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Understanding how institutional dynamics can contribute to educational inequality in Nordic cities

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the institutional dynamics that contribute to educational inequality within Nordic cities. The persistent issue of social inequality in education remains a prominent challenge for the Nordic welfare states. By investigating the gaps between educational policies and their practical implementation, this study sheds light on the mechanisms that drive educational inequality. Through the application of qualitative methods, the research examines the impediments to achieving educational equity within three distinct municipalities in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. The study identifies several contributing factors to the prevailing educational inequality, encompassing housing policies, urban spatial segregation, diverse principles governing school choice and marketisation, and variations in organisational models intended to promote equity. The research not only offers novel insights into the gaps between educational policy formulation and implementation but also underscores their pivotal role in both generating and perpetuating educational inequality. In the subsequent discussion, the study addresses these identified gaps and outlines their potential implications for future policy-making and practical implementation in Nordic education.

KEYWORDS

Nordic education;
educational inequality;
organisational theory;
welfare state; educational
policy; welfare paradox

Introduction

Equity in Nordic countries faces a challenge stemming from the interplay between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome (Buchholtz et al., 2020; Jencks, 1988; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021; Reegård & Rogstad, 2016; Reisel et al., 2019; Rogstad, 2015). Educational equity embodies the ideals of fairness and justice, ensuring equal opportunities for all learners, irrespective of their individual circumstances (UNESCO, 2017). The Coleman report introduced a paradigm shift in policymakers' perspectives on educational opportunities (Kantor & Lowe, 2017). Rather than assessing equality of opportunity by input, Coleman argued for its evaluation through the lens of equality of outcome. This approach was coupled with the recognition that desegregation of schools could effectively level the playing field (Coleman, 1966). However, translating these principles into practice has proven complex, with loosely coupled bureaucracies often lacking explicit procedural specifications for professional conduct (Mehta, 2013). In times of growing economic inequality, improving

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equity in education is becoming more urgent (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018; Schleicher, 2019). The study of inequality on a municipal level is essential because it provides a more precise empirical basis for evaluating different theories on the welfare state and equality (Smeplass et al., 2023). Issues related to the causes of cross-national variation in inequality remain unresolved due to severe methodological and conceptual problems in comparative studies. To fill this gap, an exploration of new comparative data on social policy institutions and income inequality among diverse population groups can facilitate a more profound understanding of the welfare state's design and its implications (Palme, 2006). Therefore, our study focuses on organisational aspects and institutional dynamics in relation to social inequality in education in three Nordic municipalities. Trondheim (Norway), Norrköping (Sweden) and Tampere (Finland) are all mid-sized cities in social democratic welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990), where education has been regarded a public institution to ensure social inclusion (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021; Telhaug et al., 2006). The central inquiry guiding this research is: How do institutional factors contribute to educational inequalities in Nordic cities? Notably, while these cities embrace egalitarian values, the emergence of market-led reforms complicates the pursuit of inclusive education (Wiborg, 2013), thus unveiling the intricate nature of addressing marginalisation via educational equity.

Ensuring inclusive and excellent education for all is one of the most important driving forces for sustainable development as education enables socioeconomic mobility (Duncan et al., 2012; Kääriälä & Hiilamo, 2017; Ryan et al., 2006). Amidst the Nordic and European political discourse, achieving social development necessitates a harmonious blend of social service access, sustainable economic growth, and equitable distribution (Favre et al., 2017; Halonen et al., 2017; Norwegian Government, 2013). Regarded as a model of balanced development, the Nordic education framework (Christiansen, 2006; Norwegian Government, 2013) underscores the need for an inclusive education system. Despite endeavours to establish inclusivity, research unearths the failure of social democratic welfare states to dismantle mechanisms reinforcing the link between social background and life prospects for children and youth (Bakken & Elstad, 2012; Ljunggren, 2017; Øia, 2007; OECD, 2018, 2019a; Palme, 2006). This is known as one of the welfare state paradoxes. While many scholars highlight the association of race, ethnicity, and gender with educational inequality (Zajda & Freeman, 2009), our focus examines how organisational elements contribute to inequality and marginalisation from distinct sources. Particularly, we delve into how organisational factors intersect with political equity goals on a municipal level within Nordic education.

