

(Un)doing Equity in the Provision of Educational Support

Carlos Rojas



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Academic dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Special Education at Stockholm University to be publicly defended on Friday 29 May 2026 at 13.00 in ALB hörsal 1 hus 1, Albano, Roslagsvägen 30.

Abstract

This dissertation builds on a study of provision of educational support in the Swedish education system, with a particular focus on lower secondary schools. The aim is to explore processes involved in the provision of educational support beyond pedagogical and didactical considerations. To this end, an initial analysis of the local use of a large-scale equity funding programme in nine Swedish municipalities was followed by a field study in lower secondary schools in two of them. Adopting an ethnographic approach over three semesters, classes and other domains of everyday life in the schools were observed. The study includes interviews with pupils, parents, teachers, special educators, and other school personnel, as well as administrators at local education agencies.

Theoretically informed by Foucault, the concepts of problematisations, power, discourse, knowledge, and truths have been central to the inquiry. Adopting a critical approach aims to make visible the unseen and unexamined ways of thinking and the practices they render, in order to expand the limits of our thinking.

The findings of the present study are contingent on historical processes in the Swedish education system and its relation to special education, within a continuum of categorising groups of pupils as responsible for their own school failure and rationalising the provision of educational support through medical diagnoses and moralising judgements. The findings are also understood in light of the Swedish welfare state's striving for equity and its historical ambiguities. As this study shows, the provision of educational support is conditioned by far more than pupils' educational needs, compromising educational equity.

The concept of equity has been left open to interpretation in policy, practice, and thinking about educational support. Given this, and in a context in which school personnel experience time poverty and pressure to act within dynamics of accountability and against their professional judgement, the understanding of school failure is simplified. This enables the deferral of responsibility to pupils and their families and thwarts efforts to reverse school failure. While actors such as school personnel often act unintentionally or without awareness in the observed processes, these processes ultimately operate in ways that compromise equity in the education system. In the practical doing of equity through the organisation and provision of educational support, professionals in the education system are also undoing equity.

Keywords: *educational support, equity, special education, educational needs, Foucault, problematisations.*

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The problem is:
How do things happen?

Michel Foucault

Abstract

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List of publications

Article 1

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Article 2

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Article 3

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Abbreviations

EA	Education Act (Sweden's)	(Skollagen)
LEA	Local Education Agency	(Utbildningsförvaltning eller motsvarande)
LGA	Local Government Act	(Kommunallagen)
MCA	Multilingual Classroom Assistance	(Studiehandledning på modersmålet)
NDD	Neurodevelopmental disabilities	(Neuropsykiatriska funktionshinder)
PSS	Pupil Support Services	(Elevhälsoteam)
SAS	Swedish as second language	(Svenska som andraspråk)
SEI	Socioeconomic index	(Socioekonomiskt index)
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator	(Specialpedagog)
SNAE	Swedish National Agency for Education	(Skolverket)
SSI	Swedish Schools Inspectorate	(Skolinspektionen)

Introduction

Every year in May, around the time this thesis is published, principals across Sweden sign documents confirming how compulsory education has turned out for the children now reaching its end. For around 20,000 of them, the documented grades confirm that they have not learned what they should have learned. They have failed too many subjects to qualify for entry to upper secondary education (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2025a: 19).

Making education accessible and equitable for every child has been central to the development of democratic welfare states, and Sweden is no exception. Indeed, the Swedish model is among the most robust in ensuring universal and equal access to education and striving for equity. Families cannot pay for better schooling, and enrolment in higher education is free of charge for Swedish residents. Yet, for the pupils left behind this spring, this option fades on the horizon. Even with the additional year they are given to improve their grades and qualify, only one in four will ultimately complete upper secondary education (SNAE, 2019: 26; 2026). This outcome is all the more urgent to address, as it is linked with increased risks of unemployment, poverty, poorer physical and mental health, and even earlier death (Public Health Agency, 2024).

One of the fundamental principles of the Swedish model is that children's life opportunities should not depend on their families (Swedish Government, 2017a: 3). In line with this, and after more than a century of welfare state development and over sixty years of a unitary comprehensive school system, the Education Act (Swedish Government, 2010) has long stipulated that pupils experiencing difficulties in their education must receive support. Education should "outweigh differences in children's and pupils' prerequisites for learning" (ch. 1, §4), and a pupil at risk of failing to reach the curricular goals must be provided with educational support 'hastily' (ch. 3, §4). Yet, despite policies and structures formally aligned to support all pupils in need, around 15% complete compulsory schooling without reaching the stipulated goals. Moreover, year after year, systematic and pronounced disparities in school failure persist between social groups. While the failure rate is approximately 5-7% among pupils whose parents have completed higher education, it rises to 20-25% among those whose parents have completed 'only' upper secondary education (SNAE, 2025a: 22). Pupils living in low-income households are even more disadvantaged: roughly one in three fails to qualify for upper secondary education (Save the Children Sweden et al., 2025: 47). Research going back more

than a century shows how difficult it has been for school systems to redress such inequities (Deschenes et al., 2001). Nevertheless, it is striking that these disparities not only persist but deepen to this extent within the education system of a welfare state such as Sweden.

While decades of research have illuminated causes of this decline as primarily related to policy and structures (cf. Magnússon et al., 2019; Yang Hansen et al., 2025), this study turns to a particular sequence that has been thoroughly examined from pedagogical perspectives, but less so from sociological ones: the provision of educational support. This sequence enacts and concentrates commitments to educational equity in formal and informal policy. What do you do when a pupil is not learning? The 20,000 pupils failing to qualify for upper secondary this year have likely encountered innumerable such moments during their years of schooling – moments that too often ended with somebody who could have done something failing to do so.

Interest in the provision of educational support is shared by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (SSI), which has repeatedly criticised shortcomings in its legally mandated provision of educational support. Moreover, linking these shortcomings to the decline in pupil performance over the past two decades (SSI, 2014; 2016; 2021; 2024). A concrete example is that roughly one-third of pupils entitled to educational support do not receive it (Swedish Teachers' Union, 2024). Previous research demonstrates that resourceful families are often more successful in pressing schools to provide support in Sweden, as elsewhere (Laurin, 2021; Skrtic et al., 2021). Combined with the pronounced disproportionalities affecting pupils from low-income households and migrated families (Adams Lyngbäck et al., 2023; Behtoui et al., 2019; Yang Hansen et al., 2025), there is reason to inquire into what, beyond pedagogical and didactical considerations, influences the provision of educational support.

This thesis reports on a study conducted over a two-year period with this focus. Theoretically informed by Foucault, it explores everyday life in two schools through an ethnographic approach spanning three semesters. The study includes interviews with a total of 118 participants—pupils, parents, school staff, and administrators at local education agencies—as well as an analysis of national and local policy and a large-scale equity funding programme. As a compilation thesis, empirical findings and analyses from the study are presented in three previously published articles, alongside a comprehensive summary provided towards the end of the thesis and a concluding discussion of the study as a whole. Before that, the following chapter specifies the research questions, and a historical and conceptual contextualisation situates the study within its broader field. The theoretical framework, grounded in Foucauldian thought, is then elaborated, followed by a detailed account of the methodological design and ethical considerations. Completing the thesis, after the comprehensive summary and concluding discussion, the three articles are republished in their original form.

Aim and research questions

The aim of the study is to explore processes involved in the provision of educational support within the Swedish education system. The following empirically oriented research questions have guided the research. Together, they frame the study as a whole and underpin all three articles included in this compilation thesis, rather than being individually tied to a specific article.

1. How is provision of educational support conceived and understood across different levels of the education system: from national governance, throughout local administrations, and down to the school level?
2. How is provision of educational support practised at the school level?
3. How do processes involved in the provision of educational support operate in its understanding and practice?

Background, context and concepts

This section begins with a descriptive historical overview of education as a foundation of Sweden's comprehensive welfare state and its striving for equity. The historical implications are described rather than theorised, in relation to a selection of major social and political junctures from the 19th century to the present. A review of relevant previous research, together with an overview of the current political and societal structures shaping special education and educational support, situates the present thesis and its object of study within the research field.

A history of equity and education in Sweden

In the development of the Swedish welfare state, the education system has been crucial to broader societal development. Not least in its striving for equality and, later, equity (Bergstrand, 2022: 20; Richardson 2010: 123f). A selection of social, structural, and political junctures important to this development is covered in this section.

Education as key for equity in the Swedish welfare state

The Swedish model is described by the government as a comprehensive welfare state that intends to provide education, healthcare, and other services to its citizens according to need, in order to enable individuals to have balanced power relations and less dependence on families and employers (Swedish Government, 2017a: 3). To this end, a fundamental ambition is that “pupils’ academic achievements are generally good and the variation in achievements low” (Swedish Government, 2017a: 15). While it is difficult to identify an exact starting point for this state-forming process, 1842 was a key juncture, as the government presented the first Education Act (EA), mandating schools ‘for the people’ (*folkskola*) in every parish in Sweden (§1) to provide access to education for all school-aged children (§8). From this point, the education system gradually expanded its scope. School attendance became mandatory in the 1882 revision of the EA, and the length of compulsory education increased. The education system grew alongside aspirations to equity, embed-

ded in aspirations to educational excellence, nationalism, and what in the Nordic context has later been described as Nordic exceptionalism (Barker, 2018). By the turn of the 20th century, the *folkskola* had increased access to education for children from lower social classes¹ who had previously been excluded, and introduced common standards for their education. Similarly, the educational track for children from higher social classes, *realskola*, was also increasingly standardised. The tracks differed in curriculum and organisation so as to fit the needs and aspirations supposedly held by pupils and families from different social classes. Both tracks were also mostly gender-differentiated in curriculum and organisation, although mixed-gender schools had existed since the end of the 19th century. Added to this was a diverse range of special institutions and special schools for pupils regarded as disabled or deviant (Hjörne & Säljö, 2008), which altogether constituted a scattered educational landscape. A child's educational trajectory was inevitably dependent on gender, (dis)ability, and social class (Sandin & Sundkvist 2023: 70). As in many other countries, the varying educational prospects and aspirations contingent on this dependency generated tensions that persist to the present day (cf. Allan et al., 1998; Allodi, 2017; Hjörne, 2016; Skrtic, 1999).

Discussions about the benefits of converging the education system in order to ease transitions between tracks and open up equal career opportunities were already present in the 19th century, but were long resisted by arguments focusing on inherent variations in learning capacities and aptitude for higher education. A major concern was that the quality of education might decrease if pupils with different backgrounds were mixed (Richardson 2010: 106). A report from the Schools Inspectorate in 1879 described how inapt pupils hindered the development of the apt, and the morally deprived risked corrupting well-behaved children (Sandin & Sundkvist, 2024: 71). The report rejected a unitary comprehensive education system at that point and proposed the segregation of pupils failing the *folkskola* into 'repetition-' or 'idiot-' classes. While these logics influenced education policy in Sweden for many decades, the direction gradually shifted towards a stronger aspiration to inclusion. As of 1962, the different tracks of the education system converged in a unitary comprehensive school for years 1 to 9, called *grundskola*, which literally translates as 'the foundational school'. Yet a separate educational track remained for pupils with intellectual disabilities, named *särskola*, as well as special schools for pupils that were, for example, deaf or hard of hearing. The education system was now – almost – united in one system with the same curriculum throughout Sweden, serving pupils from all social classes and genders alike (Richardsson, 2010; Ryffé 2019: 69; Sandin & Sundkvist, 2024).

¹ As social classes have been conceptualised differently across historical periods and contexts, this thesis uses the terms 'higher social classes' and 'lower social classes', except when referring to statistics that use other classifications.

New perspectives forming in the 1970s and 1980s

Migration and multilingualism emerged as issues to be addressed in the 1970s. After not even being mentioned in the 1969 curriculum, increasing migration led to a new area of need in compulsory schooling: educational support for speakers of Swedish as a second language. Municipalities and their Local Education Agencies (LEAs) also began receiving targeted resources to provide mother tongue instruction, and in 1977 the right to such instruction was enshrined in law (Swedish Government, 2019: 62ff). Still, the issue remained marginal, while the main focus of school development continued to lie in the broader social field. The first socio-economic allocation models were introduced, based on parents' educational level and income.

All these developments were addressed in the decade's major governmental inquiry into education, presented in 1974: the SIA inquiry (Skolans inre arbete, the Inner Workings of the School). Among other things, the remit it produced stated that teaching should "be adapted to different types of ability without for that reason abandoning the requirement that pupils are to be provided a common body of knowledge and frame of reference"² (Swedish Government, 1976: 64; Wall, 2018: 23). The remit prepared the ground for a shift in which greater responsibility was placed on the school rather than on the pupil. This was also reflected in changing terminology: pupils were no longer described as 'mentally retarded' or 'feeble-minded', as had previously been the case. The move from segregated to integrated forms of special education began, and a new way of thinking emerged in which the provision of educational support should also be preventive (Richardson 2010: 181ff). The school was now understood as experiencing 'teaching difficulties' if a pupil was unable to benefit from instruction and meet curricular goals, rather than the pupil being defined as having 'learning difficulties'. Focus was to be placed on the pupil's abilities and potential rather than deficits (Tinglev, 2014: 8). A structurally important change prompted by the SIA inquiry concerned state funding and school financing, discussed further below. The new trend of the time was decentralisation and increased leeway for schools and principals in deciding how to allocate resources (Hallsén & Magnússon, 2021: 186f).

The concept of equity (*likvärdighet*)³ was introduced in the 1985 revision of the Education Act, stating in the first chapter that education shall be equitable throughout the education system (ch. 1, §9). The paragraph has remained through all subsequent revisions and has been complemented by further sections increasing its detail. Educational agencies (e.g., SNAE, 2025b), as well as scholars in education and law (e.g., Ryffé, 2019; Wall, 2018), generally

² All translations from Swedish in the thesis are my own.

³ While the Swedish word *likvärdighet* is predominantly translated as *equity*, it has also been translated as *equivalence* (Englund, 2011). *Equality* has historically been consistently used as the translation of the Swedish *jämlikhet*.

understand the concept of equity as supported in the current EA by three pillars:

- All children are to be offered an education with “an ambition to outweigh differences in children’s and pupils’ circumstances” (ch. 1, §4).
- Everyone shall have equal access to education “regardless of place of residence, or social and economic circumstances” (ch. 1, §8).
- Education shall be equitable “no matter where in the country it is provided” (ch. 1, §9).

Scholars in educational law (cf. Ryffé, 2019: 131ff; Wall, 2018: 23f) concur that these mandates are both specific and open to interpretation: “Equity is, however, in several respects conceptually problematic, as it is not clear in which respects education is to be equitable, or which circumstances are being referred to” (Ryffé 2019: 132). An inherent challenge in applying the concept of equity in everyday life in schools, is that it is twofold: it encompasses equality in the sense of providing equally, for instance by maintaining the same standards and curricular aspirations, equally high quality of teaching and educational support, or education on non-discriminatory grounds. In this sense, equal is a more straightforward concept than equity, which can be understood as holding the ambition of equality in these senses while also holding the ambition of being equitable in relation to, for example, the teaching or type of educational support provided – which is understood to require individualisation, differentiation, and *not* treating pupils equally (Wall, 2018: 24f; Ryffé, 2017: 182; SSI, 2011: 12). This aligns with Espinoza’s (2007) widely used definitions, suggesting that equity generally implies equality of opportunity, and different ways of engaging with this opportunity in order to be equitable. Educational researchers with pedagogical, economic, or sociological perspectives tend to align with this, often addressing the caveats arising from this tension or ‘doubleness’ (Allan, 2007; Asp-Onsjö, 2017; Clark et al., 1998; Florian, 2019; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000).

Decentralisation and New Public Management in the 1990s

After a transitional period in which both equality and equity were emphasised in the Swedish education system, the latter became predominant during the 1990s (Berg et al., 1999; Englund, 2011). The comprehensive ‘equal’ school system introduced in 1962 became the subject of intense political debate during the 1980s, leading to parliamentary decisions that dismantled the ‘school for all’ in 1991 and 1992 through three comprehensive reforms (cf. Magnússon et al., 2019: 72; Ramberg, 2015: 17ff): First, a general decentralisation bill shifted the organisation and funding of schools from central government to the

290 municipal administrations within the Swedish state. At the same time, all schools remained governed by the national Education Act and a unitary curriculum determined by central government. Alongside this, parents and private school organisers were introduced as governing actors when new legislation enabled parents to choose which school their children would attend and allowed private entities such as companies, churches, or organisations to establish and run schools at all levels of the education system except universities. The rationale for these reforms was to improve school-home relationships, quality, and diversity, in order to better meet different educational needs. Public funding through a voucher system was intended to enable everyone, regardless of income, to choose among all available schools – public or private (Swedish Government, 1992: 8f). Still, the system soon displayed patterns that persist today, with resourceful, capital-strong groups both more likely to establish schools and more likely to make active choices regarding their children's schooling, as has been the case in similar systems around the world (Ball, 2021: 143f; Bunar & Ambrose, 2016; Granvik Saminathen et al., 2018). The Swedish system is also one of the few in the world that allows publicly financed schools to operate *for-profit* (Allodi, 2017; Jobér, 2023). In the dominant discourse of the time, the reforms had more to do with increasing quality and equity in education than with financial interests (Englund, 2011: 196f). Although scholars have identified positive effects in particular schools or settings (cf. Böhlmark et al., 2016), quantitative and qualitative research conducted since the transformation of the system has produced a broad consensus that it has increased segregation along socioeconomic and ethnic lines in Sweden, thereby intensifying inequity (Bunar, 2022a; Bunar & Ambrose, 2016; Granvik Saminathen et al., 2018; Hultqvist, 2018; Swedish Government, 2019; Yang Hansen et al., 2025).

In this new multi-levelled and multi-layered governance structure, accountability measures at all levels increased during the 1990s under the rationale of ensuring quality and equity within education, healthcare, and other public services. Described as a 'systemic shift' by central government (2008), this involved a shift from rule-oriented to goal-oriented governance, together with a striving for increased local and professional governance and responsibility for teaching (Swedish Government, 2008; 2014: 117ff). In this context, New Public Management came to dominate the organisational logics of the public sector in Sweden as well as elsewhere (Barrenechea et al., 2023; Bornemark, 2018a; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017), and the education system was no exception (Allodi, 2017).

Characterised by logics of comparison and competition, the grading system was changed in 1994 from a numeric 1–5 scale without additional labels to a scale that introduced a failing grade (no pass/icke godkänd) and three passing grades, while also introducing standards in the new curriculum (SNAE, 1994). The failing grade remained when the current A–F scale was introduced in 2011. In that reform, it was also coupled with the requirement of passing so-

called core subjects (maths, Swedish, and English) in lower secondary education in order to qualify for upper secondary education. As predicted by sceptics in the early 1990s, while pressure related to comparison and competition had always existed, the failing grade came to exert a new type of pressure on both teachers and pupils. This was notably reflected in a 40% increase in drop-outs from upper secondary education in the year the failing grade was introduced (Murray, 2007). Concerns about the failing grade have persisted since and were a key argument for a governmental inquiry into the grading system launched in 2025. While its remit proposes a new numeric grading scale from 1 to 10, it sets 4 as the threshold for admission to upper secondary education, which can be understood as a continuation of the failing grade (Swedish Government, 2025a).

In the second half of the 1990s, the conservative-liberal government that had carried out the decentralising and market-oriented reforms was replaced by the Social Democrats. After initially extending the reforms, for example by increasing the possible benefits for private entities from the voucher system, new policy was introduced that increased the central government's power in the education system (cf. Magnússon et al., 2019).

