and organizational factors (Ahrne, 1998; Brunsson, 2006), the project shows how a reciprocity in a research collaboration can arise and in turn generate innovative ways for research to understand the practical everyday lived complexity of social inequality in the education system. Furthermore, the project illustrates how social inequality is also an organizational output. In this paper, we highlighted the importance of objectification (Berger & Luckmann, 1999), translation (Sahlin & Wedin, 2008), and organizational legitimacy (Brunsson, 2006). Through communication (Luhmann, 1995) in the institutions, between the stakeholders, and with the environment, a new institutional understanding can be created where untried ideas can take shape. The project highlights the importance of informal contacts, formal platforms, feedback, and dissemination so that municipalities, schools and welfare institutions together with the researchers can achieve translation between research and practice (and vice versa). Such a collaborative effort and create legitimacy for the issue of social inequality internally and externally. Communication about the rationality of the various institutions (Luhmann, 2018), in turn, contributes to the creation of power and the capacity to be influential together (Brunsson, 2006). It also allows researchers and welfare actors to focus on issues concerning the marginalization of children and young people so that they can develop new organizational models with the capacity to deal with social inequality. Furthermore, we wish to underline the importance of symmetry in power and knowledge relations between various stakeholders whose objectives and purposes differ, in such a project. Our experience is that we share a mutual benefit in shedding light on an issue that is deeply rooted in a Nordic welfare model. Compared to other nations around the globe, the Nordic welfare systems are well equipped with resources to ensure flourishing childhoods for all children. However, they need to develop highly sensitive tools to ensure equality not only in educational goals but also in all aspects of life. Research that allows for change is only possible if marginalized voices can criticize current organizations. Collaborative projects that share common interests can be seen as an ecosystem for organizational change rather than a linear innovation process. Based on lessons from our own research initiative, we conclude that there is a need to develop new language to explain and understand how childhood marginalization is currently taking place, as old mechanisms from class structures and economic history have a strong influence on societal institutions, while at the same time, new sources for inequality and injustice can be generated even in systems full of good intentions.

We should continue to ask how childhood marginalization can be counteracted in the meeting between the individual and educational system. How can we understand the hidden mechanisms of our welfare systems that generate inequality? What are the limits in our research, policies and fields of practice that impedes us from joining forces to tackle the problem of childhood inequality? And how can stakeholders find and communicate common interests as agents for change?

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