Nordic municipalities face significant challenges in addressing poverty, inequality and environmental issues. These challenges require careful coordination and management of various organisational, legal and cultural factors in the education sector and other public services (Baraldi & Corsi, 2017; Eide et al., 2017). Our study examines how welfare systems and inclusive education are implemented and understood by actors at a municipal level and practised at different levels within welfare services and local schools. By comparing the variations in institutional factors such as housing policy, urban spatial segregation, school marketisation, and equity models across three municipalities, we highlight the institutional gaps that contribute to durable inequality. Our cross-national study offers insights into the intersection of national educational policy with other inequality amplifying mechanisms in three Nordic cities.

Organisational theory

Our work draws on several sociological perspectives on organisation and inequality. We apply the theoretical concept of durable inequalities (Tilly, 1998) in conjunction with cultural organisational theories (Hatch, 1993; Van den Berg & Wilderom, 2004) that focus on the various constructions of childhood (Hatch, 1995). Our research design is built on insights from neo-institutional theory (Brunsson, 2006, 2014; Meyer, 1977, 2006; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), which provide a conceptual framework for understanding how educational organisations are created through interactions with their institutional environment (Moos, 2017; Rapp, 2018; Smeplass, 2018; Smeplass et al., 2023). This framework is particularly well suited for analysing the relationship between official policies and social practices, which is critical for projects focused on equity (Corral-Granados et al., 2022; Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2009; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021).

Organisational approaches are well-suited for analysing the practices of schools and their interaction with municipalities (Brunsson, 2000; Hasse & Krücken, 2015). We aim to identify the cultural resources and dynamics, critical points of integration, and structural relationships and interactions between schools and other services (Hatch, 2004; Tilly, 1978). Tilly's (1998) universal theory of inequality considers the social interrelationships between categories within organisations, which create hierarchies in institutional roles and structures that are related to the design, communication, and construction of local ideas about student distribution in municipal schools (Laslett, 2000). While some categories, such as ethnicity and social class, are recognised as unacceptable sources for inequality in welfare systems, other categories are perceived as legitimate and out of policy reach. Our analysis focuses on how these categories interact in urban school systems, and how well-intended policy ideas can end up amplifying inequality when they overlap and reinforce one another (Corral-Granados et al., 2023). Our study employs a combination of organisational theories to investigate the mechanisms that drive inequality both within and between organisations, and between contrasting schools in our project.

Methods

The research design is inspired by neo-institutional theory (Brunsson, 2006, DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Smeplass et al., 2023) and includes interviews with various actors in each municipality, such as educational leaders, administrative staff, health providers and teachers, as shown in Table 1. The interviews were conducted in the local language using one of three structured interview guides tailored to the informant's organisational role (principals, school professionals, and municipal workers). The research design enabled a comparison of municipal welfare services affecting educational equity to develop new insights into the relationship between policy design and welfare management. The three cities of Trondheim, Norrköping, and Tampere were selected for this study due to their similar demographic, social, and economic characteristics. These factors allowed for an in-depth exploration of institutional factors contributing to educational inequality in Nordic cities (Smeplass et al., 2023).

A total of 98 interviews were included in this data material, which was gathered in intensive fieldwork weeks in each national case study by a team of five senior researchers,

Table 1. Data by city and type.

Cities		Trondheim	Norrköping	Tampere
Informants		Informants: 41	Informants: 36	Informants: 21
Organisations	Areas and departments	Informants	Informants	Informants
Informants: Municipal level	Health	5 counsellors from school psychiatric and pedagogical services 3 informants from school health services	4 leaders of health, 1 leader of psychologists	1 informant working on language training
	Education	3 educational directors and 2 counsellors working with upbringing	3 directors of education and 1 children and students' representatives	1 from customer service, 1 head of early years, 2 deputy leaders in schools and 1 manager working with curriculum
	Economy	1 economist and 2 informants working at a department of analysis and research	2 researchers and 1 counsellor on elementary school strategy	1 coordinator development, 1 counsellor on research
	Welfare	3 leaders of children's welfare services and 2 working in family services	1 head in the social office	
Informants: School level	Roles	3 schools	4 schools	2 schools
	Managerial level	4 principals and 3 managers	4 principals, 1 team leader	1 assistant and 1 principal
	Teachers	10 teachers	6 teachers	7 teachers
	Health and psycho-pedagogical team	3 special pedagogues	3 curators, 2 health workers, 2 safety leaders and 5 special teachers	2 school nurses and 2 special education teachers
	After school activities	3 Employees, 1 Social worker, 1 Leader from after school activities	1 leader and 1 leisure pedagogue	