The rise and fall of inclusion in the 2000s

Justified by the financial crisis that had struck Sweden during the 1990s and led local administrations to cut spending on education, governmental funding programmes were established. These took the form of more than 100 different earmarked funding streams for schools to apply for, each conditioned by use for the purposes specified by the government – a move that has been described as part of a process of recentralisation by central government (Bergstrand, 2022). Another development marking this tendency was the gradual reinstatement of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate between 2003 and 2008, after its dismantling during the era of decentralisation (Carlbaum et al., 2014).

Equity was a rationale for these recentralising moves by central government (Swedish National Audit Office, 2013: 15). Inspections were intended to control quality in order to preserve national equity within the education system. Among the funding streams introduced, several were related to special education and educational support. Schools could apply for funding for support measures for specific disabilities, and after the peak in refugee reception in 2015, specific funding became available for schools working with what is now labelled 'newly arrived' (nyanlända) pupils, defined as having spent less than four years in Swedish schooling. Also in 2015, a governmental expert committee was established to address and propose ways forward for handling challenges in the education system (Swedish Government, 2017b). The final report framed the situation that had developed after the turn of the century as marked by, for example, insufficient capacity and responsibility among school

organisers and weak ‘compensatory’ allocation of funding (Swedish Government, 2017b: 14). A considerable number of measures were proposed and promptly enacted to address these problems. One was the merging of many of the governmental funding streams into a single large funding programme introduced in 2018 for purposes of equity and quality in education (Swedish Government, 2017b: 223f; Swedish Agency for Public Management, 2020). The new funding aimed to address local needs rather than govern in detail from central government, and it simplified the bureaucratic procedures, enabling more smaller municipalities and school organisers to access the funding. This can be seen as an example of relocating agency and governance to the local level, as the report also recommended more support and less steering from governmental agencies (cf. Jarl et al., 2024), while simultaneously proposing more coherent national coordination (Swedish Government, 2017: 316ff). Throughout the succession of social democratic-green and conservative-liberal governments during the first two decades of the 2000s, there was cross-party alignment with the inclusive turn in special education proposed in the Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994). Provision of special educational support in mainstream classes became the norm, and the inclusion and integration of pupils with special needs were preferred to exclusion and placement in segregated settings, even if such settings still existed (Hjörne & Säljö 2008; Tinglev, 2014). This ideological hegemony was challenged by the conservative-liberal Government that took office in 2022. Rather than adhering to the 1990s vein of decentralisation and autonomy, the administration produced proposals for governing schools at a level of detail absent from governments in preceding decades, whether social democratic-green or conservative-liberal. This followed not only the continued decline in results, but also a decline in the well-being of pupils and teachers. The experience of *time poverty* (Creagh et al., 2023) in schools was addressed by one of the government’s first remits, titled *Time for the teaching task*. This specified the hours to be spent on teaching and planning, proposed relief from some documentation of support measures, and at the same time introduced new demands for elaborate lesson plans (Swedish Government, 2025b). Several inquiries and proposals addressed the provision of educational support and special education, advocating increased exclusion of disruptive pupils from mainstream classrooms and increased placement in special groups and even external school facilities (Bunar, 2024; Magnússon & Paulsrud, 2025). One remit (Swedish Government, 2025c) suggested replacing the mandate on ‘extra adaptations’ (extra anpassningar) in the EA, a measure of educational support that can be understood as inclusive practice in mainstream classes. ‘Support teaching’ (stöddundervisning) was proposed instead and was expected by the Government to take place through the exclusion of pupils from mainstream teaching (Swedish Government, 2025b: 16f). Scholars have stated that “Sweden is among the first countries to actually abandon inclusion as a political goal for education” (Magnússon & Paulsrud, 2025: 1). According to this argument, this is not due

solely to the choices of the latest government, but is the result of a longer cross-party process. Tendencies to displace equity as a political goal are also visible. One example is the progressive renaming of the governmental funding programme mentioned above. ‘State funding for increased equality’ (för ökad jämlikhet) was replaced in 2018 by ‘State funding for school equity’ (för likvärdig skola), which was renamed in 2024 as ‘State funding for improved knowledge development’ (för stärkt kunskapsutveckling). During this time, the scope of the funding expanded from addressing the needs of pupils experiencing school failure in disadvantaged settings to comprising anything that school organisers could consider appropriate in the name of equity.

Nevertheless, the mandates of the EA remain in force and continue to guide understandings of equity and educational support in Swedish schools (EA, ch. 3, §5-9).

Special education in theory and practice

For the purposes of this thesis, a reflexive stance has been adopted regarding how special education and educational support are represented in contemporary society and everyday life in schools. Rather than attempting to essentialise these concepts, this section provides both a historical and a theoretical overview, situating the present study within the field of special education.

Contemporary and historical special education in Sweden

While special education as such emerged in the 1950s, segregated settings for teaching pupils experiencing difficulties had been standard in Swedish schools since their expansion in the 19th century, as in other education systems (Tinglev, 2014; Skrtic, 1991: 180). What would now be called special education had early manifestations at the beginning of the 20th century in the form of *help classes* and *help schools* (Helldin, 1997/2003: 31ff). At the time, this was the only formal support measure available for pupils experiencing difficulties in learning or, as they were labelled then, ‘mentally weak’ pupils. Historians of education note that, in addition to this group, help classes also included those described as intellectually, socially, or morally deviant (Hjörne, 2016). Placement was primarily based on intelligence tests, but other tests, examinations, and observations could also result in a pupil being assigned to a help class, whether because of intellectual or physical disabilities or simply for acting disruptively in mainstream schools (Tinglev, 2014). Terminology and forms of provision were adjusted during the first half of the 20th century, but throughout this period help classes remained the main support measure for pupils. With the introduction of the comprehensive unitary school ‘for all’ in 1962, its first curriculum (SNAE, 1962) proposed increased integration of pu-

pils with special needs. The curriculum suggested cooperation between mainstream teachers and special education teachers – a profession that received its first university programme in the same year.⁴ This can be understood as an early move towards including special education in mainstream teaching, which progressively expanded during the following decades (cf. Tinglev, 2014). Moreover, the need for educational support intensified. In the cross-party agreement leading to the comprehensive unitary school, one concession to sceptics concerned that mixing pupils would reduce the quality of education: the curriculum for the new comprehensive school was based on the later curricula of the *realskola* (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014: 21). Accounts from the 1970s recall an increase from 2.6% to 40% in the proportion of pupils receiving special educational support at some point during the first decade of the new system, making it probable that the greater part of these pupils came from lower social classes that did not conform to the new educational standards (Richardson, 2010: 182). Despite these challenges, evaluations from the 1970s and 1980s (cf. Swedish Government, 1993; Svensson, 1977) show that the new system contributed to levelling the terrain and expanding opportunities for social mobility. Entry into Higher Education (HE) among pupils from lower social classes increased, even if many considered the increase smaller than expected. By the 1980s, between 25–40% of women and men from the highest social classes held HE degrees, while 5–10% of pupils from rural or working-class families did so (Swedish Government, 1993: 157, 160). As noted above, the understanding of responsibility for school failure shifted during the 1970s towards seeking solutions to school problems in the school and the learning environment (Ryffé, 2019; Tinglev, 2014). From a special educational theoretical perspective, this can be described as a shift from a traditional to a critical or alternative perspective (Allodi, 2017; Magnússon, 2015; Nilholm, 2006), as part of the broader societal shift from a psychomedical to a social model of disability (Allan et al., 1998). In this shift, society came to be understood as responsible for disabling individuals when it chose not to adapt to variations in ability, rather than individuals being regarded as disabled in

⁴ As of 2026, there are two special educational professions in Sweden. *Specialpedagog* is similar to a *special educational needs coordinator* (SENCO) and more often involved in coordination, assessment and counseling. *Speciallärare* is equivalent to a *special education teacher* and more often directly involved in teaching, while at times also takes on assessments and other tasks. When *special educator* is mentioned in this thesis, it refers to both these professions jointly. During the final stage of writing this text, the Swedish Government (2025d) launched a governmental inquiry regarding special educational professions and their tasks, among other things to increase direct involvement in teaching of all special educational personnel, and reform the professional programmes of higher education with this purpose.

themselves (Shakespeare, 2014; Rembis, 2019).⁵ The relationship between school performance and factors such as the school environment, neighbourhood characteristics, and pupils' family backgrounds also attracted increasing attention within the education system as well as in political and public discourse (Swedish Government, 1993: 105ff; Tinglev, 2014). Strengthened by the Salamanca statement of 1994, the shift persisted, and a preference for inclusive approaches to special education remained relatively undisputed in Sweden until the 2020s. As described in the previous section, Sweden, like many other countries, is experiencing a renewed shift in which policies and practices of inclusion and equity are increasingly contested. In this contemporary context, special education is ambiguously positioned in political, public, and professional discourse. A governmental inquiry (Swedish Government, 2025d) proposes greater use of special education teachers, drawing on the idea that these are particularly useful for segregated teaching. Special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), who generally advocate and support mainstream teachers in providing educational support in inclusive classrooms, are positioned as less useful in the current situation.

This thesis understands special education as constituted through historical contingencies and complexities, in which processes involving power have always been pivotal (cf. Clark et al., 1998). Similarly, the provision of educational support, as a fundamental practice within special education, also shifts and takes shape in relation to the constitution of special education, while not being restricted to special educational contexts (cf. Allodi, 2021; Ramberg & Watkins, 2020). Following this historical account, theoretical approaches to understanding special education that influence this thesis are described below.

Traditions of thinking in special education

Within the interdisciplinary field of special education, this thesis is situated close to the sociological, which is perhaps unsurprising given my background in sociology. From the outset of the research, it was assumed that processes typically understood as sociological operate across different levels of the education system and influence the provision of educational support. Skidmore (1996; 2004), Skrtic (1991; 1995; 1999; 2021), Allan (1995; 1998; 2007), Hjärne (2008; 2016), and Magnússon (2015; 2019; 2021) inspired this position, though not necessarily in ways they themselves would advocate. Skidmore (1996) also helps to organise the conceptualisation of special education through his *traditions of thinking* in special education: the sociological, organ-

⁵ I adhere to the paradigm of the social model, which implies that my use of *disabled* and *disability* in this thesis is purposeful for describing situations where it is primarily society that constructs a situation of disability, rather than the disability being inherent and inevitable due to neurological or bodily characteristics.

isational, and psychomedical. This engagement with the field of special education is completed by considering pedagogical-didactical perspectives. Acknowledging complexity, historical contingencies, and power dynamics as inherent both to special education and to any social field (Clark et al., 1998; Foucault, 1982), this study understands the psychomedical, sociological, and organisational traditions as nested, interlinked, overlapping, and in practice impossible to disentangle. Nevertheless, these conceptual distinctions are retained as analytically useful for structuring reflection, not least in a section such as this, which seeks to situate the study within the wider field of special education.

The psychomedical and the social model and the dispute over responsibility

The position of the school in relation to pupils experiencing problems is pivotal to the field of Special education. A basic divide runs between placing responsibility for school failure on the school (organisation, curricula, teachers, leadership, etc.) and blaming the failing individual (morality, enlightenment, impairment, illness, etc.) (Ainscow, 2007; Allan et al., 1998; Deschenes et al., 2001; Magnússon, 2015; Skrtic, 1991). Historically, the latter position has been prominent, while the shift towards holding the school responsible was made at the end of the 20th century. The previously described paradigm shift from the psychomedical model to the social model of disability was reflected in special educational theory and practice (Allan et al., 1998).

In the Swedish education system, this shift was visible in a new positioning of schools as responsible for pupils' failure, replacing the traditional understanding that certain pupils were simply incapable of academic success (Allodi, 2017; Tinglev, 2014). Educational policy, and not least the EA, adjusted both in principle and in detail. A classic example is the change in wording from 'pupils with need of support' to 'pupils in need of support' (*elever med/i behov av särskilt stöd*) in the 2000 revision of the EA and the 1994 revision of the curriculum for compulsory education (SNAE, 1994; Swedish Government, 1999: 35). Yet the issue has never been free from dispute. By the mid-2020s, not only was there intense political debate regarding responsibility for school failure, but there were also several governmental proposals and new pieces of legislation aiming to 'return' responsibility from schools to pupils and their families. A tangible example is a governmental inquiry into school absence proposing fines for guardians of children recurrently absent from school (Swedish Government, 2025e).

Describing a basic divide between placing responsibility for school failure either on the school or on pupils and their families is, of course, a simplification of reality. There are no clearly defined positions on either side of the di-

vide, nor is there a binary or even linear scale by which to measure responsibility and where it is placed. Several dynamics, tensions, and dilemmas are active in the processes involved in the provision of educational support and special education. Ultimately, there are often multiple and, to varying degrees, competing interests involved, such as improving pupils' learning, staying within budget, and maintaining acceptable working conditions for school personnel (cf. Allodi, 2021: 19; Clark et al., 1998). Such tensions are not exclusive to special education; questions of responsibility and competing interests arise in many fields. While this study approaches these issues within special education through a poststructuralist theoretical lens, drawing in particular on Foucault, similar problematics concerning responsibility, competing interests, and institutional tensions have been examined in other scholarly traditions. Such issues are central, for instance, to school effectiveness and school improvement research (e.g., Hopkins et al., 2014), organisational theory (e.g., Brunsson, 2019) and studies of public services (e.g., Lipsky, 2010), where complexities and tensions between professional judgement, resource constraints, and accountability structures are analysed without recourse to post-structuralist assumptions.

Tied to questions of responsibilities are questions of possibilities, also pivotal to the field of special education and its relation to education more broadly. If schools are held responsible for school failure and are expected to accommodate all pupils, regardless of background, neurological configuration, physical ability, and so on – is this possible? Historically, special education emerged in segregated settings, where pupils were placed when mainstream teachers and classrooms were deemed insufficient to meet their learning needs. Whether because teachers lacked responsibility, possibility, or both, special education was to do the work instead of mainstream education (Helldin, 1997). For as long as research on special education has existed, critical scholars have argued that its mere existence has enabled the deflection of responsibility and hindered the improvement of possibilities within mainstream teaching (Allan, 2007; Skrtic, 1991; 1999; Slee, 2008; Tomlinson, 1982/2017; 2025). On the other hand, scholars have argued that, when advocating a school *for all*, what is often meant is a school *for most* (Kauffmann, 2022), pointing to the inclusion in mainstream classrooms of, for example, pupils with severe intellectual disabilities as seemingly impossible. From that position, and acknowledging the difficulty of drawing a line between those to be provided with mainstream or special education, one way of understanding the issue is that if some pupils are still in need of special education, then special education remains necessary and specialised educators need to exist and develop specific skills to meet such needs. Even if this challenge need not necessarily be addressed by special educators or within any specific form of special education, “the need for differential response is not itself removed when the special-mainstream distinction is removed” (Clark et al., 1998: 169). To add further complexity to the question of possibilities and responsibilities,

since the 1990s and especially since the signing of the Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994), special education has no longer been linked exclusively to disabilities, if indeed it ever was⁶. Neither research nor international policy statements point to any single, readily applicable position for schools to adopt, let alone one generalisable across contexts globally. A study by Khadka and colleagues (forthcoming), examining 45 master's programmes in special education in 28 countries across the globe, makes visible the variation inherent in the profession itself. The research group identifies "persistent tensions between categorical and inclusive paradigms", with many programmes adopting a medical model and every third programme emphasising work with pupils diagnosed as disabled. Underlining competing values within special education, as well as within the broader educational striving for inclusion and equity, Clark, Dyson, and Millward suggested that "we can relate the complex features of special needs education in practice to the complex processes which produce it" (1998: 170f), and that "forms of provision can be dismantled, but the dilemmas and complexities out of which they arise cannot".

Sociological thinking in special education

Regarding the sociological and organisational dimensions, and related to the critique that special education enables the deflection of responsibility from mainstream education, there is also criticism of special education as actively reproducing the division between 'normal' pupils and 'other' pupils (cf. Allan, 1998; 2007; Florian, 2008; 2019; Liasidou, 2011; Skrtic, 1991; 1999; Slee, 2008; 2013). Some critics suggest that maintaining this division and labelling deviance is intentional, or at least semi-intentional, serving to create financial and professional opportunities within the education system at the expense of stigmatised pupils (Tomlinson, 1982/2017; 2012). Critical voices in research, policy, and practice have advocated inclusive education as an alternative to special education, understanding the latter as inherently excluding (Allan, 2007; Florian, 2008; Slee, 2008; 2013). Still, later contributions from critical scholars have shifted away from treating special education itself as the central problem for inclusion and towards a focus on normativity and rigid teaching practices: "[when] diversity becomes more commonplace, a move away from the logic of exclusion, towards an acceptance of difference as an ordinary aspect of human development is needed" (Florian, 2019: 702). Interestingly, while the central critique of special education has been that it reproduces psychomedical and categorical thinking about pupils, leading to exclusion, tensions in schools between teachers and special educators seem to stem from the

⁶ While disability has been intrinsic to special education, different education systems have since long comprised special schools and classes for a wider range of pupils failing school. In early 20th century Sweden, there were, e.g., classes for morally deviant pupils and for pupils not acting mature enough (Tinglev, 2014).

latter wanting to include pupils experiencing school problems in mainstream teaching, while mainstream teachers prefer their exclusion (Corral-Granados, 2024; Menckel et al., 2024; Ross-Hill, 2009; Saloviita, 2020).

When the Salamanca statement of 1994 prompted national governments around the globe to implement inclusive education systems, it did not present inclusion as an alternative to, or contradiction of, systems that included special education. Titled *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for action on Special needs education*, it proposes “new thinking in special needs education”, as the first chapter is headed (UNESCO, 1994: 7). The novelty of the statement was that pedagogy and didactics associated with special education should be used more widely in mainstream teaching and in support of pupils experiencing educational exclusion for reasons beyond disability. This was a cornerstone of its proposal for creating education systems in which all children, regardless of need, learn together in the same settings. The statement explicitly articulated the aim of creating educational systems that protected the right to education for every pupil at risk of exclusion due to “physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions” as well as “disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalised areas or groups” (UNESCO, 1994: 6). The implications of this broadening have been discussed in depth ever since (e.g., Haug, 2017; Magnússon et al., 2019; Thomas, 2013), and much attention has been paid to the complexity that arises when questions extend beyond placement or specific didactics (Anderson et al., 2022; Florian, 2019; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014; Huilla et al., 2022; Ramberg & Watkins, 2020; Skidmore, 2004).

The centrality of disability to special education as a means of making sense of ‘deviant’ and ‘normal’, thereby justifying the special–mainstream divide, has been unpacked by Slee (2008) into three ‘reductive acts’ that have also come to shape the concept of inclusive education. The first is the assumption that inclusive education is about ‘SEN children’, meaning ‘disabled children’. The second is the reduction of disability to a psychomedical understanding, thereby downplaying the role of society in disabling individuals. The third reductive act, according to Slee, is an aversion to educational change in mainstream schooling. A narrow and pathology-oriented understanding of disability is also argued by Skrtic (1995: 212ff) to produce a ‘pigeonholing’ of pupils experiencing a wide range of challenges so that they fit within a ‘repertoire of standard practices’. This results either in teachers failing to adapt support to pupils’ needs or in referring them to another professional assumed to possess a repertoire better suited to the case (Skrtic, 1995: 212ff). Later critical research has also addressed how “students with special needs experience, somewhat paradoxically, both neglect of, and excessive attention to, their needs and to them as learners” (Allan & Peruzzo, 2023:19). In this paradox, the exces-

sive attention is attributed to the pathologising deficit orientation within special education. The complexity is compounded by the fact that a psychiatric diagnosis has become an asset in securing resources from the expanding organisation of special education and educational support—an asset that is also unevenly distributed (Allan, 2007; Laurin, 2021; Skrtic et al., 2021; Tegtmejer et al., 2023).

