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# Nordic challenges related to exclusion and local responses in Swedish, Finnish, and Norwegian urban compulsory education

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## ABSTRACT

Although the Nordic educational models have traditions of inclusion, researchers have found strong evidence that they can reproduce inequalities for minoritized groups attending primary and lower secondary schools. Following Luhmann's system theory, this structurally orientated study identifies problems in the educational system that are caused by communication at the institutional level and in the translation of inclusive goals in urban educational institutions. We synthesise literature focusing on Norway, Sweden, and Finland to investigate the differences between the Nordic educational systems' explicit welfare goals and the gap between equity as an ideology and a system output from the functionally differentiated urban compulsory education. This review focuses on 113 peer-reviewed academic articles published during the last decade (after January 2012 until December 2021) that examine educational inequality and marginalisation in Nordic urban schools. Our analysis is based on system theories highlighting three crucial discussions of inequality in the three Nordic systems: residential segregation and school areas, the impact of performance evaluations, and discriminatory support measures. Moreover, the results indicate differences in communication in the different countries.

## KEYWORDS

Nordic countries; primary and lower secondary school; urban education; inequality; segregation; Luhmann

## Introduction

Schools in Norway, Sweden, and Finland have maintained an “education for all” culture for years (Blossing, Imsen, & Moos, 2014; Schleicher, 2019), and regional governments of these Nordic countries currently offer free, comprehensive education in local schools (Antikainen, 2010; Lundahl, 2016). However, ideals in policies and designs that relate to equity, equality, and diversity (Frønes, Pettersen, Radišić, & Buchholtz, 2020) in educational systems do not always lead to equal opportunities at the community and school levels, and researchers have found that persistent educational inequality also exists in these countries (Beach, 2017; Pihl, Holm, Riitaoja, Kjaran, & Carlson, 2018). Despite the existing challenges, very few studies have discussed how complex institutional aspects makes unequal childhoods reproducing at the local level in the Nordic urban schools neither have discussed through organisational theories these elements of social systems

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that increment social inequity (Magnússon, Göransson, & Lindqvist, 2019). In the Nordic context of urban disparity, authors have acknowledged problems of segregation and exclusion in economically disadvantaged peri-urban metropolitan areas (Beach, From, Johansson, & Öhrn, 2018). Specifically, a significant portion of the population in the outskirts of Nordic cities provides fertile ground for indispensable research (Haarstad et al., 2021; Sjöberg & Turunen, 2022).

In this article, we explore what the research in Norway, Sweden, and Finland addresses as the most important challenges regarding inequality and the risk of marginalisation and exclusion. The systemic theoretical lens explains social exclusion as a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon in which the problems should be identified. Actors' organisation defined the school communities and society as stakeholders in the systems exclude minoritized groups because the systems permit indifference or repudiation (Luhmann, 1978). Organization-based inclusion-exclusion operations exist, as when educational institutions consider whether certain norms and knowledge are valuable in their systems of communication (Emmerich & Hormel, 2021; Emmerich, 2021). Following to Luhmann (1992, p. 255). "Communication leads to a decision whether the uttered and understood information is to be accepted or rejected. A message is believed or not. This is the first alternative created by communication and with it the risk of rejection". For example, as identified by Emmerich (2021) and Ojalehto, Kalalahti, Varjo, and Kosunen (2017), schools' segregation, grouping, sorting, and tracking of pupils' results in school could result on differentiation and unequal educational opportunities.

Niklas Luhmann (1995a) studied how society is determined by the structure and processes of those systems and subsystems. Those systems construct meanings on different institutional levels, where specific groups become included or excluded through institutional differentiation and discrimination (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021). Systems of communication are created by referring back to meaning and excluding other meanings and creating internal environments within the system (Luhmann, 1995a). As suggested by Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021), individuals and other actors in the educational system, as well as the wider norms and ideas in society, guide institutionalised communication (Cornelissen, Durand, Fiss, Lammers, & Vaara, 2015). Systems, therefore, are constructed over time by using communication that relates to norms, policies, and ideas, and it is possible to explore a social system by, for instance, examining what research on inequality communicates in different countries.

Research on inequality in Nordic education demonstrates how communications of the differentiation is interpreted by inequality (Luhmann, 1994) differ between Norway, Sweden, and Finland. And by suggesting that the Nordic model (Joelsson & Ekman Ladru, 2022) seems to be challenged in very different ways. For example, neoliberal globalised ideas have challenged the Nordic countries' educational model differently through intensified privatisation and deregulation (Christensen, Læg Reid, Roness, & Røvik, 2009) converting educational systems into competitive schools that aim to achieve technical and instrumental societal goals (Cohen & Ladaique, 2018). In the urban contexts of these Nordic countries, inequalities can be seen in modes of differentiation, in which education and the economy are subsystems (Mangez & Vanden Broeck, 2021).

There is a great deal of literature providing evidence of increasing inequality linked with feelings of powerlessness and experiences of unequal treatment and distribution of resources (Buchholtz, Stuart, & Frønes, 2020; Muench, Wieczorek, & Dressler, 2022; UNICEF, 2019). Those groups whose social power relationships are universalised and fixed as a cohort of the population and who are devaluated (Cummins, 2017) include students with a lower SES (Hultqvist & Lidegran, 2021), students with a diagnosed disability, minority language students (Hilt, 2017), and students requiring special needs education (SEN). These students are all overrepresented as “marginalised” within educational organisations (Magnússon, 2020). Following Luhmann (1997), the differentiation of systems in society can result in specific groups being excluded from certain areas. This form of exclusion takes place in different subsystems that use specific cultural codes and system-specific requirements (Schirmer & Michailakis, 2015). Today, some groups are part of a given society, but they are seen as unequal, they lack certain rights, and they are subordinated. Research shows that although the Nordic countries have similar educational systems, the communication of inequality in education varies between and within Norway, Finland, and Sweden (Horst & Pihl, 2010). There is a great difference in the services provided by organisations in regions or territories; some subsystems become subordinated, and all of them are perceived differently (Rasch & Wolfe, 2000). Some groups get better position when their entitlements are considered a right in the city as they participate in the society’s development. System theory explains the exclusion in different layers of differentiation that are happening simultaneously and in different operational logics. As an example, in the Swedish context, a high number of children from ethnic minority backgrounds live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods with high poverty rates, where more than half of the residents rely on income support, and more than half of all families live below the poverty line due to high levels of unemployment (Behtoui, Hertzberg, Jonsson, León Rosales, & Neergaard, 2019; Hansen & Gustafsson, 2019). Öhrn and Weiner (2017) and Beach and Öhrn (2021) described how segregated urban schools are normally located in the city outskirts with schools within the public housing areas and mainly separated from a strong concentration of resource-rich groups. Those urban schools are characterised by a degree of unity on privileging the homogeneity rather than singularity, resulting in marginalisation, poverty, and social fragmentation (Brannstrom, 2004)