three junior researchers, four scientific assistants, and three Masters students. Nine schools were strategically chosen together with the municipalities to ensure contrasting cases and the validity of the research. We used cross-national comparative case studies within and between the countries (Lorant & Bhopal, 2011). Each municipality had access to their own administrative data, which provided detailed information about the socio-economic conditions affecting their schools. In each municipality, we selected schools that represented highly contrasting educational settings in terms of social demography. Socio-economic status is a composite or multidimensional indicator that reflects a combination of different types of capital or resources that influence children's development (Coleman, 1988). To ensure a diverse sample, we included four schools located in socio-economically advantaged areas and five schools in areas considered socio-economically disadvantaged.

The interviews concentrated on work with educational and welfare goals, organisational challenges related to social inequality, and cooperation with educational and welfare agencies within the municipality. Within each school, principals and other leaders aided in recruiting

informants. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), a structured interview guide is a useful data collection technique that can be adapted to the specific roles of informants. Interviews followed a similar protocol in all schools and countries, and were conducted in a Nordic language, transcribed, and later translated for the purpose of this article.

A combination of qualitative methods was used during data collection and analysis to investigate unequal childhoods (Flick, 2013). The analysis combined symbolic cultural means from various actors with social classifications and typification (Meyer, 2006). Our organisational analysis involved a combination of constant comparative method, usage of NVivo software, and thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns in the data and develop a model of the key organisational factors contributing to educational inequality. This approach allowed us to systematically analyse a large amount of qualitative data while also allowing for flexibility and nuance in the analysis process, which was necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the complex interactions and negotiations that occur within and between the organisations in the study.

We theoretically assume that organisational actors will relate their thoughts, actions, and evaluations to collective frames of reference (Schaefer, 2019) and interpret their meaning in the context of research (Sutton & Austin, 2015). We were interested in investigating the network patterns among the organisations and between them. The analysis enabled us to identify key aspects of the existing organisation, critical points of integration between schools and other services, and interactions between municipal services and other systems.

The study also included survey data and children's interviews (Corral-Granados, Rapp et al., 2023, Corral-Granados, Smeplass et al., 2023), but this article focuses on data from interviews with educational leaders and different professional groups. The research design connected micro-level experiences with organisational factors and macro perspectives. The study was registered and approved by the national ethics committee in all three nations, and the research team followed strict ethical guidelines.

Inequality as an organisational product

Our analyses show that organisational differences are associated with four organisational aspects that contribute to educational inequality, which we describe and analyse here as *categories in action* (Tilly, 1998). Categorical inequality results from the institution of a general, powerful, problem-solving organisational form, the asymmetrically related categorical pair, in a location that commands substantial rewards and/or punishment (Tilly, 1998, p. 84). Such categorial inequality is not necessarily bad, as it can provide benefits by simplifying social life, facilitating the production of collective goods. However, it can also cause exclusion, depriving people of access to collective goods and hindering the use of their talent and potential. As schools provide different learning arenas for children (Beach et al., 2018), they offer various opportunities to ensure well-being and further life chances. Educational attainment is related to peer effects (Coleman, 1966; Entorf & Lauk, 2008), while continued education can be difficult when students have negative school experiences (Öhrn, 2012). Our analysis reveals how differences in the municipal organisational models for educational equity, including economic redistribution and safety net models, have various blind spots and dysfunctions that might explain parts of the Nordic inequality paradox. Furthermore, it is important to note that these

Table 2. Categories in action in municipal policies.