This thesis understands the sociological as imbuing all dimensions of this complexity, rather than as being more prevalent at the macro level⁷, as Skidmore suggested (1996). Furthermore, the thesis is grounded in a sociology of special education that is interested in expanding the scope of the societies, groups, and individuals understood as experiencing difficulties in schools and the education system.

Although more than 30 years have passed since the Salamanca statement proposed that special education should be provided for “**all children**” (original bold), challenges arising from belonging to groups specifically mentioned in the statement—such as multilingual pupils—have not been acknowledged in the Swedish context as falling within the remit of special educational support. Provision of educational support for needs related to, for example, migration or multilingualism, such as multilingual classroom assistance (MCA), is often organised outside the schools in which the pupils are taught. Staff supporting migrated pupils in mainstream classes often have little or no interaction with the teachers and special educators at the schools where they work (Tajic, 2024), and research has also shown that special educators have limited interaction with migrated pupils (Johansson et al., 2021). At the same time, statistics on academic achievement show downward-sloping curves in the reported grades of pupils from migrated families (SNAE, 2025a). These pupils are also overrepresented in schools for pupils with intellectual disability (*anpassad skola*), and scholars suggest that unevenly distributed and inadequate special educational support in mainstream schools is one reason for this (Adams Lyngbäck et al., 2023). There are also disproportionalities in diagnoses of neurodevelopmental disabilities (NDD). Children from migrated families are overrepresented in diagnoses of autism (Linnsand, 2023; Magnusson et al., 2012) and intellectual disability (Adams Lyngbäck et al., 2023), and underrepresented in diagnoses of attention deficit disorder (Gubi et al., 2022). Decades of research revealing the discrimination and difficulties experienced by children from migrated families in the Swedish education system (Behtoui et al., 2019; Bunar, 2001; 2011; 2022a; 2022b; Gruber, 2007; Lozic, 2024),

⁷To enhance clarity and readability, when addressing levels in the education system, the study focuses analytically on macro and micro levels. The macro level concerns processes related to politics, societal discourse, and national or local governance, while the micro level comprises processes within schools, classrooms, and interactions among pupils and staff. Intermediate levels, such as the meso or exo levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1981), are deliberately not differentiated in this framework.

combined with the understanding among Swedish teachers that there is little racism to be found and that, for the most part, everyone is treated equally (Nilsson Mohammadi & Wolgast, forthcoming; cf. Ball, 2021: 181f), have long provided reason to examine these situations within the context of special education.

The situation of migrated and racialised pupils in the field of special education, only briefly elaborated here, is one of many that can be explored sociologically across levels and layers of the education system. Other current developments that merit greater attention in Sweden, as well as globally, include the instrumental use of psychiatric diagnosis to acquire resources for educational support (Laurin, 2021; Skrtic et al., 2021; Tegtmejer et al., 2023), declining mental health affecting primarily female and non-binary pupils, often following experiences of aggression from peers or teachers (SSI, 2025), and increasing school absence and school refusal (Strandler & Harling, 2023; Laurin, 2026). All these developments can, to a large extent, be understood from sociological perspectives, as shaped and conditioned by processes operating across different levels and layers of the education system and society at large.

Special education in everyday life in schools

Turning to the pedagogical-didactical dimension of special education, the question of what special education is remains open. Which pupils have needs that we understand as belonging to the realm of special education, and which needs do not? As discussed above, neither research nor global policy statements provide enough detail to secure a common understanding and practice of special education. Rather, policy and practice must acknowledge “situations where overarching values are multiple, complex, and frequently contradictory, and where those values have to be realised amidst equally complex realities”, as Clark, Dyson, and Millward suggest (1998: 170). In such situations, they argue, “human actors are rarely faced with unequivocal choices.”

In Sweden, the EA mandates every school to organise pupil support services (PSS)⁸, specifying (ch. 1, §25) that these must include a special education teacher or SENCO, together with a doctor, nurse, psychologist, and counsellor. Every school must ensure that all these professions are available to pupils. As the extent of provision is not specified, PSS staff are commonly shared between schools within the same public or private administration. The EA also specifies that personnel with special educational training must be consulted in assessments preceding the provision of educational support (ch. 3, §4). Special educators become involved with practically every pupil diagnosed with an NDD at some point before or after psychiatric assessment. They may also en-

⁸ The Swedish term is *elevhälsan*, literally translated as “the student health”. In this thesis, pupil support services (PSS) is used henceforth.

gage with pupils experiencing similar challenges without a diagnosis and cooperate with nursing staff in the PSS when challenges arise from issues related to mental health and well-being (Menckel et al., 2024). Every other special educator reports being occasionally involved with pupils who are speakers of Swedish as a second language or who experience school problems due to having migrated to Sweden recently (Johansson et al., 2021).

What, then, is to be regarded as special educational pedagogy and didactics, as distinct from ‘mainstream’ or ‘ordinary’ forms? Definitions often gravitate around the idea that ordinary or mainstream education does not meet the educational needs of every pupil in the system (e.g., Allan et al., 2025; Persson, 2021). Pedagogy and didactics that compensate for this lack could thus be seen as a need within the education system in the present period. It is a manifest reality—and one visible in this study’s empirical data—that the skills needed to meet diverse educational needs in mainstream teaching vary. Responsibility for the provision of educational support is therefore also contested, and research make visible tensions between mainstream teachers and special educational personnel. Given perceived limitations of time and expertise, mainstream teachers may blame special educators for pushing them to improve and adding tasks to their workload, or for not relieving them of disruptive pupils by removing them from classrooms (Corral-Granados, 2024; Paulsrud, 2024; Ross-Hill, 2009; Saloviita, 2020). Special educators, in turn, often point to teachers’ lack of training in addressing special needs (Corral-Granados, 2024; Paulsrud, 2024).

Educational support - the object of study

Having situated in the field of special education research, this section describes the study’s object of research: provision of educational support. The reflections that delineate it have been informed by theoretical understandings of special education in continuous interplay with the findings from fieldwork and their analysis.

Observing provision of educational support

The study could have been limited to observing sequences or activities with an easily accepted definition of special educational practice, such as being assessed or taught by a special educator. However, that would have excluded important observations central to the main interest of the research: the processes involved in the provision of educational support.

One recurring sequence that has been straightforwardly understood as special educational support is the assessment of a pupil by a SENCO. Individual teaching by a special education teacher would also clearly qualify. But what

about mainstream teachers who enact didactic strategies typical of special education in every class they teach? Are they providing special educational support to pupils, or simply better teaching? Is a widely used practice such as briefly introducing what pupils will work on during a lesson a form of special educational support? If not in itself, does it become more appropriately understood as special education if it is the result of a process led by the school's special educators, aimed at improving the situation of pupils who are not learning in the mainstream classroom? What about the recurring practice of relieving pupils with an NDD from certain classes in order to make their school days shorter and less intense—is that a special educational practice? And if so, is it special educational only if decided by school personnel, and not if decided by the pupil without prior consultation?

These questions are posed in this way to complete the reflection on the definition of the object of study and to confirm how difficult it is to define special educational support precisely. The examples, drawn from the empirical findings of this thesis, illustrate some of the complexity involved in defining special education and in deciding when the provision of educational support could be understood as special educational support, including in practices such as those above, which are frequently highlighted in the literature on special educational teaching strategies (cf. Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020). To add further complexity, fieldwork identified cases in which the same educational support was provided in both schools but through different processes. In the first school in the study, alias Oak Lower Secondary, extra classes with the English teacher resulted from the teacher's own policy and initiative to provide support. In the second, alias Elm Central, the extra classes resulted from a joint decision by a larger group of colleagues, including special educators. Had the study limited its object to special educational support, it would probably have been correct in this case to include data on this sequence only from Elm Central. Still, insight into processes influencing the provision of educational support is also drawn from the case of Oak Lower Secondary, and even more so from the co-observation of the two cases. Taking all these theoretical, practical, and methodological considerations into account, the balance fell on the provision of educational support as the object of study. Educational support can thus be of a special educational character, but need not be.

In conclusion, the reflection on the provision of educational support as the object of study, and on how it relates to special education, should not be confused with a definition of either. Adopting a critical reflexive stance invites us to refrain from simplified or essentialist definitions, and from creating simplified models of a complex reality, while at the same time collecting verifiable and reliable data (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010: ch. 2; Foucault, 2000: 456f; Savage, 2021).

Educational support as mandated by the law

The Education Act (2010:800/2025:730) defines who is to be provided with educational support, how, and when. This is detailed in chapter 3, after chapter 1 has established that the striving for equity includes “an ambition to outweigh differences in children’s and pupils’ circumstances” (ch. 1, §4). It begins with a mandate specifying that teaching, in general, should “guide and stimulate” every pupil to develop as fully as possible in accordance with their capacity (ch. 3, §2). It then specifies that, if mainstream teaching is insufficient for pupils experiencing challenges in their learning, ‘extra adaptations’ (extra anpassningar) should be introduced. This refers to inclusive measures provided within mainstream classroom teaching by mainstream teachers, which should be adopted “hastily” as soon as a pupil is identified as being at risk of failing to achieve the curriculum goals. If extra adaptations prove insufficient, the principal must be notified and an assessment (utredning) must be carried out to evaluate the pupil’s need for ‘specific support’ (särskilt stöd). This is defined as more far-reaching interventions that require the principal’s approval. Such support then forms part of an individual ‘action plan’ (åtgärdsprogram), including several comprehensive and long-term measures, which the principal must approve (ch. 3, §5–9). Assessment and the drafting of the action plan often include meetings and deliberations involving teachers, special educators, other PSS professions, as well as the pupil and their guardians.

There are also mandates specifically addressing pupils needing support due to disability or recent migration to Sweden. Support required because of disability is mandated specifically to counter the consequences of the disability (ch. 3, §2), while support required because of migration concerns the provision of multilingual classroom assistance (MCA), unless this is “evidently unnecessary” (ch. 3, §12).

As described in more detail in the upcoming chapters on theory and methodology, educational support is defined here as an object of study with a relational and discursive ontology. Legal mandates and their formulations are inevitably part of the coming into being of educational support, but they do not dictate the definition or set the boundaries of the object of study itself (Foucault, 1982: 792).

Currents in research on provision of educational support

There is a vast body of research in the field of special education. A selection of prominent theoretical contributions has been covered in previous sections. As the provision of educational support is central to special education, most research on special education and inclusive education can also be said to address the provision of educational support. Still, if one focuses specifically on the provision of educational support, one strand of research is concerned with specific interventions, strategies, and practices of support (e.g., Bejnö, 2021;

Gladh, 2025; Mustafa et al., 2024; Redman-Maclaren et al., 2021; Riad, 2024), as well as organisational and school development issues related to their effective implementation (Fohlin, 2025; Moliner & Sanahuja, 2025). Another common type of study focuses on practices of educational support in order to gain knowledge of teachers' thinking about special education and inclusion (e.g., Cavendish et al., 2020; Makhalemele & Nel, 2021; Ström et al., 2024). During the 2020s, this research has increasingly addressed teachers' and special educators' views on the role and use of technology and AI in providing educational support (Hopcan et al., 2023; Ramberg & Hemmingsson, 2026; Yao & Wang, 2024).

When practices of educational support are studied quantitatively, this is often done to examine their overall effect (e.g., Aturupane et al., 2022; Mustafa et al., 2024; Redman-Maclaren et al., 2021), whereas qualitative approaches often focus on the subjective experiences of teachers or special educators (e.g., Cavendish et al., 2020; Makhalemele & Nel, 2021; Dichaba et al., 2024; Ström et al., 2024). Extracting, examining, and probing ideas through interviews is, of course, generally valuable (e.g., Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019: 102ff; Pring, 2015: 53, 126). At the same time, much research on educational support reports findings that are rudimentary in the sense that they are limited to surveys or accounts collected from, for example, teachers or special educators when drawing conclusions about the impact of educational support practices. If, for instance, a support service for pupils at boarding schools makes a difference for those who use it, while non-users fare worse, no deeper analysis may be made of the reasons for non-use (Redman-Maclaren et al., 2021). A common conclusion is that diverse services are available and useful, that satisfaction with them is moderate, and that more research is needed to obtain a deeper understanding (e.g., Alqahtani & Luckner, 2021). In line with other scholars addressing methodological issues in educational research, Pring argues that such conclusions may veil reality if they fail to consider perceptions or interests held by actors other than the informants (2015: 45, 71, 161). This applies to both qualitative and quantitative studies, the latter often also making causal claims that can be contested on the grounds that results may be influenced by factors other than those accounted for, making it dubious to present them as 'law-like statements', to continue with Pring (2015: 81ff). This is especially so because practice is embedded in a reality subject to constant change and to tensions that would be new each time the research was replicated (Pring, 2015: 84, 93, 128). Not looking beyond the immediate object of study always risks missing processes or social variables that could be of significant interest.

There are, of course, studies that go further. These often involve more extensive fieldwork, such as Hoang's (2024) examination of the structural and historical implications shaping the provision of educational support, and of how the different positions of pupils, teachers, and support personnel interact through power dynamics in three Hong Kong schools. Another example is the

analysis by Tegtmejer, Hjärne, and Säljö (2021; 2023), based on interviews, observations, and policy, of organisational dynamics influencing the provision of educational support in relation to institutional practices of resource allocation and accountability. Voulgarides and Barrio (2021), as well as Flores, Phuong and Venegas (2020), also offer greater depth in analysing how following systematic protocols for the provision of educational support does not guarantee equality. Through layered qualitative methods, they find that systematic procedures still leave room for subtle or unconscious discriminatory practices based on racial and linguistic discourses, among other factors. In the Swedish context, Paulsrud (2023; 2024) has examined the enactment of national policies of inclusion in everyday life in school through extensive fieldwork involving special educators and teachers, extending the analysis to the intersections of, for example, neoliberal and standards-based policy, thereby making a rich analytical contribution. Studies such as those by Paulsrud, Hoang, Tegtmejer, and Flores clearly strive for a more profound understanding of how the complex realities of school and society influence the provision of educational support, in line with what Pring (2015: 40) argues should always be the case in research on educational practice.

The present study is situated close to the studies mentioned above in both aim and approach, seeking a deeper understanding of how complex processes in school and society operate and influence the provision of educational support. In this case, it also examines the implications for educational achievement and school failure, in line with what has been called for by Hoang (2024) and Tegtmejer et al. (2021) in their discussions, as well as by previous international research (Blase, 2005; Huilla et al., 2022; Pring, 2015; Skidmore, 2004) and, in the Swedish context, by, for example, Jarl, Blossing, and Andersson (2017: 28ff).

Summary of background, context and concepts

This section has presented a selection of historical junctures relevant to the concepts central to this study: equity, special education, and educational support. Assuming a relational and discursive ontology, all three are understood as constructed through discourse and social practices, and as subject to both historical and present contingencies.

Special education and educational support in a ‘school for all’ have been central to the striving for equity inherent in the Swedish welfare state. While instrumental to this striving, special education has also been contested, particularly with regard to whether the preservation of ‘special’ education has hindered the development of an ‘ordinary’ or mainstream education capable of including all pupils, regardless of neurological ability, social background, or other factors influencing academic achievement. A shift in thinking about responsibility for school failure took place during the final decades of the 20th

century. In Sweden, as in several other countries, inclusion became an ideal, and schools came to be seen as responsible when pupils did not acquire the knowledge aimed for in the curriculum, contrary to earlier beliefs that pupils and their families were responsible or simply ‘impossible’ to teach. Far from amounting to a complete shift, this remained the political norm until the 2020s. During this decade, the position has been challenged, not least at the political level, where the Swedish government installed in 2022 initiated 21 governmental inquiries concerning education during its first three years in office (Swedish Government, 2026), several of which proposed reforms increasing the exclusion from mainstream teaching of pupils understood as disruptive or academically weak.

The Swedish welfare state, which also shapes understandings of equity in the wider society, is founded on the ambition of taking responsibility for citizens’ needs and increasing equity by minimising individuals’ dependence on the family: the parents one happens to be born to, and the resources they hold, should not determine life opportunities. The EA mandates that neither social background, place of residence, nor disability should restrict academic achievement and specifies different types of educational support that ought to be provided when needed.

This study adopts a broad concept of educational support, in which anything that complements or supports mainstream teaching counts as such when mainstream teaching is insufficient for a pupil to acquire the knowledge stipulated by the curriculum. Still, as some forms of support are mandated by the EA, it has been of particular interest to observe the provision of educational support in the studied schools’ everyday life in light of the legal mandates governing through legislation.

Building on a long tradition of research examining the policy, practice, and thinking of special education and educational support, this study seeks to deepen understanding of how the present situation is historically contingent and how this influences the provision of educational support and, ultimately, equity.

Theoretical framework

The overarching theoretical framework of this study draws on Foucault's body of thought. In addition, domain-specific theoretical lenses inspired by Foucault are employed to analyse and interpret different parts of the study. The framework has been assembled to support inquiry into the conception and practice of educational support, and especially into the *processes* involved beyond pedagogical and didactical considerations. Among the many processes that could have been subjected to critical examination, this study focuses particularly on historical processes and on processes that can be interpreted theoretically as *problematizations* and *power dynamics* constituted through *discourse*, *knowledge*, and *truths*. This section outlines these theoretical concepts and describes how the study engages with critical research in the Foucauldian tradition. It then introduces the domain-specific theoretical lenses drawn upon in the articles that comprise the thesis, presented in the order in which they appear: curriculum studies, organisational and professional logics, empowerment, and critical policy sociology.

Critical research in the tradition of Foucault

Adopting Foucault's theoretical realm for critical inquiry into the education system has been valuable to many preceding researchers (e.g., Ahlgren, 2025; Allan, 1995; Bacon, 2015; Ball, 2012; Savage, 2021; Skrtic, 1991). In introducing how this study engages with Foucault's work, it is relevant to note that he can be understood less as a creator of theory than as a scholar setting standards for critical inquiry, "part philosophical and part social-scientific, into dynamic forms of power constitutive of who we are today" (Koopman, 2013: 9f). While power is pivotal in his body of thought, Foucault makes clear that the point is to inquire empirically into the actual functionings of power in specific contexts, not to develop a theory of power (Foucault, 1978/1990: 16f; 1980: 199; 1982: 778; 785ff). Inevitably, however, this venture led to conclusions about the nature of power that have guided scholars inspired by his work. The links between *power*, *knowledge*, and *discourse* are central (Foucault, 1972/2002). As these are also central to the present study, they are described later in this section. First, however, *problematizations* are outlined, being fundamental to this study both as an object of inquiry and as an act of inquiry.

Problematizations as act of inquiry

Foucault describes problematizations as “the totality of discursive or non-discursive practices that introduces something into the play of true and false and constitutes it as an object for thought”, and as the essential common notion across his work (Foucault, 1988: 257). A problematization can be both an object of inquiry and an act of inquiry, which is sometimes referred to as the nominal and verbal sense of problematization. These two senses coexist rather than exclude one another (cf. Koopman 2013: 98ff). Inspired by Koopman (2013) and Stengers (2021), two contemporary scholars invested in making sense of Foucault’s concepts, the study adopts problematization in its active sense as inquiry through *genealogy*. This implies critical inquiry into the contingencies and complexities influencing the present situation (cf. Koopman 2013: 21, 93ff), in order for us to be *touched* by what is made visible (Stengers 2021). Rather than providing a normative assessment of the present situation and offering solutions, the intention is therefore to provide information and materials for us to transform, after letting us be touched. In the case of this thesis, this means inquiring into the provision of educational support and making visible policies, practices, and thinking that ultimately alter equity in education. Although Foucault was far from alone in the practice of genealogy, his genealogies can be understood as seeking to examine and reveal, rather than, as in other uses, draw normative conclusions and judge the historical contingencies under study (cf. Koopman, 2013: 18, 61f, 88).