Using Luhmann’s system theory to explore the different types of communication on inequality, we ask what the current knowledge status of inequality and marginalisation in Swedish, Finnish, and Norwegian urban compulsory education is. In this article, we are specifically interested in examining how inequality and exclusionary practices in urban schools have been investigated in contemporary research. This study investigates and summarises findings that show the weaknesses in the different systems through widespread segregation (Beach, 2017; Musterd, Marcinićzak, Van Ham, & Tammaru, 2017; Varjo, Lundstrom, & Kalalahti, 2018). Urban educational systems are meant to respond to changes in the local and global society by implementing new solutions. At the same time, welfare organisations are incapable of getting to the surface of their point of view and must speculate and take decisions upon people’s lives without having all the relevant knowledge (Luhmann (2002) Our literature review observing disadvantaging organisational mechanisms in the national educational systems illustrates how the research in the different Nordic countries points to both similar and different

challenges of inequality. In the article, we discuss research focusing on the reproduction of inequality in segregated residential urban areas, as well as the impact of performance evaluations. Furthermore, we explore how the risks of marginalisation and support measures differ in each of the three countries.

## Methodology

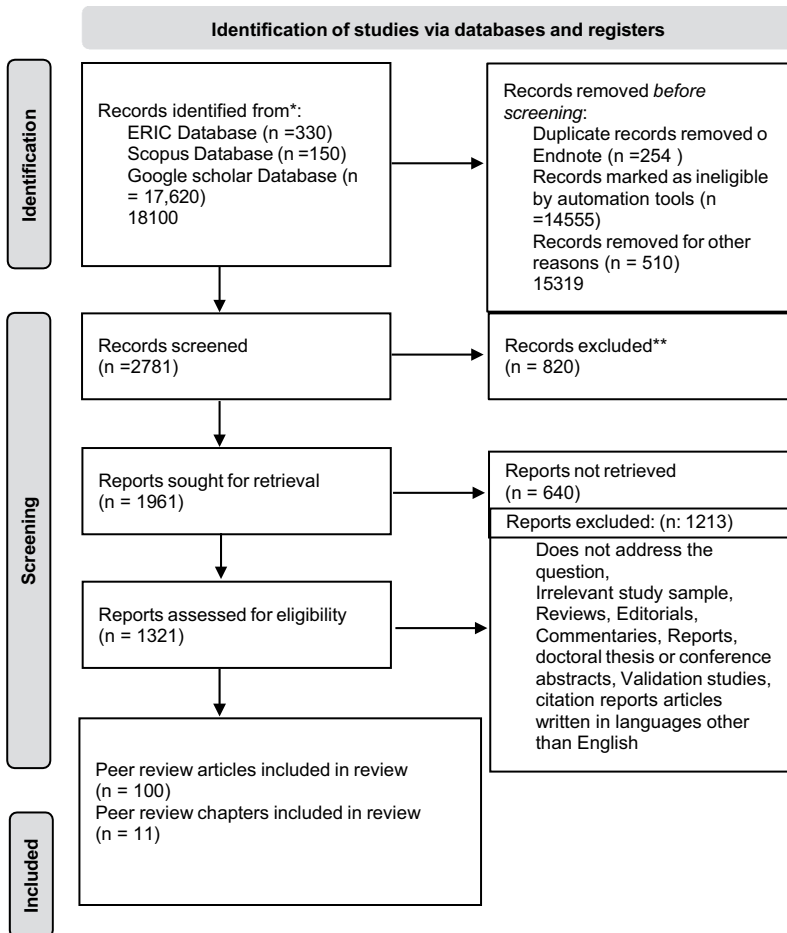
Our study is a state-of-the-art literature review (Grant & Booth, 2009) that comprises a specific view on current issues and new perspectives in areas that need further research to justify the importance of a defined problem. Therefore, we selected studies from the last ten years that examine issues of social inequality in Nordic urban compulsory schools. We searched three English language databases – Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Scopus, and Google Scholar – to identify peer-reviewed studies, including books chapters and journal articles, that met the inclusion criteria. We decided to use Google Scholar following the Martín-Martín, Orduna-Malea, Thelwall, and López-Cózar (2018) report that pointed out that 98% of the social sciences articles are included within it.

We extracted and screened the data using Endnote to remove duplicates. The proposed search strategy was based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines (PRISMA 2021; Page et al., 2021) and includes Google Advanced Search and snowballing techniques. Figure 1 below shows the step-by-step article selection process. The search terms are included in Table 1 and were used for title, abstract, and keyword searches.

The first year of this study, 2012, was the beginning of an initial era of new Swedish and Finnish educational acts and the impact of the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) 2012 in the three countries (Nortvedt, Pettersen, Pettersson, & Sollerman, 2016; Sjøberg, 2015). The introduction of the contextualised observed settings is explained in each of the specific sections describing each country's support measures (Besio, 2008).

We used the following selection criteria: (1) the selected peer-reviewed scientific publications must be connected with the Norwegian, Swedish, or Finnish context; the peer-reviewed literature must be limited to (2) pedagogy and the social sciences fields, (3) published online between January 2012 and December 2021, and (4) contain at least one of the identified terms in either the abstract, title, or keywords; (5) articles must be published in peer-reviewed journals or book series; (6) and articles must be written in English and (7) focus on students in compulsory education aged from 6 to 16 years (included). Reliability was considered by only selecting peer-reviewed journals and academic chapters (Marsh & Ball, 1989).

Following Hilt (2017) the authors were informed for the data analysis and discussion by system theory (Luhmann, 2018b). Luhmann (1995a) included three elementary forms of social systems: social systems, environment, and society. Inspired by Luhmann's social systems theory, this study was conducted through thematic analysis. Furthermore, this review's purpose (Baumeister & Leary, 1997) is to reveal investigated weaknesses in the three educational systems, what the societal problems creating inequality at schools are, and how the educational organisations deal with them (Emmerich & Hormel, 2021). The results that were obtained using these search terms



**Figure 1.** PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews which included searches of databases and registers only

\*Consider, if feasible to do so, reporting the number of records identified from each database or register searched (rather than the total number across all databases/register).

\*\*If automation tools were used, indicate how many records were excluded by a human and how many were excluded by automation tools.