	Trondheim, Norway	Norrköping, Sweden	Tampere, Finland
Policy for housing	Weak policy for housing diversity.	Weak policy for housing diversity; A former housing policy for equity generating new vulnerable areas.	Active policy to counteract attractive/non-attractive neighbourhoods.
Urban spatial segregation	High degree of segregation in certain areas; Attractive areas excluding working class and immigrant families.	High degree of segregation; Changes in social demography generating new exposed areas.	Low degree of segregation, although certain areas have higher numbers of immigrant residents.
Principles of school choice and free schools	National policy binding residences to specific schools; Few private schools.	National policy ensuring school choice; Marketisation of education and competition between free charter schools and public schools.	Parental choice – in combination with a local school principle; Few private schools.
Organisational models for equity (financial redistribution)	Existing models – but somewhat weak redistribution model between schools; Teachers responsible for adapted education.	Existing models – but significant municipal budget instability due to marketisation; Marketisation excluding vulnerable children from popular schools.	Strong models for educational equity for those without special needs; Separation of children with special needs from the ordinary education system.

municipal models are not developed in a vacuum but shaped by the broader national policy context. Hence, the national policies on housing, urban planning, and education can have effects on the municipal policies and practices, which can exacerbate educational inequality. Our analysis highlights the need to consider the interplay between national and local levels in addressing educational inequality in Nordic municipalities. [Table 2](#) summarises main similarities, differences, and issues in the municipal models on four significant categories in action (Tilly, 1998) in each municipal case.

Policy for housing

The first category is related to the existence of policy or the lack of policy for regulating housing within each municipality. In each of the cities in the study, this is evident in the contrasts between the schools where schools in socioeconomically advantaged areas generally are characterised by ‘expensive properties’ and ‘attractive neighbourhoods’, families are described as ‘rich’, ‘highly educated’ and ‘well-established’, while other schools serve families in ‘municipal housing’, ‘exposed areas’ that are ‘socially disadvantaged’. In Norway, Sweden and Finland home ownership has indeed been seen as an important ingredient in general housing policies, connected to national post-WWII reforms, although from different cultural and ideological standpoints and within different institutional frameworks (Bengtsson et al., 2017). There are substantial differences between housing policies and housing outcomes in Nordic countries, despite their common background as social-democratic welfare states (Andersen et al., 2013). The emerging ethnic diversity is likely to affect residential decisions and the ways in which residents interact in neighbourhoods, schools, playgrounds and workplaces (Andersen et al., 2016). Tampere has an active city planning programme, where equalisation

connected to housing is an important part of its housing policy (Tampere, 2021). Housing issues are not as severe in Trondheim and Tampere as in Norrköping, even though there are polarised housing areas in the cities. In Norrköping, housing works as an excluding category connected to education, due to there being an increasing shortage of housing (Rems, 2017). Tenures, housing types and standards are unevenly distributed in regions, urban areas and neighbourhoods in Norway. In combination with prices, the conditions for access to the different tenures will therefore affect the housing situation for newcomers and households with limited economic, social and informational resources (Andersson et al., 2010). Despite this, housing as part of an equalising strategy is an area where Trondheim municipality to a large extent does not intervene or connect to policy on educational equity. Recently, the municipal administration has tried to connect school planning somewhat to social demography, through a university-school collaboration, through building new school buildings, and allowing new privately owned apartment buildings in the socioeconomically disadvantaged area, creating new challenges because of an already pressured housing market in the city. Even though housing policy could contribute to inner-city diversity, the competitive housing market might also lead to gentrification. Housing becomes an excluding category since family economy determines the social demography within the city. Nonetheless, what makes this category even more exclusive is the fact that it is closely intertwined with the school area, which is, by Norwegian law (Norwegian Government, 2023), the defining recruitment mechanism for each school.

In Sweden, historical programmes for ensuring housing are generating new vulnerable areas in Norrköping. In the 1920s, Sweden was an economically, socially, and politically deeply unequal country (Bengtsson & Prado, 2020). Over many decades during the 20th century, an internationally unique welfare state, labour market model and economic policy were built up in Sweden (Bengtsson, 2020). One of the legacies from that time is the public effort for ensuring housing for the population. A reform called ‘people’s home’ (Folkhemmet) started in 1946 and was launched simultaneously as the social democrats adopting the idea of a planned economy and what, in the 1960s, was called functional socialism: that the state governs business by law instead of owning it (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019). The people’s home was characterised by the state gaining increased power to improve citizens’ well-being, even when the individual’s freedom of movement was restricted. In this way, class antagonisms would be levelled (Stråth, 1993). Even though the reform was the starting point for the Swedish welfare system, introduced as a reform of equality, it creates latent functions of marginalisation as these areas now, for the most part, attract groups with fewer economic resources.