Problematizations as object of inquiry

Foucault summarises his work as an engagement with problematizations in the introduction to the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*. These are problematizations “through which *being* is necessarily *thought*, and formed on the basis of practices” (1985: 11f [emphasis added]). He expands on this by giving examples from his work up to that point: “the problematization of madness and illness arising out of social and medical practices, and defining a pattern of ‘normalization’ ... a problematization of life, language, and labor in discursive practices, that conformed to certain ‘epistemic’ rules; and a problematization of crime and criminal behavior emerging from certain punitive practices conforming to a ‘disciplinary’ model.” Regarding sexuality, he points to how it was problematized “through practices of the self, bringing into play the criteria of an ‘aesthetics of existence’” (Foucault, 1985: 12). In Foucault’s own research, then, problematizations took place *in* practices and also *emerged* from them. Common to these examples is the dependence of problematizations on *practices*, as Foucault himself notes, and the fact that these problematizations in turn define, conform, or bring *something* into play—something *new*. Something has happened through the problematizations.

Building on these and other descriptions from Foucault, Koopman (2013) helps to understand problematisations in terms of three core ideas: *contingency*, *complexity*, and *critique*. For Foucault, problematising meant making visible that which contingently conditions the present. The interest lies in *how* the present is contingently constituted, rather than merely in asserting *that it is*. An example of Foucault expressing this is the quotation introducing this thesis: “The problem is: how do things happen?” (1980: 50). The question is twofold, as it defines the problem in terms of how things happen while also indicating what the main problem is. Contingencies are always understood to be complex, comprising, for example, practices, behaviour, phenomena, thought, ethics, processes, knowledges, and power dynamics (cf. Foucault, 1983: 171ff; 1984: 114; 1985: 12; Koopman, 2013: 101). Foucault did not intend for the contingencies identified in his inquiries to be understood as causal claims about the present problem; rather, he disentangled them because he saw them as *linking* and *processing* the present (cf. Foucault 1983: 171ff). This thesis seeks to make visible how things happen with educational support, beyond what might be assumed when glimpsing school reality through research, work, children, news, or public debate. The main aim is not to reveal utterly unknown processes, but to show how familiar issues continue to operate, despite having been recognised for so long. While problematisation as genealogy inspires the act of inquiry undertaken in this study, problematisation as an object of empirical inquiry is particularly foregrounded in one of the analyses, presented in the third article of this thesis: *How problematisations of school failure condition provision of educational support and make schools default on the Education Act*.

Critical inquiry through problematisations

Koopman argues that the purpose of Foucault’s conception of genealogy as problematisation “is to make manifest the constitutive and regulative conditions of the present as a material for thought and action that we would need to work on if we are to transform that present” (Koopman, 2013: 18). This thesis aligns with that understanding, including in relation to the purpose of enabling transformations of the present. The interest lies in making visible the practices through which educational support and equity are instantiated, and in critically investigating the conditions under which these are exercised and made possible. For Foucault, “consists in seeing on what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based”, rather than “in saying that things aren’t good the way they are” or adopting the “role of referee, judge and universal witness” (Foucault, 2000: 456). Koopman suggests that Foucault’s critical stance is inspired by Kant, as Foucault himself stated (Foucault, 1984), and also by pragmatism (Koopman, 2013: 11f). In an Essay on Kantian critique, Foucault states that “the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits

imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” (1984: 50).

The present study adopts such a pragmatic and critical Foucauldian approach to the inquiry into provision of educational support. While the historical analysis of the past two centuries forms part of the material, it serves to illuminate contingencies in what was found to be happening in the studied schools during the three years of the study, 2022–2024, as well as within the Swedish education system more broadly. The study is critical not in the sense of denouncing what is wrong, but in the sense of making visible the contingencies shaping the present provision of educational support. Although some suggestions for policy and practice are offered in the concluding discussions of the articles, the most important contribution lies in “making visible the unseen” (Foucault, 1980: 50). The study acknowledges the competence, autonomy, and goodwill of those involved in and responsible for improving schools and the education system, and aims to increase visibility of limits imposed on such improvement that are contingent rather than inevitable, in order to test the possibility of going beyond them.

In a late interview, Foucault stated: “My attitude isn’t a result of the form of critique that claims to be a methodical examination in order to reject all possible solutions except for the one valid one. It is more in the order of ‘problematization’ – which is to say, the development of a domain of acts, practices, and thoughts that seem to me to pose problems for politics” (Foucault, 1984: 114). In this spirit, the present study does not engage in normative critique, although its findings may be used to enable it. The empirical inquiry renders the present situation visible as *contingent* rather than *inevitable* (cf. Koopman, 2013: 140), thereby urging thought to expand. As this expanded visibility of the present and its contingencies *touches* us, we are invited to let ourselves be touched by it and allow it to *test our thinking*, as Stengers proposes (2021). She elaborates that problematisations entail “a form of experimentation which implicates ourselves in our present, requiring that one allows oneself to be touched by what the present presents in the form of a test, and allowing what touches us the power to modify the relation we entertain to our own reasons ... as a transformative engagement, an engagement which forces the thinker to test the limits of thinking” (Stengers 2021: 73, 76).

Far from being abstract, this lies at the core of the critical tradition, in which we, as co-constitutive agents of knowledge—whether as researchers, readers, leaders, or practitioners—engage in continual questioning of truth. Orthodoxy in this position could extend to questioning even the relevance of perceived core values or aims, such as equity. In this study, however, some restraint has been exercised in this respect, based on the conviction that the threats to equity embedded in the studied contexts of distorted educational support are undesirable. Even so, the inquiry and what it makes visible are approached and described as free from judgement as possible, on the under-

standing that many may wish to contest current thinking and engage in expanding thought when the limits imposed on it become evident (cf. Rose, 1999: 58f).

Power dynamics

Foucault recommended the study of institutions, such as the education system, as a way of developing analyses of power. He remarks that “one must analyse institutions from the standpoint of power relations, rather than vice versa, and that the fundamental point of anchorage of the relationships, even if they are embodied and crystallized in an institution, is to be found outside the institution” (Foucault 1982: 791). In this study, this is understood to apply to every relation across every realm of the education system, with educational support itself also understood as an institution in this sense. Central to the analysis is Foucault’s notion that power is everywhere rather than hierarchical, and that it can operate for good as well as ill. Rather than something one may acquire, possess, and lose, power is inherent in all relations and is “exercised from innumerable points” (Foucault, 1978/1990: 93), circulating in ‘net-like organisations’ (Foucault 1980: 98). “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 1978/1990: 93). For Foucault, power is constantly active and mobile, and “is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities” (1978/1990: 93). Foucault emphasises that power is not constituted by a binary between rulers and ruled. Nor are there roots of power or ‘headquarters’ pulling the strings. This has at times been criticised as overly simplistic and as neglecting the fact that some actors in society undoubtedly wield extraordinary power (e.g., Fricker, 2007). Foucault does not deny this. He recognises that dominant actors may adopt explicit tactics to achieve specific ends, but only at a restricted level (Foucault, 1978/1990: 94f). He also makes clear that “it would be wrong to imagine that politics has nothing to do’ with it, while still believing that there is no ‘politics’ [Foucault’s quotation marks] that can provide solutions” (1984: 114). Regardless of the actor involved, Foucault suggests that all power is exercised with aims and objectives, even though it is seldom the result of an individual subject’s or group’s conscious choice or decision. He thus formulates a view of power as something traversing the whole of society, subject to continual change and production, in which every shift depends on every other and major transformations may occur inadvertently through a series of minor shifts at a specific moment, supported by the right positionings, discourses, and knowledge regimes. As for the moral nature of power, to Foucault “power is not an evil” and “relations of power are not something bad in themselves, from which one must free one’s self” (Foucault 1987: 129). He identifies different kinds of power relations. At one end of a simplified spectrum are shifting power relations, such as those involved when a teacher uses power and truth to transmit knowledge to a pupil. At the other are situations in which

power relations strip one group of agency and the possibility of resistance, and may ‘congeal’ in ‘states of domination’ (Foucault 1987: 114). For the most part, resistance, as power aimed at disrupting such states of domination, is, like other forms of power, everywhere and always present as ‘points of resistance’ within power relations (Foucault, 1978/1990: 95f).

This understanding of power as operating from a multiplicity of points and relations underpins the use in this thesis of the broader concept of *power dynamics*. Although the concept of dynamics appears less frequently in Foucault than that of relations, it has been chosen here as a way of embracing a wider scope within the study of power, allowing room for more of what Foucault himself identifies as central to the analysis of power, as when he dissects the role of discourses as having “its own forms of sequence and succession” and recommends inquiry into the *mechanisms, procedures, and processes* that produce these (Foucault 1972/2002: 169f). The analysis of ways of thinking about educational support in Article 3 mainly centres on relations between school personnel and pupils, and on how knowledge and discourse are formed within these through iterated problematisations, themselves formed by processes and tensions extending beyond in-school relations. The analysis of practice of educational support (Article 2) focuses on tensions generated by organisational and professional logics as the main dynamic. In that case, tensions in thought are more coherently described as a dynamic than as a relation. Article 1, in turn, combines elements of the other two, analysing policy and funding of educational support through observations of governance dynamics. Understanding these as different dynamics interacting and intersecting across multiple levels, the concept of *power dynamics* is both coherent and suitable for framing the empirical findings and corresponding analyses.

Discourse, knowledge and truths

Discourse and knowledge were among the first concepts introduced by Foucault as constitutive of power dynamics (Foucault, 1972/2002). He understood *knowledge* as shaped through both conscious and unconscious positionings, interests, and identities within ongoing power relations, rather than as something over which we simply exercise control and create through interest and intention alone (1978/1990: 94f). Moreover, for Foucault, knowledge is not necessarily true, but rather what is accepted as true, or ‘in the true’ (1978/1990: 98). In this study, the concept of *truths*, used in the analysis in article 3, likewise refers to what is established as truth, or as a *knowledge regime* to which one adheres, not to truths verified in any objective or scientific sense, even though Foucault himself warns against a “dogmatic belief in the value of scientific knowledge” (Foucault, 1982: 781). Truths and knowledge regimes are part of problematisations, for example in defining the field of possibilities, rules, or status of different subjects in ways that seek to maintain

privilege, status, or authority (Foucault, 1982: 792). “Each society has its régime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (Foucault 1980:131).

Discourses and *discursive practices* are, in turn, central to the establishment of knowledge regimes and, regardless of outcome, are embedded in and formative of problematisations (cf. Foucault 1985: 11f). It is important to note that Foucault did not understand discourse in a narrowly linguistic sense, but rather as a practice through which power and knowledge are distributed (Foucault 1972/2002: 169f). Statements forming discourse can be verbal or non-verbal. Permitting boys to engage in rough-and-tumble play but intervening if a girl does the same constitutes a statement forming discourse on gender. So too do lunch-break declarations that men are from Mars and women from Venus. Discourses can shape the positioning of specific groups or persons within a power dynamic, sometimes addressed by Foucault in terms of *subjective positioning*. In the education system examined in this thesis, there is the classical power dynamic of teacher and pupil, which Foucault uses as an example of subjective positionings and of power not necessarily being evil: “I don’t see where evil is in the practice of someone who, in a given game of truth, knowing more than another, tells him what he must do, teaches him, transmits knowledge to him, communicates skills to him.” Regarding nuancing, Foucault continues: “The problem is rather to know how you are to avoid in these practices – where power cannot not play and where it is not evil in itself – the effects of domination which will make a child subject to the arbitrary and useless authority of a teacher” (Foucault, 1987: 129).

Here too, as with power dynamics, discourse is not necessarily formed through conscious processes: “Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention” (1972/2002: 49). And, as in his understanding of problematisations, Foucault suggests that historical contingency is fundamental to understanding how discourse and discursive practices work, as “no statement can be regarded as inactive, and be valid as the scarcely real shadow or transfer of the initial statement. The whole enunciative field is both regular and alerted: it never sleeps; the least statement – the most discreet or the most banal – puts into operation a whole set of rules in accordance with which its object, its modality, the concepts that it employs, and the strategy of which it is a part, are formed” (1972/2002: 163f).

Domain-specific theoretical lenses adopted by the study

A vast number of theoretical tools, analytical frameworks, and methodological approaches have emerged from Foucault’s theoretical realm. As this study examines power dynamics influencing the provision of educational support over a two-year period spanning different actors and contexts within the education

system, different methodological approaches and analytical tools were adopted where appropriate during the course of the research. With the exception of Bornemark, detailed below, all are inspired by Foucauldian thought. Following Foucault’s openness to transforming and adding tools in the service of new research (1980: 65), a guiding principle in selecting them has been the imaginary of asking him: What do you think, is this useful?

For the analysis of policy and funding in educational support (Article 1), curriculum theory (Jarl & Rönnerberg, 2019; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000) is used. Article 2, which addresses practices of educational support, draws on theory concerning organisational and professional logics (Freidson, 2001; Evetts, 2006), complemented by Bornemark’s analytical concepts of empowerment and ethical stress (Bornemark, 2018a). Article 3 remains closest to Foucault, operationalising the analysis through problematisations while also treating problematisations as the object of inquiry in order to make visible ways of thinking about educational support. Here, critical policy sociology (Ozga, 2021) complements the analysis by making it possible to identify the implications of problematisations for the micro policies of educational support formed in schools. As Each of the three articles contains descriptions of its specific theoretical and analytical approach, this section does not repeat those accounts but instead provides an overview intended to show how the different elements combine to form the study’s theoretical framework as a whole.

Table 1. Complementing domain-specific theoretical lenses, empirical data and analysis in the three articles.

	Article 1	Article 2	Article 3
Domain-specific theoretical lens:	Curriculum theory	Organisational and professional logics Empowerment and ethical stress	Critical policy sociology Problematisations
Empirical data:	Content analysis, interviews LEA and principals (Data collection 1&2)	Ethnographic field-work, two schools (Data collection 3)	Ethnographic field-work, two schools (Data collection 3)
Analysed dynamics:	Governance	Organisational	Problematisations

Curriculum theory

In analysing the power dynamics generated by the governmental equity funding programme, article 1 is informed by curriculum theory. What may be seen as a Scandinavian version of this approach, albeit one closely aligned with the original, can be said to comprise four dimensions useful when analysing power dynamics involved in governance through funding: ideology, jurisdiction, economy, and accountability or control (Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000; Jarl & Rönnberg, 2019). These interact and intersect through multiple tensions. In a de- and re-centralising education system, LEAs, schools, and teachers, for instance, operate under different laws, budgets, and accountability structures within their own domains and in relation to one another, and inevitably also in relation to central government, regardless of formal levels of autonomy.

Curriculum theory has been described by, among others, Lindensjö and Lundgren (2000: 15) as developing in the historical context in which pedagogy and upbringing became necessary for social reproduction once learning was no longer automatised through production—that is, when children could no longer simply learn by imitation. Understood through Foucault's notions of power and discursive practice, curriculum came into play as a result of the need for a distinct practice of pedagogy and socialisation, separated from other practices that, following industrialisation, no longer provided deeper learning and development. After its introduction in the early 20th century, curriculum theory and curriculum studies expanded their scope from the written curriculum to a wider interest in the principles and practices governing education more broadly, and not only its transmission of knowledge (Kridel, 2010).

Organisational and professional logics

The theoretical lens of organisational and professional logics draws on a Foucauldian understanding of power and is crucial to the analysis of tensions between the two (Evetts, 2006). Organisational logic, rooted in Weber's analysis of bureaucracy (1978) and later contrasted with market logic, emphasises measurability and 'calculating rationality'. The concept of professional logic was introduced by Freidson (2001) and is defined by trust in specialised training, ethics, responsibility, and resistance to rationalisation. Evetts (2010) emphasises that professionalism itself can be appropriated for managerial control, which makes any simple call for 're-professionalisation' problematic.

Organisational logics rely on measuring, assessment, evaluation, and control mechanisms, as well as on discourses and the formation of knowledge regimes in which all this appears necessary, and therefore necessary for everyone to adhere to (Foucault 1980: 131f). Drawing on Foucault's theory, Evetts (2006; 2010) argues that managers and employers contribute to constructing the discourse of professionalism in ways that fit organisational logic

and serve to control practitioners' work. Here it is worth recalling Foucault's view that power relations are not necessarily 'evil', as long as nobody is involuntarily dominated, as well as his understanding that positions of domination need not be deliberately adopted (Foucault 1987: 114, 129). In Swedish educational research, Lundström and Parding (2011) use this theoretical lens to show how teachers negotiate pupil needs while constrained by bureaucracy, resources, and pressure for results. They illustrate how a teacher that "may identify a need for a pupil at the same time as the teacher needs to take the organizational constraints into account, such as the bureaucratic structures and resource limitations, as well as she may feel obliged to make the pupil pass the subject as the school is pressured to display good results" (Lundström & Parding, 2011: 4). The need for measurement, organisation, and scrutiny in the education system, as in other publicly funded organisations, is not in dispute; what is disputed is the point at which these become the driving force, overshadow the actual purpose, and disrupt the quality of the service. Ball (2003) calls this pressure the 'terror of performativity', through which accountability corrodes professional commitment. Following neoliberal reforms, market logics have increasingly influenced the balance between organisational and professional logics. The present study takes market logics into account as permeating both, while limiting the analysis in the comprehensive summary and in article 2 to organisational and professional logics.

Empowerment and ethical stress

In studies of the Swedish public sector, Bornemark (2018a; 2018b) has introduced theoretical concepts useful for exploring power dynamics influencing systems and organisations such as schools. Bornemark examines tensions similar to those between organisational and professional logics with the help of Cusa's concepts of *ratio* and *intellectus*. Ratio refers to the logic of calculation and the definition of fixed categories and values, while intellectus refers to the capacity to reflect and act in relation to reality (Bornemark, 2018a: 34ff). Drawing not only on philosophy but also on research in organisational theory, sociology, and psychology, Bornemark argues that these tensions produce *ethical stress* when professionals in the public sector know what should be done in a given situation, but feel unable to do it because of a lack of resources, lack of time, and the accumulation of tasks that do not belong to the profession (Bornemark 2018a: 94ff). While her research mostly addresses other professions in the public sector, research on teachers experiencing similar tensions has developed the concept of *time poverty* (Creagh et al., 2023). This is described as more than time scarcity, instead involving "a dissonance between a teacher being the kind of teacher they want to be, and the type of teacher they have time to be" (Creagh et al., 2023: 17). For Bornemark, this is to a large degree due to *empowerment* in the public sector, "when every act has to be documented in order to be counted as complete" (Bornemark, 2018b: 235).

Empowerment produces a *double reality*: one consisting of what actually happens in everyday settings such as schools, and another existing in documentation (2018a: 52ff). There is a hierarchy between these realities, as what actually happens will, in effect, not have happened if it is not documented. This does not work in reverse, as what is documented counts as having happened, even if it did not. While these concepts do not form the primary theoretical framework of the study, similar challenges are also addressed in organisational theory, for example through the concept of *organisational hypocrisy* arising from dissonance between what is decided, what is said, and what is actually done (Brunsson, 2019).