From: Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ* 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71

were further filtered through the theoretical perspectives of the system theory (Luhmann, 2013) to find influences from external categories (Domina, Penner, & Penner, 2017), distribution of resources (Hilt, 2015, 2017; Hopmann, 2008), and recognition of inequality (Baraldi, 2015, 2021; Bunyard, 2010; Warming, 2019). The first author conducted the search and selected the inclusion criteria in collaboration with a research group specialising in educational inequality. The second and third authors participated in reporting and interpreting the contextual aspects of the study. Based on the mentioned inclusion criteria, we sorted through the articles assessing how

**Table 1.** Search terms.

Focus group	Inequality	Schooling	Countries or cities
children at risk, children for low socioeconomic status (SES), children of ethnic minorities, disabilities	Inequality, marginalisation, segregation, discrimination against, stigma, lack of equity, lack of equality, and lack of justice.	Primary education, lower secondary education, compulsory education, urban school, city school	Norway, Sweden, Finland Total population including city schools (a min representation of 4 larger-sized municipalities)

the Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish educational systems generate inequalities. After removing duplicates, we carried out the first screening process to exclude articles (1) for which there was no access to the full texts; (2) in which only the titles, abstracts, and keywords were in English; or (3) that were not academic articles. We utilised the preview, research question, read-through, and summarise methods for the data analysis to facilitate the identification of themes (Ramdhani, Ramdhani, & Amin, 2014).

We included 113 research documents in our review based on our inclusion criteria and analysed them through qualitative content analysis (103 peer-review articles and 10 peer-review book chapters). Subsequently, we re-read the abstracts to obtain an initial overview of our selected studies and developed a preliminary coding scheme to analyse the articles' full text. In the following sections of this paper, we present the relevant challenges in Nordic education that previous researchers have discussed (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). There are three themes that we have elaborated based on the theoretical system theory perspectives on inequality. These themes are based on differentiation of system levels, such as the function system of politics from the welfare state related to the residential segregation, performance evaluation from the global system, and its specific discriminatory support measures from the local educational political system. Combining functional differentiation with the differentiation of system levels helped us analyse different contractions of social problems (Michailakis & Schirmer, 2014).

Since we found issues in the literature to be specific for each country, they were given different thematic attention in the analysis. We sorted the analysis into three themes: how exclusion takes the form of segregation in urban areas by limiting the equality of education in the Nordic context, how the impact of performance evaluations creates marginalisation as another form of exclusion, and, finally, how discriminatory support measures could lead to an exclusionary functional differentiation. These themes can be regarded as various communications (Luhmann, 1995b, 2015) of perceived issues documented in the research on inequality that rise from the different educational systems in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. The two global issues of residential segregation and performance are affecting the three countries. Moreover, the three themes were identified specifically for each of the three countries, as elaborated further below.

### **Exclusion and segregation in urban areas limit the equality of education in the Nordic context**

This section combines the three Nordic educational systems, describing how segregated schooling is linked to spatial and social exclusion and the lack of social attention in specific urban neighbourhoods (Terhart & von Dewitz, 2018). In the Norwegian context, in part, urban segregation is particularly prevalent in large cities with suburban

areas – for instance, Oslo, which is mostly working class in the eastern part and upper class in the western part of the outskirts. As Ljunggren and Andersen (2015) noted, horizontal segregation increases between social classes on the basis of cultural and economic capital. In Oslo, the functional differentiation of social privileges is possible, as certain groups form socio-spatial hierarchies in specific neighbourhoods (Nordvik & Hedman, 2019).

Scholars explain how spatial segregation within the same neighbourhood areas happens due to selective choices, and teachers explain how there is a segregation of access by “cream skimming” in elite schools by attracting and retaining the “good students”, followed by informed choices by certain parents (Haugen, 2020). Following Galster and Wessel’s (2019) study, in the Norwegian capital, Oslo, there is a social reproduction of housing wealth, creating homogeneous living areas in which older generations that had a large house have grandchildren living in similar neighbourhoods. The schools in these specific neighbourhoods have become selective schools because families have similar economic status. Furthermore, Finnish and Swedish scholars have explored how the research has taken segregation into consideration. Overall, they have found that segregation targets minorities, and its effect is most severe in the Swedish context (Modin, Karvonen, Rahkonen, & Östberg, 2015).

According to Sahlberg (2016), diversity and equality in education were replaced by standardisation and uniformity in Swedish schools due to the Global Education Reform Movement. Since 1992, this movement has pushed educational companies and different interest organisations to create private schools and free schools – that is, government-funded private schools where parents do not need to pay fees. The Swedish school system has adopted a more neoliberal approach by implementing school enrolment policies and voucher systems – often collectively referred to as “free choice”. When Sweden decentralised the school system in 2006, parents could choose which school to send their children to by using a voucher system, which legitimised a hierarchy that benefited people with a high SES because they tend to make informed choices (Magnússon, 2020) and have access to social functions. This decentralisation also channelled public money into private and non-profit schools situated in privileged neighbourhoods, which has created an environment characterised by growing social inequality (Lundahl, 2016). The movement also favours schools that use branding and marketisation and in which parents compete for child enrolment (Lunneblad, 2020). Instead of promoting mixed schools, Swedish policies have focused on funding, which limits the potential to effect change in schools in impoverished areas (Waldring, 2016). Although some students were actively changing their schools, Swedish policies reinforced school segregation on a general level (Trumberg & Urban, 2021). Additionally, the national policies of free choice and free schools can explain the marginalisation of groups such as first-generation non-European immigrants and refugees, special needs students, and low-income students (Beach, From, Johansson, & Öhrn, 2018; Plenty & Jonsson, 2017).

Independently run schools were introduced in the 1992 voucher reform. The number of kids attending independent schools varies in each municipality, as public schools have been affected by budget cuts; resources, personnel, and school choices, which are influenced by families’ decisions of selecting specific schools (Hansen & Gustafsson, 2016, 2019). Therefore, public funds have been channelled into private academic



entities that accept students from specific backgrounds (Voyer, 2019), which has resulted in middle- and upper-class students being able to access better educations, contributing to increased school exclusion and commutes within metropolitan areas (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019; Trumberg & Urban, 2021).

Behtoui, Hertzberg, Jonsson, León Rosales, and Neergaard (2019) found that state agencies also facilitate stigmatisation and stereotyping. As an example, Bergman, Lindgren, and Sæther (2016) described the El Sistema Program, which commenced in Sweden in 2010 and was intended to deal with segregation problems typical of Swedish urban areas. At the same time, the programme has been criticised for having antagonist values, such as the belief that people's cultural affiliations are not important. The psychological effects of marginalisation on minoritized groups generate great anxiety from higher SES families to get their children into the "right" school (Bunar & Ambrose, 2016). Granvik-Saminathen (2019) described how commuting students who live in disadvantaged areas in Stockholm suffer from school dissatisfaction and more significant psychological distress than those who study where they live. Furthermore, children who live in marginalised areas are affected by stigmas surrounding certain residential areas, characteristics of the population, and educators' misconceptions about students' needs. In a country where there is no difference in criminal behaviour between neighbourhoods and where the schools are perceived as safe places by young adolescents (Stattin, Svensson, & Korol, 2019), external actors can respond to violence quite differently in different areas within the same urban districts. For example, Lunneblad, Johansson, and Odenbring (2019) found that there are substantial differences between the reporting of incidents to the police in disadvantaged areas compared to areas where middle-class families live. Furthermore, Beach, Dovemark, Schwartz, and Öhrn (2013) identified that children's challenges are created by economic and social policies, differentiation, power relations, and culture – for instance, through the newspapers. Gudmundsson (2013) indicated that due to territorial stigmatisation in Sweden, people who live in particular neighbourhoods are labelled as troublemakers that do not want to adjust to norms. Furthermore, staff working with youth living in sub urban segregated areas can change beliefs based on discriminatory stereotypes and foster community solidarity together with schools, as is the case with female football coaches working at the "football for inclusion programme" at local schools (Ekholm & Dahlstedt, 2019, 2021).