Urban spatial segregation

Urban spatial segregation is related to housing but is also currently increasing because of immigration in the Nordic countries (Karlsdóttir et al., 2018; Murdie & Borgestad, 1998; Wessel et al., 2017). In our sample, Sweden has the largest immigrant population among its neighboring countries, with 19.6% of its population being foreign-born, compared to Norway’s 14.8% and Finland’s 7.3% (Statistics Finland, 2021; Statistics Norway, 2021; Statistics Sweden, 2021). Over the course of a decade, from 2009 to 2019, the population of Sweden increased by nearly one million people. This substantial demographic shift has

undoubtedly placed a strain on the nation's welfare system. Ethnic segregation is linked to an ethnic division of the housing market and a spatial separation of different housing tenures (Andersen et al., 2016). Through the 'million homes programme' (Ignatieva et al., 2017), social democrats in Sweden historically had the goal of building 1,000,000 homes in 10 years to address an imminent housing shortage. The programme was designed to raise the standard of accommodation and ensure that everyone has the right to live well and in a modern way. However, many homes built during the reform have become exposed, socially stigmatised suburban areas (Odenbring, 2019). In Norrköping, for example, one of the schools is located in such an area characterised as a socioeconomically disadvantaged area (Skolverket, 2021a). At this school, 98% of the students have foreign ethnic backgrounds. Another school in Norrköping is an immigrant reception school, and the number of migrant students is nearly the same. All three cities in our study have experienced some level of urban spatial segregation, as changes in demography are not equally distributed throughout the cities, but rather tend to affect certain neighbourhoods more than others.

In these areas, students' performance results are lower than in other areas and they do not gain the academic skills they are entitled to (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Kallstenius, 2010; Sernhede, 2009). Growing up in a socially unfavourable residential area is often used as an explanation for why some students perform worse in school than others (Chaplin, 2002; Kahlenberg, 2001; Kallstenius, 2010; Murdock & Swanson, 2008; Sernhede, 2009). Both Norway and Finland have local school attendance closest to their residential area, which means that in Norway and Finland, urban spatial segregation is causing major differences between school areas and inequality connects to the history of the school areas (Arnman et al., 2004; Beach et al., 2013; Gudmundsson et al. 2013; Lunneblad et al, 2016; Sernhede, 2007, 2018). Immigrants with low socioeconomic backgrounds inhabit the exposed areas in all municipalities participating in this project.

In Norrköping, our informants from contrasting areas provide a vivid illustration of this polarisation. A principal from a privileged area describes their school as 'calm and pleasant, located near green areas' and 'close to everything'. They note that, despite the many students, they experience the school as smaller, and there are 'incredibly competent employees'. In contrast, a teacher from an exposed area describes a 'small schoolyard' that is 'badly located in terms of traffic'. They explain that 'there is a home for drug addicts on the other side of the road', which makes it a 'fairly exposed area'. A teacher notes that the school's location in the city centre makes them 'more vulnerable', and they 'notice more of the bad things in the city'. The teacher goes on to describe a variety of challenges, including 'drunk people' and 'people under the influence of drugs' who have 'talked to our children'. They even note that 'we had relatives of children who threatened us' and that 'it has gotten worse'.

Similar contrasts between the schools are observed in all three cities. In Norway and Finland the socioeconomically disadvantaged schools are reported to have 'higher levels of immigrant children', 'more social problems', also 'issues in communicating with parents' and 'heavier challenges'. We conclude that the lack of city planning in terms of social equity, in combination with how school areas are managed, generates categorical inequality. This is part of the paradox, as the Nordic welfare models rely heavily on high employment rates. Parents living in more exposed areas have a higher risk of being unemployed. An educational leader in Norrköping shared this perspective: 'Here, we

have students who are at risk. They come from all countries worldwide and their parents have no job. How can we communicate with them?’ (Educational leader, Norrköping municipality).