Critical policy sociology

Critical policy sociology (CPS) emerges from critical policy analysis (CPA), which in turn developed from Foucault's theoretical realm as a methodological and theoretical approach to critical inquiry into policy dynamics. Core concepts from this tradition have been useful in the present study, such as understanding policy both as text and as discourse (Ball, 1993), and as active within a multiplicity of power dynamics across multiple levels: from juridically binding national law at the macro level to a teacher's specific policy at the micro level regarding grading, inclusion, tolerated attitudes, and so on. Across this macro–micro span, Foucauldian ideas about discourse and knowledge regimes are central to policy analysis, whether understood as policy in themselves or as inherent elements of policies. The essential purpose of CPA is to follow and understand the creation and development of policy across different levels. Analytical concepts such as interpretation, translation, and enactment are common within CPA and are useful for the present research (Ball et al., 2011). In this case, the Education Act and its mandates regulate educational support in Swedish schools. These mandates are translated by school organisers into local circumstances, and local policy is assembled out of their restrictions, possibilities, and interdependence with other policies. Principals and other school personnel are then required to enact these policies to the best of their judgement and ability. In article 3, CPS is particularly helpful in making tangible a very specific phenomenon: the creation by school personnel of micro policies for the provision of educational support that differ from the macro policy regulating the same practice, when processes of problematisation influence their positions.

Although CPS is applied more specifically in article 3, the study as a whole draws on concepts from CPS, not least because it encompasses different levels of the education system, including national law, local education agencies, schools, classrooms, and individuals. Having Foucault's theoretical realm as the broader backdrop allows the analytical process to take account of the com-

plexities of the power dynamics operating within and between actors and levels. This is also where a closer engagement with critical policy analysis through the approach of critical policy sociology becomes relevant.

Ball and colleagues (2011: 11) suggest that “it is only possible to begin to think sensibly about policy and its enactment if we work with an encompassing (extensive) and conceptually dense definition of policy and policy processes”. A multi-level focus on the interpretation, translation, and enactment of policy in specific local and national contexts is likewise central to this approach (Ball et al., 2011; Ball, 2021). Ozga emphasises the need for historical awareness in policy analysis and recommends the use of ‘qualitative and illuminative techniques’ for this purpose, two aspects that became defining features of CPS when she introduced the approach in 1987. In the decades that followed, Ozga and other policy researchers also emphasised the sociological dimension as concerned with the consequences of policy for society, and with its structural, social, and political dimensions (Ball, 2021: 9f; Ozga, 2021). Savage, one of today’s leading CPS scholars, describes the approach as “a sociological commitment to understanding the co-constitutive dynamics between our personal lives and the broader public forms and processes that mediate our lives, and vice versa” (2021: 283).

For the purposes of this thesis, adopting an approach of *critical* policy sociology is crucial. As Savage (2021), together with Sellar and Gorur (2014), argues, there are many ways of approaching criticality or ‘being critical’. Although critical approaches have traditionally been associated with emancipatory agendas or proposals for solving problems, Savage and colleagues take up Foucault’s position in calling for critical policy sociology to consider refraining from articulating solutions or preferred futures and instead to focus on mapping and unpacking power dynamics and policy processes. This may nonetheless have emancipatory effects (Savage et al., 2021).

Limitations and considerations regarding the theoretical framework

Having outlined the theoretical framework of this study, some concluding remarks follow regarding the choice of Foucault’s theoretical realm and its limitations.

An initial assumption of the study has been that the processes influencing the provision of educational support have been, and remain, difficult to grasp. Vast amounts of qualitative research have shown power dynamics at work in schools, and vast amounts of quantitative research have shown how improvements in school achievement never seem to accumulate into an equitable pattern when academic success across pupil groups is measured (Ball, 2021:

178ff; Yang Hansen et al., 2025). The study's adoption of Foucault crystallised after the initial interviews with heads of LEAs and principals, which made visible the centrality of power dynamics and power relations to the provision of educational support across national, municipal, and school levels. Moreover, the interviewees' accounts of school development, school failure, and educational support in relation to social circumstances suggested that similar dynamics might be operating in the everyday life in schools that had yet to be explored. The theoretical concepts of power, discourse, and knowledge soon proved valuable in understanding the processes at work, while the adoption of problematisation as useful both as an act of inquiry and as an object of study emerged in the final stages of fieldwork as a result of the continuous and iterative analysis of the growing empirical material.

Other theoretical frameworks could undoubtedly have been used instead of Foucault's. Several were considered during the planning of the study and before entry into the schools: Bourdieu (1984), critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008; Stutchbury, 2022), institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005), social justice (Fraser, 2005), Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach (1981), and more contemporary approaches such as (non-)performativity (Ahmed, 2006) or DisCrit (Ferri et al., 2024). The theoretical framework of curriculum studies, used to analyse the empirical data on governance dynamics in the equity funding programme, was also considered for the analysis of the data collected *in situ* in the two schools. This provides a good example: curriculum studies could have been used to disentangle the tensions made visible in the empirical findings. At the same time, the analysis would probably have gravitated more towards the organisation and the staff, whereas the findings made visible power dynamics in which pupil agency and relational processes were equally important.

There is, of course, valid criticism of Foucault and his theoretical work, as there is of any theoretical framework. Critical scholars have repeatedly argued that Foucault claims to be value-neutral while in reality being value-laden. Without dismissing the force of this critique, Koopman argues that positions in which both elements coexist—such as in this thesis—need be neither controversial nor incoherent (cf. Koopman, 2013: 88ff). Any research entering a specific field is implicitly value-laden in the choice of field itself, as well as in the choice of method, theory, and so on. These choices always involve some degree of arbitrariness and inevitably reflect, at least in part, the researcher's own values. A related criticism directed at Foucault, and relevant here too, concerns his focus on power as the primary object of inquiry in his studies of prisons, sexuality, and other domains. Habermas (1987: 266ff) and Fraser (1981) both criticised this as a normative position in itself, since it implies that power is the most important factor shaping present situations and problems. Yet Foucault never claimed that power acts independently in shaping the present; rather, he treated it as being of paramount interest because it is everywhere and comes from everywhere (Foucault, 1978/1990: 93).

Beyond scholarly disagreement, all theory has its limits. Foucault's work offers theories for understanding power dynamics and relations, but not necessarily for improving relations or increasing the power held by specific actors. For those purposes, a Bourdieusian approach might have been more useful. Had the purpose been to map more precisely the relational dependencies within power dynamics, institutional ethnography might have served better. Foucault has certainly not been useful for analysing or proposing pedagogical improvements. The value of Foucault for this study lies in his attempt to reveal and show what may be relevant to present situations and problems, without necessarily judging them or claiming that findings must be followed by a single answer (Foucault, 1980: 62). As already cited, Koopman, Stengers, Savage, and many other Foucauldians suggest that his theory and tools are best used for critical reflection aimed at a deeper and more sustainable search for solutions rather than linear problem solving (Koopman, 2013; Stengers, 2021; Savage, 2021).

Summary of theoretical framework

This section has outlined the rationale for basing the study's primary theoretical framework on Foucault, while complementing it with domain-specific theoretical lenses valuable for engaging analytically with the findings. These are curriculum theory, critical policy sociology, theories of organisational and professional logics, and the concepts of empowerment and ethical stress. From Foucault's theoretical realm, *problematization*—both as an *act* of inquiry and as an *object* of inquiry—is fundamental to the study. Problematization as an act of inquiry rests on a critical stance that understands what is observed in research as complex and contingent on both present and historical processes and practices. Practices, in turn, always arise from thought. In the present research, the practices of power made visible have been conceptualised as *power dynamics* and found to be key processes influencing educational support. *Discourse*, *knowledge*, and *truths*, as understood by Foucault, are fundamental to these power dynamics. Together, they form problematisations in the education system and the studied schools, which are observed as objects of inquiry, particularly where problematisations of school failure and educational support are concerned.

Foucault's critical approach is non-normative in the sense that it seeks to make the unseen visible and to examine critically where constraints on thought might be withdrawn so as to enable movement beyond established horizons of the possible. The critical inquiry undertaken in this study therefore seeks to make visible new layers and practices involved in the provision of educational support, in ways that may affect thought and allow what is taken for granted to be questioned.

Methodological framework

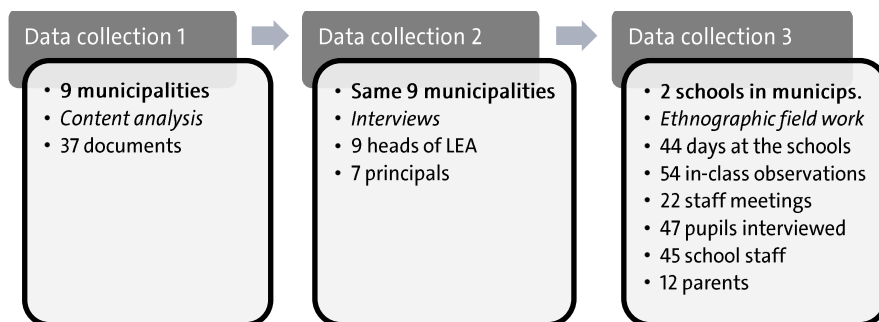
Inquiry into how the provision of educational support is conceived, understood, and practised at different levels of the education system—central government, LEAs, and schools—prompted the adoption of multiple methods across three distinct data collections. As described in Table 1, these data collections together constitute a single study and are not each tied to a specific article. The same applies to the three research questions, which frame the study as a whole and thus also underpin the three articles.

After clarifying the ontological and epistemological stance of the study, the three phases of data collection are described in relation to sampling, methods, analyses, and their interrelations within the study as a whole. Following this account of the planning and execution of the study, the ethical considerations taken into account are outlined.

Ontological and epistemological stance

The study assumes a relational and discursive ontology, in which reality is not taken as objectively given but as constructed through discourse and social practices. The concepts used in the study, as detailed in previous sections (see, for example, ‘Educational support - the object of study’), are understood as constituted through historically contingent practices of power and knowledge, and are therefore fluid rather than fixed (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016; Foucault, 1982; 785f; 1983: 171ff; Koopman 2013: 21, 93ff). Epistemologically, the study adopts a critical and genealogical stance, engaging in problematisation as an act of inquiry rather than seeking normative or causal explanations (cf. Koopman, 2013: 18, 61f, 88). The combination of content analysis of policy documents, interviews, and ethnographic fieldwork makes it possible to examine how the provision of educational support is constituted in policy, practice, and thought across different levels of the education system, consistent with a Foucauldian view of power as both productive and situated within historical context (Foucault, 1978/1990: 94f). Problematisation as a genealogical and critical act of inquiry helps render the empirical data gathered during the two years of fieldwork visible in its complexity and contingency in relation to historical discourses on special education, educational support, and equity.

Figure 1. Specifics of the three phases of data collection.



Adopting multiple methods in the same study

Although different methods and analytical approaches are used, the various data collections in the research (Figure 1) together form a single study aimed at providing insight into the wider picture of how educational support is influenced by power dynamics that operate everywhere, constantly, and across different levels (Foucault, 1978/1990: 93). The choice of methods follows Ozga's suggestion that it is important to "bring together structural, macro-level analysis of education systems and education policies and micro-level investigation, especially that which takes account of people's perception and experiences" (Ozga, 1990: 359).

The study entered the field at the macro level through analysis of national and municipal policy documents and plans concerning the provision of educational support, where a reflexive, problem-driven content analysis proved useful. In the subsequent phase of interviews with heads of LEAs and school principals, reflexive thematic analysis was used. Moving into schools and classrooms, and sharing spaces with pupils and school personnel, the study adopted an ethnographic approach. Spending time in the schools and blending into the everyday lives of pupils, teachers, and other staff enabled participant observation as well as more and deeper interviews during the three semesters of fieldwork. Linked to the onto-epistemological stance outlined above, the three data collections can be understood as different ways of addressing the research questions about how the provision of educational support is conceived and practised across different levels. The content analysis treats texts as discursive practices that produce and circulate truths, rather than merely describing educational realities. The interviews acknowledge the managers and principals interviewed as active in producing and constituting educational support, as well as in handling related issues or being subject to the power dynamics discussed. They are not treated merely as informants, nor were the

pupils, parents, or school personnel interviewed during the ethnographic fieldwork. Engaging in ethnographic fieldwork also recognises that power is embedded in practices and interactions in everyday life in school—the ‘capillaries’ of power, as Foucault called them (1978/1990: 94f). Being embedded in this everyday life in the two schools made it possible to observe, in situated form, the conception, practice, and thinking surrounding the provision of educational support in context, thereby deepening understanding of how the processes involved operate.

The sample

Three criteria guided the purposeful sampling of Local Education Agencies (LEAs) at municipal level, from which the sample of schools was then derived:

1. The municipality had a population ranging from 11,000 to 34,000.
2. The municipality’s LEA organised at least one lower secondary school with a Socioeconomic Index (SEI) score of 150 or higher.
3. The municipality was accessible within a maximum 90-minute commute from Stockholm Central by train or bus.

The first two were strict scientific criteria. The third was a practical criterion, since some of the schools organised by LEAs initially sampled for content analysis and online interviews would later be subject to field research and thus require frequent travel. Across the three phases of data collection, the sample was gradually narrowed to two schools in two of the original nine municipalities. Before detailing this process, a general description of the context and the variables considered in sampling is provided.

Municipalities, LEAs and the socioeconomic index

Sweden consists of 290 municipalities, and about half of these had populations between 11,000 and 34,000 at the beginning of 2022, when the sample was constructed. Most Swedish research on disadvantaged schools samples from larger municipalities, often the largest ones—Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö—or from neighbouring municipalities within their metropolitan areas. Given the broader interest in educational support, it better served the purposes of this study to sample what might be regarded as more common types of municipalities in Sweden. As already noted, the study does not seek generalisability, but aims to make visible processes involved in the provision of educational support. One underlying assumption was that examining such processes in more typical settings would make the findings more relatable to a

wider range of LEAs, schools, and school personnel. An alternative way of serving the same purpose would have been to draw a completely random sample from all 290 municipalities. However, given the design of the project as a whole, some degree of structural similarity between the sampled municipalities was useful. In this case, population size functioned as a proxy for at least broadly comparable financial and bureaucratic structures. Without holding comparative ambitions for the final stage of the study, fieldwork in two schools with some degree of structural similarity was preferable to the risk of ending up with very large differences, such as between a municipality of 6,000 inhabitants and the city of Gothenburg with around 600,000. Sampling within the stated population range reduced such potential structural gaps while still allowing for variation in historical, political, cultural, and social realities. During the project, this approach proved not only useful but also beneficial in unforeseen ways, which will be discussed later.

Every Swedish municipality has an LEA. Even the smallest municipalities, with populations of 2,000–3,000, have at least one official serving as head of the LEA, as this is mandated by the EA (Bergstrand, 2022; Swedish Government, 2017b). While this role may bear different titles and may encompass, for example, all schools or all compulsory schools, the LEA interviewees in this thesis are referred to as heads of LEA⁹. All held administrative and financial responsibility for municipally organised schools including lower secondary classes. Within the diverse landscape of school organisers, LEAs still organise most primary and lower secondary schools in Sweden—82%—while 18% are organised by independent for-profit and non-profit organisations (SNAE, 2023a).

The socioeconomic index (SEI) was introduced by the Swedish National Agency for Education in 2011, based on national census data. While preserving confidentiality, the model draws on information such as income, gender, place of residence, place of birth, year of migration, social benefits, years of higher education, and family composition. These variables have been correlated with school results in order to estimate, for example, the probability of achieving the grades required to progress from lower to upper secondary education. Data on both pupils at a given school and their guardians feed into the algorithm that generates an SEI score for each school unit. An SEI score of 150 indicates that roughly 50% more pupils have guardians with shorter educational backgrounds, receive social benefits, or have migrated to Sweden, compared with the national average. Of approximately 4,700 school units in Sweden, around 800 have scores of 150 or above on the SEI (SNAE, 2025c). Since the object of study was the provision of educational support, sampling schools with higher SEI scores increased the likelihood that such provision would be observable during the research, while still aligning with the aim of sampling schools with relatively common characteristics. Schools scoring 150

⁹ The most common Swedish title is ‘skolchef’ (head of school) or ‘utbildningschef’ (head of education).

and above therefore served as indicators of disadvantaged circumstances without being among the most extreme outliers more frequently studied.

Sampling sequence for data collection 1 and 2

As described above, municipalities were ultimately sampled if they had a population between 11,000 and 34,000 and at least one lower secondary school with an SEI score of 150 or above. This yielded a final sample of nine municipalities. At the outset of the study, policy documents concerning the provision of educational support were collected from these municipalities, and heads of LEAs were invited to participate in interviews. Where LEAs had several managers, interviewees were selected on the basis of administrative responsibility for schools, with preference given to those overseeing lower secondary education. Heads of LEA from all nine sampled municipalities accepted the invitation. Principals were then sampled from the high-SEI lower secondary schools. Here, seven accepted, one declined, and one school had a vacant position with a temporary principal who also declined.

Sampling sequence for data collection 3

Among the seven schools whose principals were interviewed, two schools were selected for ethnographic fieldwork. At this point, an informed and subjective qualitative selection was made. This was partly because it was difficult to devise a meaningful systematic sample based on existing quantitative variables alone, and partly because qualitative variables had emerged through the interviews with principals and heads of LEA. All interviewed principals responded positively when asked about the feasibility of conducting fieldwork in their schools, which improved the quality of the final sampling by reducing gatekeeper bias (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019: 51ff). The question then became where fieldwork would yield the richest encounters and information relevant to the research aims. Since one aim was to broaden understanding of the processes and power dynamics shaping the provision of educational support, this became a central sampling criterion. The two schools chosen were those in which principals and heads of LEA had offered differing accounts of what they saw as the causes of school failure in their local contexts. This was not for comparative purposes, but because it increased the possibility of observing a wider range of processes and practices influencing school failure and the provision of educational support. Preferring two schools in different contexts required subjective sampling and ruled out randomisation, which might have produced two schools in very similar contexts.

Apart from the qualitative variable of context, the sampled schools had similar SEI scores (around 165) and similar passing rates (around 75%). This was regarded as purposeful for inquiry into the provision of educational support and the school failures it might address, since outcomes could not readily

be explained by numerical differences. Organisational or financial explanations were also less likely given the relative homogeneity of the original municipal sample in these respects. One difference, however, was school size, as Elm Central was considered a ‘big-school’ (‘storskola’) and had around 30% more pupils than Oak Lower Secondary. In addition, the schools differed in the proportion of pupils with migrated parents. Oak Lower Secondary had around 25%, while Elm Central had around 40%. It later emerged that, in Oak, most of these pupils had themselves migrated, whereas in Elm the majority of pupils with migrated parents had been born in Sweden.

The schools were also similar in that they drew pupils from across the municipality and from a range of living conditions, thereby providing a fairly representative cross-section of children in their municipalities. Given that around 25% of pupils in both schools did not achieve the grades required to progress from lower to upper secondary education, and given the variation in problems and contexts taken into account, the sample made it likely that the fieldwork would encounter a range of power dynamics and processes to observe, not least in the provision of educational support.

Entering the schools, one class in each school was randomly sampled as the main focus of the research. The only requirement was that it be a Year 8 class, so that pupils could be followed until the end of Year 9, when lower secondary education is completed in Sweden. In both schools, this sampling was conducted during a meeting with the principal and a group of teachers. The name of each Year 8 class was written on a slip of paper, and one was randomly drawn. In both schools, the teachers responsible for the selected classes responded positively and later proved helpful with practical matters when needed. They consistently supported the research process and never obstructed it.