In the Finnish system, the composition of the low-SES schools is influenced by housing in the areas where poor communities live and the inexistence of urban policies that do not lead the population to inhabit mixed areas, which in the next step affects where they study (Bernelius & Vilkkama, 2019). To a greater extent than before the reforms of the 1990s, families with a higher level of education who live in cities (for example, families in which the mothers are university educated), as well as those with more socioeconomic resources whose children perform well in school, exercise free school choices within the publicly funded education system (Silvennoinen, Kalalahti, & Varjo, 2015). Urban schools are characterised by hidden systems that create social segregation, such as an emphasis on classes for students who have strong performance records and come from socially advantaged backgrounds (Kosunen, Bernelius, Seppänen, & Porkka, 2020), while those with higher academic competencies from poorer neighbourhoods move to the elite schools (Bernelius & Vaattovaara, 2016).

Kosunen (2014) identified how families efficiently use their social, cultural, and economic capital to avoid schools with bad reputations. Families with a higher SES expect to be satisfied with home – school cooperation and the school culture, and families might avoid certain areas – a phenomenon called “white flight” (Tikkanen, 2019). Scholars have identified a mobility related to catchment areas among higher income Finnish origin households (Kauppinen, van Ham, & Bernelius, 2021). Since these families with a high SES lack school commitment for reputation and elitism (Kosunen & Carrasco, 2016), their choice is attributed to the school contentment, not to the school population. When specifically, are studies the choices done by minoritized groups, evidence shows that children with immigrant backgrounds lack equal educational opportunities due to school choice and that failing schools are situated in deprived areas (Sinkkonen & Kyttälä, 2014; Varjo & Kalalahti, 2015, 2019; Varjo, Lundstrom, & Kalalahti, 2018; Wessel, Andersson, Kauppinen, & Andersen, 2017). In all three Nordic countries, the research investigated in this article demonstrates how neoliberal policies, such as free school choice in the Swedish and Finnish contexts and white flight in the Norwegian context, together with urban segregation generate school segregation. Therefore, the communication (Luhmann, 1995a) on inequality from school segregation is similar in all three countries, though seemingly the segregation due to the school free choice is more extended in Sweden. In Norway, families who live in selective areas choose prestigious schools that only those who live in these areas can access. In Sweden, the marketisation contributes to territorial stigmatisation in areas where children are feeling marginalised, while in Finland, those with socioeconomic power avoid specific areas and schools with fewer resources.

### **The impact of normative performance evaluation creates exclusion**

This section describes research on challenges related to performance evaluation faced by segregated and minoritized groups in the Nordic educational system who live in big cities. These groups of students have been affected the most by managerial tools – such as regulations, national competence aims, and assessments – and the control of their learning through documented bureaucracy (Imsen, Blossing, & Moos, 2016; Volckmar, 2019).

Sweden is characterised by markets, politics, and the privatisation of services where some schools try to be attractive as profiled schools – for example, schools with competitive access processes offering subject-specific competencies, such as sports. The focus on competitiveness has lowered collaboration between schools: teachers no longer share their best ideas, and students cooperate less (Sahlberg, 2016). Andersson, Hennerdal, and Malmberg (2019) and Behtoui (2017) found that there are significant differences in students’ performances in Sweden that are based on factors such as families, neighbourhoods, residential contexts, disabilities, and race (Böhlmark, Holmlund, & Lindahl, 2016). Educational segregation, which contributes to the existence of poorly performing schools and districts, correlates with systems that classify pupils hierarchically. These systems affect students’ future opportunities by increasing their risk of having incomplete grades, dropping out of school, and being unable to finish their secondary education (Hansen & Gustafsson, 2019). Those few children whose parents are foreign-born and who commute have better socioeconomic

opportunities, leaving those who go to school where they live in the segregated areas and those living in neighbourhoods with families of low socio-economic status. Furthermore, those who did not make an active school choice seem to have a lower potential for future educational achievement (Trumberg & Urban, 2021).

Researchers have described how since teachers decide where to work in the Nordic countries, the competent teachers predominantly work in high-SES compulsory schools (Nilsen & Bergem, 2020). Some of these privileged schools are located in the Swedish capital Stockholm, where teachers form strong and supportive teams and cooperate with one another to achieve goals and improve their teaching techniques (Granvik-Saminathen, Brolin Låftman, Almquist, & Modin, 2018).

The aforementioned drastic change in policies has affected the educational system in various ways. In Sweden, schools complete evaluations under the guidance of the Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE). These external evaluations are conducted by the school inspectorate. The heavy workload that comes from curriculum prescriptions, an emphasis on testing, performance management, and a focus on school interventions reportedly leads to high turnover for teachers and school leaders (Alexiadou & Lundahl, 2016; Alexiadou et al., 2016; Wahlström, Alvunger, & Wermke, 2018) and the de-professionalisation of teachers (Hardy, Rönnerman, & Beach, 2019). After noting that PISA scores started declining in 2015, scholars started exploring strategies to counter the national challenges. Not all students with an immigrant background in the Swedish school system participated in national tests purposefully, and the lack of participation of all students increased from 9% in 2016 to 11% in 2018 (Lundahl & Lindblad, 2018). Therefore, communities and schools are divided when it comes to statistical evaluation – something that must be investigated, especially because the policies and statistics of the countries show that they are committed to education (Lundahl, 2016).