Principles of school choice and marketisation

The Nordic education’s principle of equity has been challenged by the neoliberal influence that has intensified privatisation and deregulation (Christensen et al., 2005; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019; Haugen, 2018). Parental school choice and competition have been promoted as ways to improve quality while reducing state intervention (Ball, 1993). The nature and extent of these changes vary between and within the Nordic countries as well as between the three municipalities. For instance, Swedish schools have faced substantial challenges related to equity and increasing segregation due to outsourcing education to private providers and the free school choice principle that excludes students with lower socioeconomic status and immigrant backgrounds (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019b). The situation is particularly evident in Norrköping, where segregation is reinforced by the ethnic Swedish population’s active choice of schools in the city’s segregated areas. This is evident in many interviews where informants describe how the ethnic Swedish population with high educational levels are ‘the most active choosers’ in the school market, amplifying the consequences of the segregated city. Even in housing areas where there is a possibility to integrate students from different ethnic backgrounds and students with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, diversification fails because of the effects of the free school choice principle, a mechanism that is well known throughout the municipality and schools:

My impression is that the municipality has very different schools. They have different student groups, meaning they are in different residential areas. And Norrköping is a segregated city with residential areas that have an extremely high proportion of students who have a different mother tongue than Swedish. We also have schools that have nearly no students who have a different mother tongue. So, this is a big difference between our schools. (Leader working with strategical development, Norrköping municipality)

Recent white papers from the Swedish government suggest changing the free school choice policy to give authorities more influence, as studies have shown that the policy may exclude children with lower socioeconomic status and an immigrant background (Adamson et al., 2016; Swedish Government, 2021). In Sweden, ‘free schools’, owned by private providers, together with free school choice, are institutional factors that exclude children with lower socioeconomic status and an immigrant background. In contrast, the Finnish and Norwegian school systems have remained stable due to their strong belief that schools are primarily a public responsibility (Lappalainen et al., 2013). While free school choices in Norway and Finland are based on a similar educational regime, scholars find increasing pressure on schools to prioritise students with the best formal qualifications (Bernelius & Vaattovaara, 2016; Bjordal, 2016; Haugen, 2020).

The impact of national policies promoting privatisation and deregulation can be seen in how they have intensified marketisation and polarisation between schools, contributing to challenges in achieving equity in local conditions as seen in Norrköping. Furthermore, the principle of free school choice, encouraged by these policies, has had unintended consequences of reinforcing segregation and excluding students with lower socioeconomic status and immigrant backgrounds from certain schools.

Organisational models for equity

The last category is related to the more complex nuances in each municipal model for organising equity in education. All three municipalities have a robust welfare model, where a resource distribution model is thought to compensate the school economy. That means that in all our cases, socioeconomic background determines the financial resources allocated for each school. While Swedish policy has far-reaching references to equity and equality in education (Skolverket, 2021a, 2021b), their model for equity is more cemented in policy and law than the Norwegian and Finnish models. They have ‘school health teams’ and specific employees focusing on social inclusion at the school level. In Norway, the concept of equity is implicit in the unitary school ‘enhetsskolen’, which, by tradition, means that every child has the right to equal access to education. The central curriculum in Norway (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2021) refers not to equity but to inclusion. Our data show that when professionals in education talk about inclusion, they generally mean pedagogical inclusion. Employees talk about ‘variations in behavioural expression’, ‘children who need adapted teaching’ and ‘children at risk’. This perspective often tends to focus on the individual child, rather than structural factors surrounding the social environment. Translated into practice, pedagogical inclusion entails placing all children in the same classroom, instead of attending separate schools or placed in groups of children with special needs. In this system, teachers become responsible for compensating for social inequality among children by adapting their teaching to the individual, while not necessarily receiving extra resources as long as there is no specific diagnosis or an adopted measure for special education. In areas with socioeconomic disadvantage, this means that teachers ‘become overwhelmed’ and that they must ‘be a special kind of teacher’, and ‘need to forget the problems at work’ when they go home after work, simply to tackle the pressure of working in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools.