Following entry to the schools, all teachers and staff who in one way or another worked with pupils in the two classes were approached—Initially to be informed about classroom observations and later to request interview sessions. As with the pupils, none among staff actively refused participation, although there was variation in willingness to take part or make time available. While staff cannot be considered vulnerable in the same way as pupils, a gentle approach was adopted in requesting interviews. At the same time, because school staff were responsible for the provision of educational support, a somewhat more persistent approach was taken when requests for interviews were at times avoided or deferred. Care was always taken not to demand too much of their time, and 20–30 minutes was the usual request, although interviews often lasted longer when participants wished to continue. As they became more familiar with the ongoing research, staff members also opened up access to a range of meetings, eventually including most meetings that in one way or another addressed the academic progress of pupils in the studied classes. These meetings were not recorded, but notes were taken by hand on a personal

computer, while information concerning pupils from other classes was omitted where mentioned. In summary, sampling within the researched schools comprised all teachers and other staff directly involved with the pupils in the selected classes, as well as all pupils and their parents, and all meetings in which these pupils were discussed.

Concluding remarks on the sample

Systematic sampling, combined with a high degree of randomisation throughout the procedure, resulted in a sample of schools that had been subject to little or no previous research, as well as classes whose pupils and teachers had little or no prior experience of being researched. This proved useful for several reasons. The first was ethical. A convenience sample often leads either to schools where the researcher knows people or to schools already known for challenges or failures, often because of media attention. Such visibility inevitably comes with a label attached to pupils, and that label risks being reinforced when they become subjects of research because of failure (Buchanan, 2024). During fieldwork, pupils occasionally asked whether they or their class were being studied because they were bad at school. A truthful answer could then be given: this was not the case; they had been randomly drawn from a larger procedure aimed at finding schools and classes that were relatively common rather than outliers. The second reason was practical. There was no sign of research fatigue among participants, which likely reduced impediments and bias as far as could be judged from my perspective. The third was analytical. Studying these ‘fairly common’ schools was directly useful for the type of findings that emerged, enabling analysis of key aspects that might be harder to detect in outlier settings. One example is the finding that pupils from migrated families in both schools received less educational support when needed than peers from native families. In schools disproportionately represented in research and in which almost all pupils are from migrated families, such a finding would simply not have been observable. Given that schools with an SEI above 150 constitute around one sixth of all Swedish schools, and that the proportions of pupils from migrated families in the two schools studied here (around 25% and 40%) are much more common than in schools where this proportion exceeds 90%, the findings gain another dimension. Processes in policy, thinking, and practice may be operating here that have remained unseen because attention has so often focused on more spectacular, but less common, cases.

Methods of inquiry

Data collection 1: Content analysis of policy documents

The collection of documents from nine LEAs and their corresponding municipal administrations was carried out through a problem-driven content analysis (CA), asking what forms of provision of educational support were planned as well as implemented. Problem-driven CA contrasts with text-driven CA in that the latter approaches texts more openly, without, for example, a predefined question or chosen focus prior to reviewing the documents (Krippendorff 2013: 355ff). This data collection was anchored in the study's first research question: how is the provision of educational support conceived? Put simply, this was the question posed to the documents, of which there were 37 in total. These included documents specifying the use of governmental equity funding and general annual or long-term plans for the public schools organised by the LEAs. The exploratory character of the study allowed increasing attention to be directed towards documents concerning governmental funding. These had initially been sampled because they contained information about educational support as planned by LEAs, but they were found also to reveal highly varied understandings of what equity and educational support could mean. A deeper analysis of these materials, in combination with the empirical inquiry of the second data collection, led to the focus on the equity funding programme in the final analysis of these data sets.

Beyond the equity funding, other interesting findings were set aside for reasons of focus and coherence in article 1. One example was the dominance in planned educational support, of alternative special educational perspectives emphasising inclusion and organisational responsibility, which later contrasted with the traditional perspectives observed among much school personnel (cf. Nilholm, 2006). Although these and other findings are not reported in detail within the thesis, they contributed to a fuller understanding of the power dynamics operating across different levels of the education system and of their interrelation within the study as a whole.

Data collection 2: Interviews with heads of LEA and principals

Following the content analysis of policy documents and plans from the nine municipalities, heads of LEA and principals were interviewed. Interviews are generally valuable for eliciting, exploring, and probing ideas (Pring, 2015: 53, 126). The interviews were semi-structured, following a guide that left room for detours and new questions to emerge, allowing a more conversational form while also retaining fixed questions that enabled comparison across interviewees (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010: ch. 8). All interviews were conducted digitally via Zoom and recorded using the platform's built-in recording tool. In total,

16 interviews were conducted, lasting between 40 and 80 minutes each. Nine interviewees were heads of LEA and seven were principals at the time of interviewing (autumn 2022). Rather than eliciting straightforward answers, the interview guide was designed to prompt reflection and expand the space for thought beyond simplistic conclusions. As noted earlier, reliance on direct, surface-level responses can obscure underlying realities if inquiry does not probe further into the unarticulated perceptions or interests held by interviewees and the actors with whom they interact (Pring, 2015: 45, 71, 161).

A first transcription of the recordings was generated digitally using Microsoft Word's transcription tool, after which the transcripts were revised manually. The interview material was then analysed using thematic analysis (TA) in the tradition of Braun and Clarke (2022), not merely by following procedural steps but by adopting a reflexive critical stance and treating the material as more than topical. The analysis sought to identify meaning and central patterns rather than simply sort, code, and pursue reliability in a more positivist or neo-positivist sense. In this approach, a theme is not merely a topic, but what might be understood as a central organising concept: the core idea of a theme, which may have multiple facets while still remaining one organising idea or understanding. In revisiting their method for thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke explain this using the metaphor of the sun in a solar system: the surrounding planets may differ greatly, yet all remain oriented towards the same centre (Braun et al., 2022).

Applied and adapted to this study, Braun and Clarke's TA involved five phases (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2022: 35f). The first phase consisted of familiarisation with the material, mainly through re-listening to all 16 recordings and rereading the transcripts. In the second phase, using NVivo, transcripts were coded freely, leading into the third phase of identifying and constructing themes and thematising the material. The fourth phase involved reviewing and developing these themes, returning to the study's research questions and aims. The TA concluded with the fifth phase of writing up the findings, renaming and describing the themes in detail as part of the final analytical process.

The iterative nature of TA can be understood as a conceptual redescription or recontextualisation of empirical material in a way that enables conceptual framing (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021). Rather than adding breadth and generalisability, the analytical process adds depth and thick description, thereby making transferability possible (Geertz, 2008).

Because the interviewees were heads of LEA and principals employed within the same municipal systems, themes were constructed through interpretation of the relations and dynamics between principals' and heads of LEA's accounts. Although the study is not comparative, tensions and divergences between these positions were analytically productive in the construction of some themes, while other themes formed more through accumulation across independent accounts. As in the content analysis, some interesting themes were left aside in order to focus on the power dynamics involved in

the governance of the equity funding programme. While this focus captured issues of autonomy and control, as well as accountability and equity, additional themes concerning leadership, school development, and understandings of society and the causes of school failure received less attention. The analysis of the accounts provided by heads of LEA and principals, together with the power dynamics made visible between them, became central to the study's adoption of Foucault's theoretical framework and to the transition into the analytical phase of the study and its third and final data collection.

Data collection 3: An ethnographic approach at the schools

The third and final data collection, conducted on site in the two sampled schools, adopted an ethnographic approach inspired by Hammersley and Atkinson (2019; Hammersley, 2006), referred to in this thesis as the phase of ethnographic fieldwork. Since all three phases of data collection together constitute one study, no claim is made that the project as a whole should be understood as an ethnography as such. There is, in any case, no single standard for what counts as an ethnography, and scholarly debate about its nature is ongoing (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019: 1). One debate relevant here is that some ethnographically oriented scholars argue that local contexts cannot be analysed without attending to wider, even global, contexts, while it is not feasible to analyse such wider and dispersed contexts through ethnography alone (Hammersley, 2006). The present study, apart from being methodologically mixed and analytically attentive to wider contexts, also relies heavily on interview material collected in the two schools. This too is a contested aspect of ethnography, as some researchers place interviews at the centre of the method while others resist their inclusion (Hammersley, 2006). For the purposes of this study, and in line with other researchers in education (e.g., Tajic, 2022), an ethnographic approach was adopted primarily to gain contextual understanding, build trust, and secure access to interviews and relevant sites of observation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019: 104f). The fieldwork in the two schools was guided by the following ethnographic techniques (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019: 3):

1. Studying the actions, accounts, and statements of pupils and school personnel in everyday life in school.
2. Gathering material from a variety of sources, mainly interviews and observations in meetings and classrooms, as well as in common spaces used by pupils or staff. Documentation of different kinds was also collected.

3. Combining more structured data collection, such as planned interviews or classroom observations, with unstructured and ad hoc forms, such as informal conversations.
4. Facilitating in-depth inquiry by focusing on only one class in each school, with 24 and 26 pupils respectively, together with a similar number of school personnel involved with those pupils from each class (teachers, special educators, pupil support services, etc.).
5. Working thoroughly with interpretation, sorting, coding, and analysis of collected material, both during the three semesters of fieldwork and in the subsequent phase devoted purely to analysis.

Fieldwork in the two schools took place over three semesters, from April 2023 to June 2024, enabling the collection of varied and rich material (Table 2). More structured participant observations of lessons and staff meetings were conducted, alongside ad hoc observations and interview-like conversations during lunch and other breaks and while spending time in pupils' and teachers' common spaces (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2010: ch. 8). A total of 45 teachers and other school personnel were interviewed, some on more than one occasion, together with 47 pupils and 12 of their parents. The interviews were digitally transcribed using Good Tape, revised manually, and eventually imported into Nvivo together with field notes and notes taken during participation in staff meetings. Over time, access to different spaces, meetings, and individuals increased. Interviews with staff often led to references to particular meetings in which decisions or deliberations had taken place. In such cases, once the interview had concluded, permission was often requested to attend the referenced meeting as a silent observer, and this was granted in every case. These included a range of meetings involving PSS staff, teachers, or school leadership, where decisions were often taken concerning the provision of educational support, as well as more general meetings involving all staff or subject-specific groups of teachers.

As all transcripts and field notes were analysed, the findings presented in this study are grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the empirical material. Given the space limitations of the articles, the excerpts included serve as illustrative examples rather than a full representation of what was expressed by pupils and teachers. As Article 2 focuses on the situation of school personnel, its analysis draws primarily on interviews and observations relating to this group. Article 3, by contrast, draws more evenly on accounts from across the full data set.

Table 2. Data collected during ethnographic fieldwork at two schools.

	Observations, field notes			Interviews*		
	Days	Meetings	Lessons	Pupils	Parents	Staff
Elm Central School	24	14	23	24	5	23
Oak Lower Secondary	20	8	31	23	7	22
Total	44	22	54	47	12	45

* Accounts for number of individuals interviewed. Several were interviewed more than once, and pupils often in groups.

Ethnographically oriented fieldwork implies that the analytical process begins before data collection is complete (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019: 167). Analytical notes were therefore included among the field notes and later coded as such, while also shaping later stages of inquiry and observation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019: 168). One example may help illustrate this. As the growing influence of pressure and demands on teachers became increasingly visible, a new question was introduced when interviewing some teachers for a second time: “What is required of you?” This generated important empirical material for the ongoing analysis of organisational and professional logics presented in article 2, *‘You have this pressure from above’*. Another example is the increasing visibility of four main problematisations that together formed a broader problematisation of school failure, which prompted the introduction of specific questions on these issues in interviews with pupils, teachers, and parents. These examples illustrate the iterative analytical process embedded in long-term ethnographically oriented studies (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019: 168).

Ethical considerations entering, during and leaving fieldwork

Ethical approval for the research carried out within the context of this thesis was granted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority in November 2022 (No. 2022-05524-01). Given that the research subjects in data collections 1 and 2 were anonymised adult officials and documents, and that no discussion of other individuals was involved, the main ethical considerations concerned data collection 3, consisting of ethnographic fieldwork in two lower secondary schools over an extended period. Central considerations included the fact that many research subjects were minors and that some were in vulnerable situations (Shamoo & Resnik, 2022: 264ff). Although individual pupils and their lived situations were not the primary object of study, considerable attention

was nevertheless given to their experiences in order to understand the power dynamics influencing educational support they were or were not provided. Pupils' own accounts in interviews and participant observations, together with information about them obtained through documents or through accounts from school personnel and parents, provided empirical material used for analytical purposes in understanding the power dynamics influencing the provision of educational support. Collection, storage, and analysis of all material were handled with great caution in every phase, as described in more detail in the ethical review application (No. 2022-05524-01). While basic ethical principles were observed in the document analysis and interviews with principals and heads of LEA, such as anonymisation wherever possible, most ethical considerations before, during, and after fieldwork related to research in the two schools. The following sections therefore outline key considerations relevant to entry into the field and conduct during fieldwork.

Entering the field

Ethical considerations were guided above all by the core principle of avoiding harm to research participants, understood more broadly as protecting “the rights, dignity, and welfare of human research subjects” (Shamoo & Resnik, 2022: 18). This was particularly important given that roughly half of the study's participants were young. In This section, they are referred to as ‘children’, since that status underscores the importance of the ethical considerations and precautions taken. The author is referred to as ‘I’ and ‘me’ in order to assign clear responsibility. Given the topic of the research and the number of child participants (N=50), it was certain in the planning phase that some would be in vulnerable situations (Shamoo & Resnik, 2022: 258ff). Procedures for obtaining informed consent are addressed in the next section; the present section instead focuses on broader considerations related to ensuring that there was a legitimate scientific reason for including vulnerable participants in the study and to limiting the risks they might encounter in the research (Shamoo & Resnik, 2022: 259).

As noted in the section on sampling, the largely randomised sampling procedure reduced the risk of children feeling discomfort related to being labelled deviant or as outsiders (Becker, 1963: 9), since neither schools nor classes were selected because of reputations or media visibility concerning failure or difficulty. Media records relating to the schools were not collected until after the first semester of fieldwork.

Drawing on recommendations from previous research, both school counsellors were contacted for a brief conversation and informed about the forthcoming research. Since relationships would inevitably be built with children, and these might prompt disclosures of personal issues beyond my capacity to address, it was a preventive measure to establish an initial connection with the counsellors in case it became appropriate to suggest that a pupil contact them,

or in case something harmful observed at group level needed to be discussed while preserving individual anonymity. It also served as a safeguard in case my own actions caused discomfort or unease to any child, whether through lack of caution or by broaching a difficult topic. In one specific instance, when a child shared information about a situation that could involve risk, this preventive measure proved relevant, as I could discuss the situation with the school's counsellor.

As is clear throughout the thesis, all empirical material and all reporting are anonymised as far as possible in order to help conceal the identity of participants (Heaton, 2022). Schools, municipalities, and individuals are all given pseudonyms. In the case of children, most were invited to choose their own pseudonym, which was understood as a way of increasing balance and agency in the research situation (Heaton, 2022). Not all had the opportunity to do so, and a few preferred me to decide. School personnel were assigned pseudonyms corresponding to common Swedish names from the decade in which they were presumed to have been born. Where possible, these pseudonyms are culturally common names tied to presumed national context of the authentic name.

On the field

A researcher entering any field inevitably intersects with ongoing power dynamics and becomes part of them, which makes it necessary to establish ethical guidelines before entering the field (cf. VanderStaay, 2005: 404). Given the Foucauldian approach adopted here, and the focus on relations and dynamics involving power, this required particular reflection in planning the research. Inspired by Karlsson's work on asylum-seeking children (2021), I adopted her approach of positioning *with* the children. In Karlsson's case, this involved keeping children's secrets, not telling adults when rules were broken, and spending time playing and having fun with them rather than socialising with adults at the research sites (Karlsson, 2021: 75ff). In a similar way, positioning with the children in this study involved keeping their confidences but also being clear with me *taking sides* with them (Dennis, 2009) in general, while being careful not to bias their experience of teachers, school, or studies. I could be supportive, at some points, but chose never to be critical towards them. This contrasted with my interactions with teachers and other school personnel, towards whom an intuitive inclination to be supportive was retained, and critical questioning was used when necessary to reach deeper analytical layers.

Another ethical consideration shaping this position in the field concerned the limits set on the risks that the children might encounter in the research itself (Shamoo & Resnik, 2022: 259). Beyond avoiding exposing children to risk through the research, there is the more complex question of risks that be-

come visible during research. The issue of whether to intervene is always present in fieldwork, particularly where children or other vulnerable participants are involved (VanderStaay, 2005). My position if witnessing first person physical or mental violence or abuse was given: I would intervene. The intuitive impulse to stop harm of this kind had few drawbacks in relation to the research aims. Other forms of harm, however, were more complicated. For example, when teachers spoke pejoratively about children in their absence, I did not intervene. Negative or degrading talk in children's presence was more limited and generally took the form of accusations of poor attitude or weak character, and here too I did not intervene. I chose to remain aligned with the study's research questions and investigate the details of such positions among adults, including the sentiments and structures shaping their attitudes. In this respect, the position diverged from Karlsson's, who intervened during fieldwork when children were wrongly accused or subjected to degrading remarks by teachers (Karlsson, 2021: 79). The question of whether to intervene is, of course, also entangled with the risk that well-intentioned interventions may make matters worse, and with the fact that "fieldwork is not social work" (VanderStaay, 2005: 406), even though documenting the destructiveness of others can contribute to a PhD and an academic career for the researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019: 230f; VanderStaay, 2005: 382). In the case of this study, it was reasonable to assume before entering the schools that situations would be observed in which children were not being provided with the educational support needed to meet the requirements for progression to upper secondary education, thereby increasing statistical risks of later hardship in life, including difficulties with employment and physical and mental health (Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2024). Weighing these factors, I decided not to intervene when such neglect of children in need of support was observed during fieldwork. Broadly speaking, this decision followed logics used in previous research concerning the value of documenting and reporting harmful behaviour in ways that may reduce future harm (cf. Taylor, 1987; VanderStaay, 2005). In this study, intervention would have meant confronting teachers or reporting cases to principals or heads of school. The assumptions, which still appear sound in retrospect, were these: First, if a principle of reporting or confronting were consistently followed whenever a child was not receiving adequate support, future situations would soon be hidden from my view, reducing observational access. Maintaining such a position might even have made the study impossible, through participants opting out or otherwise restricting the research. Second, intervention would probably have made little difference for the individual child concerned. Third, my knowledge of any one case would probably have been too limited for effective intervention and might even have worsened matters. Fourth, greater benefit might lie, not for the children in the study directly but for children as a group, in making visible the mistakes, crit-

ical issues, power dynamics, and processes that operate negatively. Such visibility would likely have been reduced, and the findings less impactful, had intervention occurred during the project.

A situation that can serve as example is when a teacher once expressed racist views on the children—not to them directly, but in informal conversation with colleagues. Had I voiced concern or intervened, the teacher’s classroom behaviour would probably have changed in my presence after that point. By refraining from intervention, teaching proceeded as usual, making it possible to observe, for example, how the teacher withheld support from pupils previously spoken about in a contemptuous way. This illustrates the importance of positionality for gaining relevant empirical material: in this case, it made visible that a teacher’s attitude not only had the potential to hurt, but also directly influenced the provision of educational support to children who needed it. Still, when fieldwork was approaching its end and staff reactions were less likely to condition the research, the racist remark as well as other questionable behaviours seemingly influencing the withholding of support from racialised children were brought up with those responsible. This was done in a spirit of joint exploration and, in several cases, the discussion was welcomed by the interviewee. Ultimately, these are examples of how a complex reality was managed in a context where ethical considerations were central yet difficult to resolve in a straightforward manner. Hammersley and Atkinson, key guides for the ethnographic approach used here, write that “The only value which is central to research is truth. However, this does not mean that all other values can be ignored” (2019: 263). More broadly, it is also well known that one consequence of concern for vulnerable research participants, such as children, is their routine exclusion from research when scholars simply choose to avoid such risks and moral dilemmas altogether (Shamoo & Resnik, 2022: 260).