Since the Norwegian educational system does not allow schools to be marketised in the same way as in Sweden, neither to profit from schools (Lundahl, 2016), scholars have also questioned how the PISA results have influenced national policy (Hopfenbeck & Gørgen, 2017). According to Thuen and Volckmar (2020) and Camphuijsen, Møller, and Skedsmo (2020), Norwegian municipalities began using new public management strategies to measure schools' effectiveness with the help of school heads, who are responsible for reporting school outcomes. Municipalities currently have to report further to the central government. Norwegian schools are externally evaluated, and their curricula feature standardised knowledge plans that include prescribed learning outcomes. Sivesind and Karseth (2019) noted that the curriculum's only purpose is to help students score well on international ranking tests. Werler and Færevaaag (2017) demonstrated that when teachers must focus on testing in Norwegian schools, their autonomy declines since their practice becomes dull, which creates an overly rigid structure in children's learning due to a narrow market curriculum, fewer resources for teachers, an intensified workload, a reduction in curricula, and a decline in teachers' vitality and creativity (Mølstad & Karseth, 2016). Hilt, Riese, and Søreide (2019) analysed the subject- and competency-based curricula that were introduced in 2015 and presented a Norwegian official report titled "The School of the Future. Renewal of Subjects and Competences". In the report, they pointed out how a system of legitimising accountability through descriptive and narrow expectations based on students'

identity could create more problems than it solves. They also argued that this could devalue those who do not fit the specific profile described in the policy report. In the Norwegian context, schools have also implemented managerial performance tools, and school principals agree that the use of test scores to assess schools' overall performance by external actors does more harm than good (Camphuijsen, 2021). The main issue with this is that schools' results are compared using data on comparable indicators that are provided by web-based government portals in Norway and Sweden; this has resulted in the media ranking "the best and the worst" performing schools (Wallenius, Juvonen, Hansen, & Varjo, 2018).

There are differences in the schools' results both in PISA tests results or national tests results based on their social class composition in large cities, and within the "marginalised school" there is ethnic classroom segregation to discriminate based on students language competencies (Haugen, 2020). Hilt (2017) described how newly arrived minority language students are placed in segregated "introductory classes" that a differentiation by language created a total exclusion from all possible systems. The different pedagogical practices also related to the specific characteristics of school culture. In some schools, the culture stresses the importance of cognitive abilities while completely disregarding personal backgrounds and individual circumstances; consequently, those with higher cognitive skills are rewarded, and those who do not adapt to the system are punished. Many students disengage from the system that mainly values academic knowledge and cognitive abilities (Arnesen, 2017).

In Finland, school performance in large cities differs significantly between schools. Most of the children from immigrant backgrounds living in Finland reside in a large city –65% live in one of the ten largest cities – and do not obtain the same educational outcomes as their peers from non-immigrant backgrounds (Harju-Luukkainen & McElvany et al., 2018). The schools with the worst performance were those with a higher share of children from immigrant backgrounds (Berisha & Seppänen, 2017). The socioeconomic status of ethnic minority families is highly correlated with their children's educational achievements (Yeasmin & Uusiautti, 2018). These disparities in school performance also exist between social classes, and they are connected to public schools' selectiveness during admission resulting in ability grouping. Furthermore, Finland has lately focused on accountability practices regarding standardised testing, school inspections, and completeness, which has placed considerable stress on students from large cities such as the capital, Helsinki (Modin, Karvonen, Rahkonen, & Östberg, 2015).

Our review demonstrates how the three countries share a system (Luhmann, 2018a) of competitiveness and managerial performance tools that lead to different pedagogical practices and less resources for schools, resulting in lower performance levels of minoritized ethnic groups.

### **Discriminatory support measures leading to a functional differentiation**

First, we examined Norwegian studies, followed by Swedish and then Finnish studies. The themes correspond with the main communication of inequality issues in each country's academic literature and factors that challenge equal education in urban schools within the three contexts. The Norwegian research on communication of

inequality is characterised by a focus on assimilative and segregated welfare services, with normative expectations. The Swedish research communication of inequality is distinguished by territorial stigmatisation and schools' social interventions. Finally, the Finnish research communication is typified by highly qualified teachers who work in a segregated educational system.

1) *The Norwegian segregated and assimilative welfare services and normative expectations*

Researchers have examined some of the challenges related to inequality in Norwegian urban schools, particularly for groups of children with SEN and children from immigrant backgrounds. Arfa, Solvang, Berg, and Jahnsen (2020) studied the experiences of parents from immigrant backgrounds with children with disabilities and pointed out the lack of communication and difficulties connected to navigating between the welfare services. In the following section, we describe how parents attribute the meaning of an assimilative and normative system of services.

Looking into the services provided for children with SEN, Norwegian special-need teachers receive training that relates to different disabilities. When asked about diagnoses or needs, on some occasions, teachers categorise them as intrinsic to the child, there is exclusion of values without this called inclusive system (Finnvold, 2021). Therefore, children with SEN are placed in group-level settings, which include lower-level social arrangements or units within inclusive schools. Resulting that those students with more segregated experience narrates lack of social engagement (Nes, Demo, & Ianes, 2018). Furthermore, Haug (2020) found that students with disabilities who participate in compulsory education in regular and special schools in Norway feel that their learning environments are of a lower quality than those of other pupils (Haug, 2020).

Regarding multiculturalism, the curriculum, teaching, and practices have resulted in a lack of a multicultural perspective and culturally responsive pedagogy, which could be caused by the lack of multidisciplinary work from support teams (Reisel, Hermansen, & Kindt, 2019). Hesjedal, Hetland, Iversen, and Manger (2015) pointed out a lack of collaboration and poor communication between the available services and a lack of teacher knowledge about other services and competencies. Therefore, many children who are at risk of dropping out of school do not necessarily receive an individual plan or help from a multidisciplinary team. This is despite policies or guidelines that state that these resources should be provided, but not how the services have to connect. Krulatz, Steen-Olsen, and Torgersen (2018) pointed out that the Ministry of Education and Research introduced a four-year programme in 2013 called "Competence for Diversity" (*Kompetanse for mangfold*). The programme aimed to strengthen educational institutions' competencies in dealing with the challenges that minority children, adolescents, and adults encounter in the educational system. The initiative also emphasised educating managers, teachers, and other actors in the educational system about multicultural pedagogy, multilingualism, and other forms of pedagogy that relate to diversity. Burner, Nodeland, and Aamaas (2018) indicated that the programme was constructive since it created a dialogue among educators. However, the programme lasted only four years, which researchers have indicated was not enough time to train educators to implement and work in operational curriculum areas. Strzemecka (2015) described students who feel divided into being either Norwegian or so-called "others" – namely, children of immigrants and those who must assimilate into Norwegian culture.

Fylkesnes (2019) pointed out how racialised discourses from the educational policies and the use of meaning-making to highlight cultural diversity creates a teaching culture of assimilation. Garthus-Niegel, Oppedal, and Vike (2016) also argued that the national culture of exclusion has strengthened because of the neoliberal market approach and right-wing political parties with no interest in including the immigrant cultural heritage into the Norwegian educational system. Moreover, according to Burner and Biseth (2016), the conceptual separation between immigrants and non-immigrants created at the policy level has resulted in differentiation in the programme's implementation in the Norwegian school context. Furthermore, other researchers have documented ethnic discrimination by describing how children's textbooks have adopted the perspective that Sami culture is strange (Eriksen, 2018). Dewilde and Skrefsrud (2016) and Wessel, Andersson, Kauppinen, and Andersen (2017) found that homogenising and assimilating discourses and practices have dominated in Norwegian schools. Eriksen (2020) discussed the implications of a pedagogy of discomfort. Regarding parents' relationship with the schools, Bendixsen and Danielsen (2020) pointed out that school leaders' and teachers' high expectations of migrant parents' behaviour create a significant gap among these two groups, resulting in blame being placed in two directions.