The Finnish organisational model of equity in education is a differentiated system of support (Jahnukainen et al., 2023). In Tampere, there are special schools for students with physical disabilities, including severely delayed development, severe disabilities, autism, dysphasia and visual or hearing impairment. There are no fewer than three levels of support for learning and schooling: general support, intensified support and special assistance. The forms of support are, for example, a teaching assistant, part-time special education, support services and special aids. The intentions of providing special education can, however, generate a fragmented approach to equity as immigrant students often end up at special schools, even though they are not considered disabled (Lehti et al., 2018; Liebkind et al., 2004). Furthermore, a lack of attention is then given to immigrant students that are included in the regular classroom. Compared to the other two Nordic cases, this differentiated system produces a bureaucratic vulnerability through selection processes. While Tampere’s active engagement in addressing social inequality is evident, it does encounter challenges in effectively organising the complexities of coordination:

I think we are working in silos. That is an issue we should work on, the cooperation between the different [welfare] functions. Just last week we had a meeting with the social and welfare services, which are student health care services. I noticed that we are doing much of the same things, we have the same objectives, but we are working separately. [...] we have two ongoing projects set forth to tackle the same issues... (Educational leader, Tampere municipality)

As shown, a policy of education that operates in interior categories in the organisation can have latent functions of exclusion, even if it is meant to compensate for social inequality (Tilly, 1998). Two such categories are differentiated special education, which is mainly the case in Finland, and pedagogical inclusion, which is the central idea in the Norwegian education system (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021).

On the intricate question of how different educational models work in each of our municipal cases, they all have distinct systems for ensuring equity, but we observe different issues related to their organisation. In the context of Tampere's educational system, we observe a focus on differentiation that aims to address the diverse needs of students, with a potential side effect of excluding groups of children such as those with immigrant backgrounds from the ordinary system. In Trondheim, teachers have a greater responsibility to ensure equity within their own classroom. In Sweden, despite the explicit focus on equity in policy, school budget instability because of a strong marketisation between both free schools and public schools, as well as between different public schools, contributes to excluding children from the most popular schools.

Conclusion

Nordic education models are based on shared values of promoting democracy and equality (Antikainen, 2006, 2010). However, social-inclusive policies have been reformulated and delimited in the Nordic countries due to a strengthening of economic-utilitarian functions of education and a weakening of central education governance (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Lundahl, 2016). Our study reveals that institutional gaps specific to each municipal case in relation to state policy can inhibit educational equity due to factors connected to housing, immigration, segregation, school choice, and organisation of special education and inclusion within the school system.

Free school choice policies in Sweden, Norway, and Finland have created pressure on schools to prioritise students with the best formal qualifications (Bernelius & Vaattovaara, 2016; Bjordal, 2016; Haugen, 2020). Tampere, Finland, has a more explicit policy on integration between different city areas and has neither free school choice nor intense competition between the public and private school systems. Despite a similar educational regime, Norwegian and Finnish school systems have been characterised by more stability than the Swedish school system (Jarl et al., 2007; Sahlberg, 2011). In contrast, Norrköping, Sweden, has strong marketisation contributing to segregation and polarisation between schools.

Between the welfare state and national policy, the local organisational level contains several complex gaps between policy ideals, children's living conditions, and institutional surroundings (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Our analysis reveals that excluding categories operate in the translation between various policies and the municipal organisation of equity in education. Housing policies play a significant role in urban spatial segregation and are reinforced by increased immigration in combination with other living conditions and markets. Principles of school choice in combination with an educational market can create school polarisation, while stronger connections between residential areas and school areas can make the system more stable but strongly tied to families' economic and social resources (Coleman, 1988). Despite financial redistribution between schools and strong organisational models for equity, the differences that can be seen in each

system reveal latent functions that can create vulnerability for children in the educational system, which in turn can help explain the paradox of persisting educational inequality in the Nordic nations.

In conclusion, there are several organisational factors that inhibit Nordic countries from fulfilling their ambitious policy goals of ensuring equity in education. We find that the differences in the institutional organisation of equity in education, school choice, and marketisation between the Nordic countries can create institutional gaps and excluding categories in action, leading to educational welfare gaps. Therefore, it is essential to address these issues and close these gaps to ensure the promotion of equity in the Nordic education system.

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Ethics statement

All subjects gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. This study has been registered and approved by ethical committees in all three countries Norway, Sweden, and Finland, (Norwegian Centre for Research Data, Swedish Ethical Review Authority and Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region), ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines and regulations in each respective country.

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