To the best of my understanding, I have handled these ethical considerations with care, and approached the research through the positionings described above. These proved useful, not least because they made the many choices and situations I encountered during daily fieldwork easier to navigate. More generally, the coherence of this approach seemed to increase confidence among both children and adults. Several of the research dynamics shaped by these ethical positionings are visible in the excerpt below, taken from a brief field note halfway through the second semester. It shows how the interests of the research were contingent on maintaining a coherent stance of neither condoning nor condemning, and on being attentive to participants’ boundaries as a basis for building relationships with pupils that enabled them to speak openly and trustfully. In this case, it begins with Oscar testing me (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019: 71f), since he is too young to use *snus*, the typical Swedish snuff-tobacco:

He asks me if I want to check out his stash. “Sure.” And he opens his locker and shows how three cans of Red Bull are neatly stacked at the back of the shelf. In front are four white boxes of *snus*, also neatly arranged. Gunilla [a classmate] is standing next to the locker and, when we approach, she quickly closes her own. It is a funny contrast to Oscar’s complete willingness to open up and show me, and I comment on it: “You want to close and he wants to open.” She smiles a little, and Oscar and she engage in a brief exchange that ends with a teeny throwing of random insults and suggestions. When Gunilla has left, I ask whether I can interview Oscar at some point. “Why me?” “I would like to hear what you think about school, you have many thoughts.” He seems open to it, but when I ask whether he wants to do it now, since he is not going back to maths, he declines. “I’m going to sit down in some corner with my phone. I don’t have it in me right now. What can I say, it’s a madhouse.” I leave him there, taking care not to pressure him.

Another limit set before entering the field, and maintained throughout fieldwork, was not to contact children involved in the study outside school. While this might have deepened understanding of their lives and personal situations in relation to the dynamics shaping the provision of educational support, the empirical material gathered in school was sufficient and constituted a natural limit to the study. Not exchanging contact details became a way of marking professional distance within the broader approach of taking sides: even when company was enjoyed mutually, it remained clear that the role in the field was not that of a friend, but of a researcher. One exception was made in the case when a child disclosed an issue involving a possible risk of harm, and I appeared to be the only adult informed. Although the risk seemed very low, to the best of my judgement, we exchanged telephone numbers in order to allow contact if necessary and to leave open the possibility of reconsidering confidentiality should the need arise. Monitoring the situation over the three semesters of fieldwork did not give reason to do so. I initially encouraged the child to talk to family, the school counsellor, or the police, repeating my suggestion from time to time, but, as far as I know, the risk eventually appeared to recede.

Leaving the field

Research can have harmful consequences for people, both in the field and when published (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019: 226f). After completing fieldwork, I wrote individual letters to the children who had participated. I explained that all my notes and transcripts from the schools were being read and thought through carefully, and thanked them for their generosity. Some letters also included encouragement in relation to upper secondary studies or expressed appreciation for them as persons—always at a level appropriate to the relationship that we had developed over time. Each child has by now also received a printed copy of the thesis, accompanied by a final handwritten note of gratitude.

After fieldwork, participating school personnel were informed and involved through in-person meetings and through reading draft texts on findings and analysis, approximately 6–12 months after the fieldwork had ended. Those who chose to attend—around half of those invited—were encouraged to reflect critically on what was presented. Their comments were generally understood as validating the analysis, including those parts dealing with failures or less flattering situations for the school or for themselves. These sessions clarified both factual matters and analytical possibilities. They helped improve the articles and the thesis without altering the analysis or conclusions. Three individual meetings were held with school personnel in cases where it seemed likely that they, although anonymised, might still be identifiable to colleagues, and where this might have negative consequences for their workplace relations. In these three cases, meetings took place before the findings were presented to colleagues, and those concerned were given an opportunity to read the texts and comment before submission for publication. They confirmed the validity of the contextual account and suggested minor adjustments to the description of the situation, which were accepted on the grounds that they improved the accuracy of the representation.

Informed consent

A few weeks before entering the schools, I sent a letter to the pupils in both classes. It included a picture and some information about me, and described my interest in “things that matter in getting through to upper secondary”. The letter also stressed that what pupils told me was confidential and that nothing they did or said would affect their grades, since these concerns might easily arise and cause unease. On the first day in school, pupils were taken out of class in small groups of four or five for around 5–10 minutes in a separate room. The main purpose was to answer any questions raised by the letter, repeat information about confidentiality and grades, and add further information about the object of study. Here, I emphasised that, when present in school and especially in classrooms, my observation concerned how teachers helped pupils, not what they as pupils did right or wrong. Again, reducing as much as possible any concern caused by my presence was central at this stage. On this occasion, all children present signed a written consent form, and those absent did so later when encountered. Consent was continuously re-established during fieldwork and in structured sessions similar to the first-day meeting at the end of both the first and second semesters. No child refused participation. Even so, willingness to participate varied, and less eager pupils were approached with caution and gentleness. The repeated seeking of consent also applied in interviews and more informal interactions, where close attention was paid to signs of unease and the willingness of children to talk about different topics was allowed to guide the space given to them.

The Swedish Ethical Review Authority requires informed consent also from legal guardians where research participants are under 15 years of age, which applied to almost half of the children in the two classes studied. Before entering the schools, information about the study was sent to all guardians, and telephone calls were made in order to allow questions or reflections on the study and on what would take place in school. During these calls, I obtained consent from the guardians of pupils under 15, and they were also asked to return the physical consent form that I had sent by post. Similar calls were made to the guardians of pupils who had already turned 15; although their consent was not legally required, no guardian expressed opposition or reluctance concerning participation. These calls also helped identify guardians who might benefit from receiving information in their mother tongue or in English. In such cases, a summary letter in English or Arabic was sent by post and email. At the beginning of the final semester of fieldwork, all parents were contacted once more through a short SMS message that also included an interview request. By that point, all pupils had turned 15, but the interview invitation also functioned as an opportunity for parents to ask questions or raise concerns about the research. No such concerns were expressed. When the thesis is completed, all guardians will receive a brief letter of thanks including a link to the thesis.

Data storage and GDPR

All recordings during fieldwork were made using a digital voice recorder approved for this purpose by Stockholm University and owned by the university. Recordings were never labelled with full pseudonyms or real names. Instead, abbreviations and codes were used when storing and coding the files. Transcriptions saved as Word documents or in Nvivo were handled in the same way. Whenever the recorder contained files, it was always carried in my backpack or, where that was not possible, in a front trouser pocket. As far as I can determine, it never came into anyone else's possession, and no one but me ever listened to the recordings. After each day of fieldwork, files were transferred from the recorder to secure drives provided by Stockholm University and then deleted from the device. These included an external secure hard drive accessible only by fingerprint. A backup copy of the files on the hard drive was regularly made to the secure cloud storage provided and approved by Stockholm University, SunetDrive/Nextcloud. Files were at times temporarily transferred to a secure, password-protected laptop owned and administered by Stockholm University, whose hard drive is also approved for this kind of storage.

The hard drive containing recordings was kept in a safe intended for storage of sensitive data at the department of Special Education at Stockholm university, accessible by pin code. Notebooks used for ethnographic field notes and printed documents containing telephone numbers and details of pupils and

their families drawn from school registers were also stored in the safe together with the hard drive. These documents had been provided by school principals in compliance with their obligations under the GDPR directive, in printed rather than electronic form.

Researcher positioning and reflexivity

A critical self-reflexive stance is maintained throughout all stages and aspects of the study. This applies, first, to the research interest itself, which cannot be chosen objectively (Koopman, 2013: 88). It also applies to what it means to be a critical researcher in the field, in analysis, and in the dissemination of findings. Since the understanding of critical research adopted in this thesis has already been discussed (see ‘Theoretical framework’), this section focuses on the reflexivity embedded in fieldwork and on researcher positioning within it.

The positioning with the children, and the taking of sides with them, rested on personal conviction, scholarly inspiration (Karlsson, 2021), and scientific discussion regarding the greater prevalence of adult oppression of children than the reverse (Barth & Olsen, 2020). Without going into unnecessary personal detail, I have since adolescence been involved in various initiatives for the social justice of children and young people, often focusing on structurally disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Sweden with larger proportions of migrated families—some of these being the neighbourhoods in which I grew up and lived for the first 22 years of my life. Both the drive to give voice to people facing epistemic injustice (Scully, 2020) and an affinity with people sharing similar backgrounds have remained strong. While my physical appearance may invite different kinds of categorisation, knowing my name quickly raises questions about origin—internationally, nationally, regionally, and locally. The two schools entered for fieldwork had proportions of children with migrated parents of around 25% and 40%, respectively. In both cases there were friendship groups composed of both children with migrated parents and children with native parents, yet it remained common for pupils to group themselves along these lines. In both schools, the first group to approach me consisted mainly of boys from migrated families, and the energy and curiosity from their side in these first encounters quickly generated rapport and a bond that remained throughout the fieldwork. Although connections and rapport were eventually built with several other groups in the classes, these initial bonds made further aspects of the situations of these pupils visible. Their eagerness to approach me during the school day may also have reduced my opportunities for interaction with other groups. Even so, 44 days were spent in the schools, and these involved time with all groups in different ways and at different points, without any single group taking up a disproportionate share of time. What remains important to reflect on, however, is that stronger affinity—not only with those groups, but also with others and with certain individ-

ual children—may have drawn my research focus more towards some situations, circumstances, and power dynamics, while other may have received less attention. Each class contained a very quiet friendship group, inclined to keep to itself. These pupils were difficult to approach and harder to engage in deeper reflection, although this eventually became possible with at least one member in each class. One of the schools also had a child who, while not apparently bullied, was almost entirely left out and tended to disappear from sight as soon as lessons ended, often making attempts to find her unsuccessful. This limited her verbal contribution to the study to a very brief exchange during the first successful approach, coinciding with me explaining my presence and obtaining informed consent. Beyond that, her voice is almost absent from the study. These examples make visible the nature of ethnographically generated empirical material, where research ambitions are always entangled with the messiness of everyday life in the setting under study (cf. Kustatscher, 2014). They moreover suggest that a different personality, gender, name, mother tongue, or social background might have shaped the dynamics of data collection differently, which in turn would have produced a somewhat different empirical corpus and, at least to some degree, a different analysis (cf. Savage et al., 2021).

Summary of methodological framework

This section has presented the methodological framework of the study. With the provision of educational support as its object of study, and with a particular interest in the processes involved in and shaping it, data collection and analysis were carried out through a critical, relational, and discursive onto-epistemological stance. Divided into three data collections, the study initially sampled nine municipalities on the basis of municipal and LEA size, school scores on the Swedish socioeconomic index (SEI), and geographical proximity to the researcher, since the third and final phase took the form of ethnographic fieldwork. The first two phases comprised content analysis of policy documents and interviews with heads of LEA and principals in the nine originally sampled municipalities. Fieldwork then took place in two lower secondary schools over three semesters, following one class in each school in detail through interviews with school personnel, pupils, and parents, as well as observations in classrooms, common spaces, and meetings. Participating in everyday life in school alongside minors required careful ethical consideration before entering the field, throughout the research process, and also when leaving the field. Beyond continuous informed consent from both children and guardians, ethical reflexivity and a clear position on how to act proved necessary when, for example, observing the social or educational hardships in which children were found to be living.

Comprehensive summary of the research findings

As a compilation thesis, this work includes three published articles reporting on three different but related processes, theoretically understood as power dynamics, that were found to influence the provision of educational support. These were examined in the national and local governance of schools ('Policy and funding of educational support'), in the tensions between organisational and professional logics in everyday life in schools ('Practice of educational support'), and in problematisations of school failure ('Thinking of educational support'). Since the articles are annexed to the thesis and can be consulted for details and extracts from the findings, the present summary aims to provide an overview of the study as a whole.

Policy and funding of educational support

Summary of article 1: Governance dynamics and local autonomy in large-scale governmental funding: The case of Sweden's campaign to improve equity.

National and local governments are responsible for funding Swedish schools. Two laws govern this funding: the Education Act (EA) and the Local Government Act (LGA). As democratically enacted and amended legislation, both are carefully articulated. In relation to the concerns of this study, their interaction lies primarily in the fact that the EA mandates the provision of educational support, while the LGA enables resources for this through its protection of the finances of local administrations and their education agencies (LEAs). As described in the introductory section of the thesis, equity is a fundamental aim of the Swedish welfare state, and schools are, in turn, fundamental to this aim (Swedish Government, 2017a: 15). It is against this background that the introduction in 2018 of one of the World's largest funding schemes for educational equity can be understood, following a significant decline in school results during the first decades of the 2000s and a steadily increasing share of pupils failing to meet the standards of the curriculum (Swedish Government, 2017b). A yearly allocation of 500 million euros to improve equity among a pupil population of one million students in more than 4,000 schools was therefore an important intervention. It also aligned with longstanding claims from

research, school personnel, and school organisers that local needs should determine the use of such funding rather than central governmental assumptions about what was needed. The funds were automatically distributed to every school organiser that requisitioned them, on the basis of pupil numbers and the socioeconomic profile of the pupil population.

The initial phase of the study reported in this thesis involved a content analysis of 37 documents describing the plans and strategies of nine LEAs regarding educational support. Among these were the LEAs' own descriptions of how the governmental equity funding was used. These became of particular interest when it became visible that the funding was often being used to cover regular school costs rather than educational support. The content analysis was complemented by interviews with LEA managers and principals of lower secondary schools in the same municipalities. Although the interviews covered a wider range of themes, their reflections on the equity funding drew particular attention during analysis. These materials were analysed through the four dimensions of curriculum theory—ideology, jurisdiction, economy, and accountability or control (Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000; Jarl & Rönnerberg, 2019)—which made visible tensions within each dimension in the use of the funding.

A first point of interest is the tension created by the open approach to the concept of equity adopted by central government. Leaving the meaning of equity open led to a wide range of interpretations among the LEA managers responsible for distributing the funding received. This, in turn, led to different uses of the money. While some of the funding was used for special educators, other Pupil Support Services (PSS)¹⁰ personnel, and services more plausibly related to increasing equity, as much as half was budgeted for general staffing of teachers or other personnel such as assistant principals. Significant sums were also used for digital devices and software. In some cases, the funding covered personnel responsible for constructing a new school, security, physiotherapy, or even a librarian for a municipality's central public library—a budget line not belonging to the LEA at all. The empirical material, which also includes school budgets, plans, and documents related to equity and educational support, shows that many of these costs had already been planned for and were not specifically intended to improve equity. As one interviewed head of LEA put it: “Do we need a librarian ... Yes, but this should be employed with municipality money, not with some of this sagging equity funding.” An especially striking example at the edge of this logic was an LEA that used part of the funding to install defibrillators in all its schools, justifying this with reference to everyone's equal right to assistance in the event of cardiac arrest.

¹⁰ In the article, PSS is referred to as SHT, the acronym for Student Health Team, a direct translation of the Swedish *elevhälsoteam*, an equivalent of PSS. The subsequent articles, as well as this thesis, use PSS.

Beyond raising questions about what equity is or could be, and therefore about what equity funding could or should be used for, the study of the programme also makes visible governance dynamics between LEA and school levels that influence the educational support produced by the funding. These are most visible in tensions between actors involved in governance and in the tendency of dominant actors to maintain rather than distribute power. In principle, LEAs could have passed the funding on to principals and allowed them to decide how it should be used. In practice, however, principals' legal right and obligation to decide over school funding left LEA managers with limited formal power, and what happened instead was that LEAs seized the opportunity to retain decision-making authority—either by employing staff within the LEA and then allocating them to schools, such as assistant principals or special educators, or by passing on funds to principals but earmarking them for specific purposes. None of the principals interviewed about the use of the equity funding were aware that it could be used for anything they deemed necessary in order to improve equity. One principal even expressed a wish for non-earmarked funding during the interview: “like, what do you need, given your... we would see that, yes, we could get this opportunity to employ additional staff, someone for each teacher team, and get this continuity, so we can reach here ... But a lot of this [earmarked funds], becomes like extra support and in some way, you feel like, you can't cope with it.”

The use of the funding to cover regular and already existing budget items can also be understood as the result of tension in the juridical dimension between the EA and the LGA. The former mandates educational equity without regard to budget restrictions, while the latter prohibits deficits in municipal administration, of which the LEA forms part. Principals are governed primarily by the EA, while LEA managers are governed by both the EA and the LGA. The unregulated use of the funding is thus preceded by an unregulated definition of equity in the funding itself. This enables LEA managers to justify financing equal access to digital devices, directing funds to high-performing schools that have not yet introduced such devices, or distributing funds to all schools within an LEA regardless of performance and challenges, all in the name of equity. While some LEAs weighted distribution according to socio-economic variables, none excluded schools with predominantly high-achieving pupils and apparently little need of additional funding. LEA managers dominated these power dynamics, making their definitions of equity more effective as truth. The variety of truths about equity, and the power dynamics involved in planning and subsequently enacting the provision of educational support, influence the final outcome and contribute to the messiness of both the concept and the practice of equity.

Practice of educational support

Summary of article 2: 'You have this pressure from above': Exploring provision of educational support within tensions of organisational and professional logics.

After studying documents from nine LEAs and interviewing their managers and school principals, two LEAs were selected for fieldwork in two lower secondary schools. The phrase "You have this pressure from above", which appears in the article title, captures an experience widely shared by the school personnel interviewed regarding why daily tasks were carried out as they were, often contrary to what they believed to be best. Field research was conducted with an ethnographical approach over three semesters. A total of 44 days were spent in the two schools, located in different regions of Sweden. Among the many power dynamics made visible during fieldwork and gathered as empirical material, two stood out: the dominance of organisational logics in almost every aspect of everyday life in school, and the formation of thinking about educational support through problematisations of school failure. Together, these had a tangible influence on the provision of educational support in ways that ultimately compromised equity, both in micro policy and in practice.

In the article presenting empirical material concerning the influence of organisational dynamics, the findings are analysed through the theoretical lens of organisational and professional logics. Drawing on Freidson (2001), these concepts define organisational logics as prioritising efficiency through measurability and evaluation, whereas professional logics rest on the belief that doing work well depends on training, experience, and trust in such expertise, since professional skills cannot simply be rationalised or standardised.

The empirical material shows how teachers, principals, special educators, and others responsible for the provision of educational support were influenced by these power dynamics in ways that generated inequity. The pressure produced a need to 'cover one's back', a phrase used so often by school personnel when discussing documentation under expanding accountability structures that it could also have served as the article title.

Providing educational support had become a key means both of helping pupils achieve passing grades, including those required for transition to upper secondary education, and of avoiding responsibility when pupils failed to do so. Educational support was therefore both a real, valuable, and scarce resource over which there were struggles and competition, and also a kind of safety line for teachers or others at school at risk of being held responsible for failure. If written documentation showed that a failing pupil had received educational support, pressure and scrutiny were reduced. Having provided educational support became a way of covering the back of the school, the special educator, or the teacher and of demonstrating that all possible efforts had been made, even if the pupil still failed. This back-covering occurred in internal

relations between school personnel in different roles—special educators, subject teachers, principals—as well as in relations with pupils and parents and with higher levels in the educational hierarchy, above all the LEA. A principal reporting disappointing pass rates could reduce scrutiny by simultaneously reporting high levels of educational support: “I tried . . . sometimes you just don’t make it”, as one special education teacher put it. As a result, documentation of educational support became instrumental for surviving accountability dynamics rather than for improving pupils’ teaching and learning. Teachers reported providing educational support that was sometimes debatable or even non-existent in reality. School personnel pointed out that this made the documentation of pupils’ needs and of what helps them increasingly insubstantial, to the point where colleagues stopped caring about what was written when planning teaching.