In summary, scholars find that there is a differentiation (Luhmann, 1997) in placements and services for children with SEN and assimilative school cultures and practices experienced by children from minority ethnic groups.

## *2) Challenges and social interventions in Swedish schools*

We have already discussed research highlighting the elements that have created inequality in Swedish schools, such as territorial stigmatisation and market strategies, and we now focus on how challenges related to access seem to be linked with segregated interventions. These challenges, collectively named the "perfect policy storm", have become a common feature of Swedish urban schools and municipalities (Grannäs & Frelin, 2021).

At the school level, the lack of resources for educating children from ethnic minority backgrounds could also result in exclusionary practices. Following Swedish law, students who speak a language other than Swedish have the right to receive language and social science subjects from the regions where their mother tongue is spoken. Furthermore, a lack of resources and defined roles and responsibilities affects schools' teaching of Swedish as a second language. School staff share a stressful feeling of becoming outsiders from school. Those children who participate in the sessions are perceiving exclusionary practices and being labelled as "in need of support" (Avery, 2015). Another important point to mention is that unqualified teachers mostly work in independent schools and often teach Swedish as a second language, making head-teachers feel that they lack qualified teachers prepared to offer adequate support to recently arrived children (Norberg, 2017). Subsequently, Avery (2016) specified that the tutoring of newly arrived minority students in Sweden needs to be improved through appropriate materials, resources, context, planning, environments, coordination, and the conferral of equal status to all class teachers. Furthermore, segregation approached in pedagogical research is orientated towards compensatory strategies for "other minoritized groups" (Möller, 2012) or pedagogies that are based on saving children from their backgrounds (Schwartz, 2014). School leaders have pointed to a lack of resources, professional training, standardised procedures, accountability measurements, and

inflexible systems, which result in unequal access to education and the possible reinforcement of migration-related health inequalities (Mock-Muñoz de Luna, Granberg, Krasnik, & Vitus, 2020).

With regard to the relationships between school and families, Tah (2019) highlighted that families with children with SEN often play a lesser role in the decision of selecting schools due to their lack of choice, information, and support on whether students should be placed in integration classes or regular classes. Therefore, the practices implemented depend on how professionals interpret policies. As an example of segregated interventions, scholars have pointed out that very few children with SEN are studying at independent schools. Given the current conditions in the Swedish educational system, these schools also have fewer resources to offer, and they often reject students with special needs. Many of these educators who work at independent schools are less experienced and less qualified. They implement a different approach related to internal inclusion since they offer fewer professional special education resources. Additionally, staff usually have multiple duties as SEN coordinators and teachers (Magnússon, 2020; Magnússon, Göransson, & Nilholm, 2018). Furthermore, the number of special private schools for children with SEN has increased over the past few years. Apart from public special schools, there are resource schools, which are for children in need of special support. This type of school has incrementally changed the integration of children with SEN and the greatest number of students in special classes in urban municipal schools (Hjörne, 2016). In terms of the inclusion of children with disabilities, school teachers have said that there is still much to do for children with SEN when working with peers without SEN. They mention that mentoring and imitation could work as learning strategies for these children (Olsson, Sand, & Stenberg, 2020). However, there is a lack of resources for children with learning disabilities, and these students often have harmful interactions with teachers from segregated settings (Göransson et al., 2020). Furthermore, there are significant differences between SEN coordinators and special education staff role teachers without authorised degrees. There is considerable variation between municipalities and the support that special needs educators and special education staff role teachers offer. Special needs educators coordinate group activities and mainstream classrooms (Göransson, Lindqvist, Möllås, Almqvist, & Nilholm, 2017). While we pointed out the more intrinsic work of the Norwegian special educators, Swedish special educators in contrast seem to focus more on their students' social goals, teacher training, school development, and the promotion of inclusive environments in practice (Cameron et al., 2018). Therefore, many scholars have criticised a change in higher education where a new field of special education research for promoting the diagnosis culture in postgraduate programmes has appeared, promoting more specific, integrated, and specialised educational settings – quite against the Salamanca statement of inclusion (Berhanu, 2019).

In this section, we described how the research points to a lack of tools, planning, and resources at Swedish urban schools that has had negative implications on the inclusion of children from ethnic minority groups and children with SEN or disabilities.

### 3) *Teachers in Finland working in a functionally differentiated educational system*

The Finnish system has also placed a relatively significant number of students in segregated settings into regular classes, with integration among classes, in special needs facilities, among regular schools (Ström & Sundqvist, 2021), and in classes with a special

emphasis on one type of ability grouping (Berisha & Seppänen, 2017). Still, significant differences exist between the funding and support given to children with SEN in small and large municipalities (Pulkkinen, Räikkönen, Jahnukainen, & Pirttimaa, 2019). In the case of parents with children with SEN, the choice of a school is not based on the socio-economic class of the parents, but on the resource allocation. Parents mentioned how specific resources tend to be outside their neighbourhoods' schools based on the rationality that the most crucial factor is that their children receive special support while being concerned about their children's well-being. Since they tend to choose these types of special schools, these students are segregated in specific schools (Lempinen & Niemi, 2018). When considering specific disabilities, such as autism, Finnish schools do not employ a clear definition of how to proceed and implement an intervention plan. They are minimally involved with families, even though schools should take responsibility for the lack of coordination between agencies (Van Kessel et al., 2019). Moreover, many teachers have expressed that there is a strong relationship between integration and inclusion and that resources are not always transferred between integration classes and regular classes (Lempinen, 2017). Scholars have also highlighted that collaboration among professionals is challenging because teachers in Finland are intensely specialised as classroom teachers, subject teachers, and SEN teachers (Paju, Kajamaa, Pirttimaa, & Kontu, 2018; Saloviita, 2018). According to Eklund, Sundqvist, Lindell, and Toppinen (2020), teachers are supportive and have consulted with SEN teachers and see collaboration as essential. However, they feel that they have too much paperwork to complete and not enough time, support from external professionals, or resources. Other scholars have added that many teachers and SEN teachers work in the same schools, but they do not communicate efficiently (Hakala & Leivo, 2017). In urban settings, most SEN children are segregated into special classes or institutions, while their teachers are responsible for offering flexible practices. Engelbrecht, Savolainen, Nel, Koskela, and Okkolin (2017) also highlighted that the medical model provides specialised support rather than full participation to children with disabilities who attend Finnish schools. A higher proportion of integration units are located in urban settings.

Finnish-born children of immigrants are also more likely to be diagnosed with disabilities – specifically, those related to speech and language or developmental disorders (Lehti, Gyllenberg, Suominen, & Sourander, 2018) – than children with none immigrant background within the same age group (Sinkkonen & Kyttälä, 2014). Paju, Kajamaa, Pirttimaa, and Kontu (2018) and Alisaari, Heikkola, Commins, and Acquah (2019) indicated that most teachers recognise a need for further specific training in SEN and multilingual skills.

In 2012, Finland started a comprehensive curriculum reform. This new curriculum was implemented in 2016 (Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE), 2016) and aims to foster ethical and respectful teaching that promotes a sense of fairness and views diversity as a positive factor; the main challenge of the policy is institutionalising multicultural education (Zilliacus, Holm, & Sahlström, 2017). Teachers from Swedish schools in Finland take a “colour-blind” approach, and Holm and Mansikka (2013) found that Swedish-speaking areas in Finland have de-prioritised the goal of working towards cultural diversity. Most lessons are taught in Finnish; however, teachers who focus on specific immigrant communities – namely, Russian, Somalian, and Romani – consider how students' native languages influence their academic performances. The



home – school relationship is also closely related to ethnic background, SES of families, and educational background of parents from ethnic minorities (Yeasmin & Uusiautti, 2018). More than 30% of first-generation sub-Saharan African children do not finish compulsory education, which contrasts with the less than 10% of Finnish children who do not complete mandatory education. Therefore, researchers have recommended that studies further analyse these challenges by using a broader perspective that might focus on discrimination or racism (Hummelstedt-Djedou, Zilliacus, & Holm, 2018). In one city, there is a wide variety of school resourcing, which is mainly due to a lack of multicultural recognition, as identified by Kimanen (2018) and Rissanen (2022), who pointed out that there is a lack of critical positions in the educational structures.

In the Finnish context, the dilemma of integration differed by region and between both schools and individual classrooms within the same urban school. This section pointed out how researchers have highlighted the need for a more inclusive educational framework that recognises children and families.

### **Discussion and conclusion: standardisation in the Nordic context**

Research on inequality in Norway, Sweden, and Finland shows that the three educational systems lack communications on inequality in different dimensions, which in each case has created a monopoly in the states' social functions and independent and segregated units at urban schools. Urban segregation challenges the educational systems. The inequality in all three countries follow-on schools implementing an essential role in segregation, in which the differentiation explains and legitimises the closure leading to the lack of opportunities (Emmerich & Hormel, 2021). In segregated cities, opportunities are gathered in some areas and create powerless conditions in others, in which the inequality of opportunities results in the inequality of outcomes (Rolfe, Strietholt, & Hansen, 2021; Walby, 2021). Specific cultures and the specific memory of social systems become less valued, their communication is less representative, and they get isolated and marginalised while others gain the opportunity accumulating by instruments used, for example, by upper-class children (Hansen & Toft, 2021). In large Nordic cities, structural factors lead to the oppression and exclusion of minority groups (Bernelius & Vaattovaara, 2016; Gutiérrez, Jerrim, & Torres, 2020; Haugen, 2020) and opportunity accumulation for children from upper-status social classes (Hansen & Toft, 2021). Using the Nordic countries as a framework for a study requires a critical discussion about the possibilities and limitations regarding equity in education in this context (Arnesen, Lahelma, Lundahl, & Öhrn, 2014; Dovemark et al., 2018; Lundahl, 2016). Our research shows that the communication on inequality and exclusion differs between the three Nordic countries. Therefore, the challenges of inequality in Finland are not the same as in Sweden or Norway.

In the Norwegian and the Swedish systems, the evaluation systems coming from GERM or PISA have been adopted and create such a pressure within the system that inequality increases. At the same time, the Finnish system decoupled from international evaluation systems and keeps working with a quite flexible system of evaluations.

Yet, research has indicated that these ideas have been translated differently and that the communication on system problematics related to inequality in the three educational systems differs, creating barriers to participation in social communication

(Luhmann, 1995a). The competitive system exemplified by the three countries does not have these same aims (Braathe & Otterstad, 2014). Following Luhmann (2013), segmentation divides society into different subsystems, and the distribution of pupils within schools may reflect a social, functional differentiation of society (Ojalehto, Kalalahti, Varjo, & Kosunen, 2017) – particularly pupils in the higher positions who are entitled to full access to the social communication, with rights and full participation. When the growing diversity is broad in urban contexts, the standardisation (Luhmann, 1982) of neighbourhoods grows, unmasked by evaluations, unfair accessibility routes, and alternative and segregated pedagogical contexts, which become implanted at the Nordic schools. Our overview of the recent research on inequality in education in three Nordic countries has highlighted some critical mechanisms that challenge equity and integration at different structural levels and a glance into inequality from the complexity this article aims to point out the generalised indifference in the society. At the same time, Nordic countries differ in their abilities to counteract or reproduce social inequality due to factors that impede that those organisations are embedded on memberships of organisations regulated and collectively recognised (Luhmann, 1997). Multiple systems simultaneously encounter disparities. In Sweden, the economic market and neoliberal systems create a highly segregated housing sector, segregated schooling created through school choice design, and widespread ethnic discrimination in school systems and the labour market. In the Swedish macro-system, policies and financial procedures create a physical separation among children. The integration of the child focuses on adapting the student into the school system, where there is a dichotomy between ordinary and special education (Haug, 2017) and between minority ethnic group classrooms and native children's settings. Simultaneously, many policies have influenced how children are taught at school; one policy may require that children's mother tongues be respected (Salö, Ganuza, Hedman, & Karrebæk, 2018), whereas another may introduce an incentive for social pedagogues to individualise the intervention on second language acquisition (Anderberg, 2020).

Researchers have found that inequality in Finnish education is a bit different than in Sweden and Norway (Beach, From, Johansson, & Öhrn, 2018). The central aspect of the Finnish experience of families with children with disabilities (Saloviita, 2018; Takala, Silfver, Karlsson, & Saarinen, 2020) and children from immigrant backgrounds (Könönen, 2018; Rubinstein-Avila, 2016) is physical differentiation and a lack of social roles that could increment staff autonomy. Differentiation makes it difficult for staff to support all children in a class, and specific institutional conditions have aggravated the situation (Eklund, Sundqvist, Lindell, & Toppinen, 2020). Equity can be accomplished through the participation of all students and the consideration of their perspectives (Terhart & von Dewitz, 2018) during activity-dependent, open-ended, dynamic, and situated developmental processes that are critically reliant on socio-cultural support (Rissanen, 2022). These processes can be utilised with appropriately distributed learning opportunities, innovative practices that involve cultural tools, adapted spaces, resources, and support, mediation, and access to the necessary resources, which are all used primarily through education (Beach, Fritzsche, & Kakos, 2019; Mikander, Zilliacus, & Holm, 2018). Furthermore, researchers have demonstrated that educational policies must be enacted in the three countries to end discrimination and marginalisation (Stetsenko, 2017, 2019). According to Ahrbeck (2016), constrained growth of segregated

settings results in individual funding models in the Finnish system. Therefore, individuals' futures rely heavily on labels, which position inequalities as personal failures. This grim reality is far more common in Nordic urban schools since burnout of teaching staff is said to be due to overwhelming workloads and individual adaptations are done by external professional (Arnesen, 2017; Arvidsson et al., 2019).

Following Luhmann (1982), through the recognition of differences, an established social pattern can be distinguished and perpetuated, which could result in exclusion at the organisational level (Michailakis & Reich, 2009). A determining factor that should be further evaluated is school choice and access to education. For instance, in Norway students are enrolled in schools according to their residence (Rogne, Andersson, Malmberg, & Lyngstad, 2020). Scholars have pointed out that some schools have a homogeneous population (Berisha & Seppänen, 2017). In many cases, particularly in Finland and Sweden, the middle and upper classes segregate by choice; those who do not have access to well-funded and prestigious educational facilities are excluded. Thus, schools have become a positional good, and the enrolment process is not equal for all children.

Following Luhmann (2013), functional differentiation divides into unequal subsystems of different rank. The educational system differentiates between students with SEN and other groups of students. Our literature review indicates that there is marginalisation in Swedish, Finnish, and Norwegian urban primary education institutions, while the research community seems to be quite fragmented in identifying and offering solutions to the challenges related to inequality. System answers differently on pressure, but a common way is system differentiation. In Norway, that differentiation happens within the regular classroom, creating different communications on homogeneity and normalisation. In Sweden, this differentiation segregates the whole school community through lines of private and public, as well as SES and ethnicity. And in Finland, this system differentiation is connected to medical issues of diagnoses and special education. All of them use hidden tracking and take for granted the logic of boundaries (Emmerich & Hormel, 2021).

Heinze, Soderstrom, and Heinze (2016) called for an institutional change in local communities since equality is essential in linking organisations. The impact of exemplary case studies is also limited. Scholars in educational research are currently attempting to identify best practices for learning, but they have not been able to find adequate solutions when considering social inclusion. There is also coherence among scholars on the urgency of achieving educational equity in practice. Researchers must therefore consider connecting different branches of science, such as pedagogies, sociology, and economics.

In conclusion, in regard to the Nordic systems, the concept of equity seems relatively narrow since it does not go beyond the allocation of financial resources for facilities and materials. Furthermore, the recognition of individual cultures linking or communication that emerges between the manifestation and the system is called the intangible value of heritage, which makes something patrimonial a physical object – an urban configuration. This heritage is not constituted as a testimonial document of a finished past, but as a means for the present social inclusion that is reflected in a territorial dimension in which we have identified urban segregation. This contributes to inequity in education, as students' SESs and individual characteristics, such as disabilities or

SENs, significantly impact their learning benefits. However, fair resource allocation is crucial for schools to achieve equity in practice (Sahlberg, 2016). Furthermore, inclusion ideology and values in Nordic countries (Vislie, 2003) –particularly Finland (Harjunen, Kortelainen, & Saarimaa, 2018), Norway (Garthus-Niegel, Oppedal, & Vike, 2016), and Sweden (Magnússon, Göransson, & Lindqvist, 2019; Vuorsola, 2019) – are sources of considerable disagreement due to the polarising approaches to combating discrimination and achieving equality. Equal education is not only an instrumental tool that applies to the distribution of resources; it is also an ethical concept that aligns with the purpose of education (Reindal, 2010a, 2010b). According to Chong (2018), inclusion consists of more than placement in a class. The mere act of being placed in a class does not mean that a student takes part in all aspects of academic life, and to achieve both equity and inclusion, positive discrimination must be enforced to ensure that students' knowledge is equal. Positive discrimination in Nordic contexts can be seen as a shield that is used to protect students who may need more resources and involves access to participation, inclusion, and equity (Azorin & Ainscow, 2018). However, positive discrimination by compensatory pedagogy may have adverse effects, as it could further isolate students because their peers may label them as different (Möller, 2012). Positive discrimination wrongfully creates the impression that such students are privileged. This perception renders successful social inclusion impossible; in other words, these students are somehow integrated, but they do not actively participate in school life (Vislie, 2003). Ferguson-Patrick, K (2020) offered some examples in Swedish schools where teachers work with care and trust, and where there is collaborative learning that makes students feel like active participants.

Conversely, the existence of a culture of inclusion implies that systemic issues that foster discrimination against students will not exist and that everyone, both teachers and the community, will work towards equality in results instead of a misunderstood equality that relies on financial resources and positive discrimination (Hedegaard-Soerensen & Grumloese, 2020). Scholars have highlighted that inter-professional collaboration is necessary but lacking among Nordic schools, multidisciplinary teams, and IPs (individual plans) who can work with families and schools (Hesjedal, Hetland, Iversen, & Manger, 2015). As previously stated, there are still exceptions to this issue, and programmes and practices within schools need to be further encouraged. Following Luhmann (1995a), for the inclusion to be implemented, the systems that contributed to its implementation must be elaborated based on each of the actor's participation, but not at their individual level, to introduce the complexities of the social world that they live in (Vanderstraeten, 2021).

As previously discussed, in Nordic schools, exclusion is manifested by marginalised connexions and the inherent differences in living conditions. Inherent in the union of individual motivations is the promotion of active participation and the empowerment of children in classroom practices that could be complementary of expectative and shared themes in the pursuit of a structural differentiation in which interactive systems of facilitation are included (Klette et al., 2018; Luhmann, 1997; Öhrn, 2012). Following Luhmann, in the specific case of urban inclusion, participation means being part of something by taking action (Luhmann & Schorr, 1996). This perspective accepts every person as diverse and acknowledges their value (Celeste, Baysu, Phalet, Meeussen, & Kende, 2019; Sealy, 2018). We wish to highlight the relevance of school staffs' fight for social justice in schools. Each school's staff works critically, acknowledges their own

cultural framework, and uses individual reflections on how to use it to work with families (Jørgensen, Dobson, & Perry, 2021) and fight for transformational change. It must be a goal to fully include individuals from both minoritized and native ethnic backgrounds and to uphold respect and preserve their cultures (Hermansson, Norlund Shaswar, Rosén, & Wedin, 2021). To accomplish this, our review points out that teachers at Nordic schools have stated that they need training in teaching procedures, forms of differentiation, and guidelines instead of being given “hollow slogans”. We believe that generating a more coherent picture of how Nordic education consists of subsystems contributing to inequality as an outcome could be a step towards more informed policies and practices at all system levels. As the current knowledge base is rich in information regarding various aspects of the existing inequality, considering how to connect the identified problems and solutions to a broader systems perspective could be an important way forward to decoding the paradox of persistent inequality in Nordic schooling.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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