Educational support was more often provided when someone holding accountability power exercised it. This could be a special educator, a principal, or a parent demanding action. One SENCO explained why one of two friends with similar educational needs received more support than the other: “[he] has a very tough mom, and the mom probably slams her fist hard on the table, like, tells how she wants things to happen.” When principals pushed for particular pupils to receive educational support, this too was always linked to parental communication. While it is difficult to say precisely what an equitable way of distributing educational support would be, it is at times clear that support was not being distributed in a manner consistent with a welfare state guided by the principle that life chances should not depend on one’s family (Swedish Government, 2017a: 3). An interesting aspect of this dynamic was that, when school personnel under pressure and scrutiny decided to provide adequate support in order to push pupils over the line, they often succeeded.

As noted above, support was sometimes documented even when its actual existence was debatable. In the study, this is labelled *illusional support*. One example concerns pupils in one of the researched classes who studied Swedish as a second language (SAS) instead of ‘ordinary’ Swedish. The two subjects are interchangeable in the Swedish curriculum, the first having the same achievement goals but adapted for pupils with Swedish as an additional language. In this class, pupils taking SAS were marked in documentation as receiving educational support. The rationale for treating this as educational support—as something extra rather than mainstream teaching—was that SAS was taught in ‘a smaller group’, arbitrarily defined as any group of twelve pupils or fewer. The fact that classes in French or music also consisted of smaller groups was never documented as educational support. The pupils attending SAS were passing that subject but failing maths, which is mandatory for transition to upper secondary education. Still, no educational support was provided to them in maths. Given the pressure and scarcity of time reported by teachers and other school personnel, it is understandable that those selecting pupils for assessment and subsequent support did not see how to assess all

pupils and instead prioritised those who had not received any support at all. Even so, all the pupils in the class attending SAS and failing maths received no educational support in that subject. They eventually failed maths and therefore failed to progress to upper secondary education, for which passing maths is a requirement. Other forms of illusional support visible in the study included optional extra sessions in particular subjects or optional sessions with special education teachers. When optional, such sessions were rarely attended by pupils. Yet, once documented as offered, they relieved teachers, special educators, and school leaders of pressure and scrutiny. Something similar occurred with the provision of multilingual classroom assistance (MCA), which, although mandated by the EA in accordance with needs, was generally not provided in that way. In one of the studied classes, for example, a pupil arriving from Ukraine received three hours per week of in-class translation and support from an MCA during the first year in Swedish schooling. This same MCA was also designated as educational support for two pupils who had recently arrived from Congo, despite not sharing a language with them. In both cases, the school could tick the box indicating that MCA had been provided, but there is reason to question critically the substance of this provision of educational support.

The empirical material also shows that pupils from migrated families were more often the subjects of illusional support. Within accountability dynamics, this makes sense inasmuch as parents who have migrated more recently may be less equipped to hold schools accountable. Research has also long shown, in Sweden and internationally, that those positioned lower in ethnic and social hierarchies are less likely to exert such pressure, even after decades in the host country (Bunar, 2022b; Curran, 2022). This seems to have been the case in the contexts studied. While no deliberate intention among school personnel to defer or postpone support to pupils from migrated families was identified, that was nevertheless what occurred in practice.

At the start of Year 9, there were 20 pupils across the two researched classes who were at risk of school failure (Table 3). They were failing either Swedish, English, or maths, all three of which are mandatory passes for progression to upper secondary education. Eleven of these pupils were from migrated families, and none of them were assessed or given action plans and subsequent educational support, whereas all nine pupils from native families at risk of failure were. Of these nine, all but two ultimately succeeded in progressing to upper secondary education. Among the eleven pupils from migrated families, only two managed to do so without an action plan and without proper provision of educational support. Providing support on the basis of parental engagement and resources, or in response to organisational pressures, thus appears to influence educational support in ways that compromise the education system's aspirations to equity.

Table 3. All pupils in the two studied classes at Oak Lower Secondary and Elm Central School who, at the start of Year 9, had failing grades in at least one subject required for progression to upper secondary education.

Pupil	Migrated parents	Native parents	Assessed and provided educational support	Qualified for upper secondary by end of year 9
Jasmin	x			
Ahmed	x			
Ermal	x			
Vini	x			
Isaak	x			
Nadia	x			
Reem	x			
Alludi	x			
Foad	x			
Rama	x			x
Zain	x			x
Sofie		x	x	
Anton		x	x	
Alexandra		x	x	x
Ida		x	x	x
Adolf		x	x	x
Oscar		x	x	x
Vildann		x	x	x
Gunilla		x	x	x
Robin		x	x	x

Thinking of educational support

Summary of article 3: How problematisations of school failure condition provision of educational support and make schools default on the Education Act.

The thinking surrounding school failure, problems, and educational support forms part of another set of power dynamics identified in the study, which also influence the provision of educational support. In this respect, the empirical material is analysed using Foucault's concepts of discourse, truths, and problematisations, outlined in the section on the thesis's theoretical framework. Within this framework, a problematisation may be introduced in the service of power—for example, by constructing truths that protect a dominant position—as well as in order to address an actual problem. It can also happen without any real interest in either a solution or an accurate description of reality. Foucault often emphasises that this is seldom deliberate or explicit, though it can be (cf. 1978/1990: 94ff).

Attitude, absence, migration, and neurodevelopmental disabilities (NDD) are the four main problematisations identified in the studied schools. These overlap and intersect at several points, and together form an overarching problematisation of school failure. Attitude is formed through discourses presenting both pupils and parents as not caring sufficiently about school, partly because parents are perceived as *curling*¹¹ their children. This overlaps with the problematisation of absence, mainly formed by discourses portraying parents as increasingly accepting school absence. The positioning of school personnel in relation to this is one of limited responsibility, visible both in their accounts and in the lack of action taken when encountering pupils with a questionable attitude or increasing absence. The problematisation of migration is formed by fairly explicit discourses about pupils' and parents' insufficient skills in Swedish, as well as by more implicit discourses about the attitudes of both pupils and parents, intersecting with the problematisation of attitude. School retains some responsibility within the problematisation of migration, visible in the provision of multilingual classroom assistance and Swedish as a second language as stipulated in the EA and the curriculum, although this was never found to correspond fully to pupils' needs. NDD is the only problematisation in which the school is clearly positioned as responsible when school failure occurs. When this finding was shared with a participating assistant director after the analysis had been completed, the response highlighted its significance: "Yes. God have mercy on the school that does not act if someone comes waving a paper with a diagnosis!" While this statement exemplifies the school's assumption of responsibility in relation to NDD, it also points to a finding connected to the importance of documentation in the power dynamics

¹¹ The Swedish concept of the *curling-parent* is similar to the English *helicopter-parent* (Somers and Settle, 2010).

described in article 2—that is, within an accountability structure in which documents are crucial. The empirical material shows that formal medical or psychiatric diagnoses of NDDs were used to prioritise pupils for educational support, even though the EA and reports from the Schools Inspectorate are clear that educational support is to be provided to pupils in need, not to pupils with diagnoses (SSI, 2024). This default from the EA, whereby formal diagnosis becomes pivotal for access to support, increases the importance of parents' capacity either to navigate the process of obtaining such a diagnosis or to pay for one in order to skip the queue and ease the process¹². Once again, family resources become central to the provision of educational support.

The forming of problematisations can be understood as a way for school personnel to make sense of how scarce resources are used when there are not enough to meet the needs of all pupils. By invoking rationales made legitimate through problematisations—such as the idea that pupils must demonstrate a willingness to succeed in order to benefit from support—a distribution of the provision of educational support is legitimised in which some pupils receive more than others. Thus, if a pupil does not show the necessary willingness, the responsibility of the teacher, special educator, or school is seen as limited. From the perspective of schools and school personnel, it makes sense to problematise in ways that limit responsibility—and in some cases fend it off altogether—in a reality where teachers are constrained in their capacity to practise their profession while still being expected to help pupils achieve academically. This is intensified by the pressure to make pupils succeed and the accountability attached to failure, which is measured mainly by passing or not passing the subject. In line with theory on defining truths as a way to safeguard own interests, whether consciously or unconsciously, the empirical material shows how teachers and other school personnel act in these ways. Since they occupy dominant positions within power relations vis-à-vis pupils and parents, it is primarily their discourses, statements, and practices that form the problematisations. Although some pupils, parents, teachers, and PSS personnel act as points of resistance in these power dynamics by directing responsibility back towards the school, this is not enough.

There is more to the intersection between the power dynamics of problematisations and those operating in the tensions between organisational and professional logics. Article 2, on the practice of educational support, explains how none of the eleven pupils from migrated families who were at risk of school failure were assessed or given adequate support. Material gathered during fieldwork suggests that the problematisation of migration plays into this. special educators, teachers, and school leaders state explicitly that assessment of failing pupils from migrated families is often postponed or deferred on the

¹² “A full assessment takes approximately 8-11 hours of visits for the person being assessed and a couple of weeks to receive the final result and report. A full ADHD-assessment via Mindler costs from 29,000 SEK.” (Mindler.se, 2026-02-01)

basis of the truth that a lack of Swedish language skills explains their difficulties. One SENCO referred to this recurring pattern as the ‘wait-and-see strategy’, describing how pupils’ failure is repeatedly explained in terms of deficits in Swedish. This applies both to pupils from migrated families who were born and raised in Sweden and to those who migrated themselves. For many of them, this waiting seems effectively endless—at least for every such pupil in the classes studied here. Special educators also acknowledge that assessments are explicitly or implicitly deferred because personnel lack the language skills needed to assess pupils with whom they do not share a language.

These problematisations are formed within power dynamics in which the statements from pupils and their families carry less weight, while teachers and other school personnel dominate the production of discourse. Their work is also influenced by the pressure of accountability and scrutiny, alongside experiences of time poverty. Within these dynamics, problematisations appear to form in ways that release school personnel from responsibility rather than release pupils from school failure. This provides reason to understand problematisations of school failure as conditioning the provision of educational support in ways that seem to make schools, at the micro level, default on the mandates of the Education Act formulated at the macro level. While it may be difficult to agree on a generalisable policy for equitable provision of educational support in everyday life in schools, there is little coherence across the education system.

Concluding discussion

The questions of how provision of educational support is conceived across different levels of the education system, and how it is ultimately practised at school level, have been addressed throughout this study. Inquiry into the processes involved has made visible multiple power dynamics shaping the provision of educational support, contingent on historical processes. Starting with the contemporary dynamics, the following is visible:

- Equity remains open to interpretation in policy, practice, and thinking of educational support, even though it is defined in general national policy and more specifically in education policy. In practice, the fundamental principle that children's educational and life opportunities should not depend on their families is dismissed.
- Teachers and other school personnel experience *time poverty* and limited scope to act in accordance with their professional judgement. For example, in providing educational support corresponding to pupils' needs.
- Teachers and other school personnel experience pressure to succeed in what is perceived as an impossible mission because of time poverty. This leads them to 'keep their backs covered' rather than act as they would wish.
- In order to manage time poverty, the understanding of the problems causing school failure is simplified, which in turn enables similarly simplified solutions.
- In order to manage accountability pressures, responsibility is deferred away from oneself and most readily directed towards pupils and their families.
- The provision of educational support is largely conditioned by moralising judgements and categorisations, often supported by medical-psychiatric diagnoses, rather than by educational needs.

Taken together, these dynamics form a corrosive process in which a fundamental purpose of the Swedish welfare state—ensuring children equitable life opportunities regardless of family background—is eroded. In the schools studied, a parallel set of policies emerges, according to which educational support is provided to pupils in need when they and their families behave in particular ways, rather than simply on the basis of need.

How can these processes—processes that appear to compromise equity in the education system—persist and continue to be reproduced? Further analysis of the power dynamics identified prompts this key question, inviting historical engagement and a return to the quote that introduces the thesis: How do things happen? (Foucault, 1980: 50). The French original—‘comment ça se passe’ (Foucault, 1976)—carries a wider meaning, also encompassing how things ‘are going’, or ‘going on’. The question-suggestion invites examination of what this study has made visible from several angles. How is the provision of educational support going? Seemingly well when support is actually provided, but support is neither provided as often and as extensively as needed, nor in an equitable manner. How is it, then, that current ways of providing educational support persist? This concluding discussion engages with that final question by further examining the data collected in the present study and by problematising the contingencies of the present in relation to historical processes in the Swedish education system and its special education. This is done through a Foucauldian critical genealogical inquiry, as described in the theoretical section (Foucault, 1988: 257; Koopman, 2013: 93ff). Ultimately, this act of inquiry and critical analysis aims to make visible unexamined ways of thinking and what has remained unseen (Foucault, 1980: 50; 2000: 456), thereby expanding the limits of our thinking, rather than proposing solutions (cf. Stengers, 2021: 76; Rose, 1999: 58f; Savage et al., 2021).

An unintended dispute of equity in the education system

The empirical material presented in the three articles makes visible incoherencies between thinking and practice in schools, on the one hand, and fundamental policy articulated by the Swedish government, on the other. While a critical stance invites non-normative thinking about equity and its desirability—what is stated by ‘common sense’, the law, or universities need not be true or most important (cf. Foucault, 1980: 52, 122)—the empirical findings show that fundamental ideas constituting the welfare state’s striving for equity are undeniably being contested in the studied schools. Most notably, this concerns the ambition to mitigate the impact of family and family resources on children’s life opportunities (Swedish Government, 2017a; Magnússon & Pettersson, 2021). Examining the findings through a Foucauldian understanding of power dynamics sharpens the question of whether school personnel participating in this dispute actually wish to challenge fundamental Swedish welfare

state ideals such as those concerning equity (Foucault 1972/2002: 49; 1980: 131). Much suggests that these disputes take place unintentionally, through school personnel who occupy dominant positions in power dynamics vis-à-vis pupils and parents, while themselves being dominated by organisational logics and higher-ranking colleagues. A teacher or learning mentor ticks the box indicating that educational support has been provided, consciously or unconsciously complying with pressure to prove effort, while being more or less aware of stretching the meaning of that act and more or less aware of latent risk calculations about whether colleagues or parents might challenge it. All of this, and more, may be involved in the decision either to tick the box and mark the task as complete, or to improve the provision of educational support before considering the task done. That such calculations take place with varying degrees of awareness is suggested by several of the scholars used to understand the power dynamics identified here (cf. Bornemark, 2018a: 71; Lundström & Parding, 2011: 4), and not least by Foucault himself, who described unconsciously enacted ‘technology of the self’ as a prerequisite for governing (Foucault, 1988: 18f). Even minute practices, such as ticking a box, can be understood as expressions of ways of thinking that operate both consciously and unconsciously. Yet, at this micro level, such actions are rarely deliberate rebellions against the welfare state ideals of equity held by the citizen performing them. Still, the process thwarts the intentions of macro policy at the micro level. In the practical doing of equity through the organisation and provision of educational support, professionals in the education system are also undoing equity.

There appears to be no active resistance among the professionals who are ultimately responsible for enacting policy at the micro level. Instead, there is uncertainty about what it means to act rightly—and what that means for themselves and for others, not least in terms of equity. As Bornemark (2018a: 94ff) puts it, *ethical stress* is generated when action is guided by fear of accountability rather than by discernment and conviction. This ethical stress then connects to further power dynamics and complexities, which in turn continue to influence policy, practice, and thinking about the provision of educational support, as described in the comprehensive summary.

Having made visible the threat to equity, the empirical findings can also guide understanding of how equity might be strengthened. As described in article 2, assessment and the adequate educational support that follows appear to work. Teachers and special educators generally want to honour their profession, and when they decide to do so many seem able to provide pupils experiencing hardship with what they need—even if such support is currently distributed unequally. It is also visible that teachers and other school personnel are able to develop relationships with pupils in difficult situations and to resist problematisations that discredit them, as shown in article 3. There is likewise resistance among teachers and other school personnel to organisational logics and to the deferral of responsibility. Article 1 shows that some equity funding

is invested purposefully, even if a great deal appears to be wasted in the tensions and messiness of its governance. While these more positive insights are overshadowed in the findings, they are present and could potentially move into the foreground and come to dominate future power dynamics. It is crucial here to remember that “power is not an evil” and may be used for good (Foucault, 1987: 129).

Tensions and protection of dominating positions in the power dynamics

The power dynamics made visible in the study share a common feature: tangible tensions in which dominant actors or logics prioritise preserving their position over acting in ways that serve the broader purposes of the education system (cf. Foucault, 1978/1990: 94ff; 1987: 114). In funding and policy, tensions between LEAs and principals—intensified further by competing priorities embedded in the Local Government Act and the Education Act—lead LEAs to govern equity funding in ways that protect their own position rather than respond to local needs. As a consequence, the stated purposes of the central government’s equity funding programme are undermined (Article 1). In the tension between organisational and professional logics in the schools studied, the organisational logic holds such hegemonic dominance that education professionals appear to comply with its demands rather than risk the consequences of doing what they believe is right instead of what they believe they must do (Article 2). In the power dynamics of school-failure problematisations, school personnel occupying dominant positions protect these positions and use them to defer responsibility and tasks, at the cost of blaming pupils and families for school failure and withholding educational support that pupils both need and are legally entitled to receive (Article 3). Put simply: dominant actors tend to act so as to protect their dominant position rather than to protect an equitable education system.

Foucault (1978/1990: 93f) argued that there are no ‘headquarters’ exercising power in a binary of rulers and ruled, and that domination is seldom the result of deliberate decisions by individuals or groups. But this does not imply that dominating actors, once they find themselves in such positions in the power dynamics, will willingly seek a reconfiguration of these and relinquish dominance.

The protection of a dominant position can be understandable. This is especially so when, as in the case of a teacher, a dominating position in one power dynamic is combined with being dominated in another. As detailed in the comprehensive summary, experiencing time poverty alongside considerable pressure to deliver results in an increasingly complex educational landscape makes

it understandable that teachers seek some degree of stability and safety. Employment, salary, workplace relations, professional identity, and reputation are all at stake. Without seeking either to blame or excuse anyone, the findings and the way tensions in these power dynamics influence provision of educational support—and ultimately equity—provide sufficient reason to widen our thinking, both as researchers and as practitioners.

Managing limits to provision of educational support

A central issue arising from the empirical findings is that the tensions, power dynamics, and historical contingencies described above ultimately produce a provision of educational support that is distributed disproportionately among pupils who need it. This is a distribution that few, if any, would have deliberately chosen in advance. It *happened*. No PSS team or special educator would decide beforehand that pupils in need of educational support whose parents were born in Sweden should move to the front of the queue and be assessed before pupils whose parents had migrated to Sweden. Yet without any such prior decision, this was the *ex post* result when the pupils in the studied classes had completed lower secondary. In the studied schools, providing educational support on the basis of the attitudes, behaviour, and language of pupils and their families—as perceived by school personnel at this moment in history—placed pupils from native families first in line and pupils from migrated families at the back. Even if nobody decided deliberately on such an order, few would regard the chain of events that unintentionally led to it as an acceptable explanation or condone its repetition. If this is true, at least two things follow:

It is difficult to say what equitable provision of educational support looks like.

It is easy to say, in cases such as this, that this is not what equitable provision of educational support looks like.

School personnel often refer to the reality of everyday life in school as marked by limited time and resources, which ultimately restrict every teacher, special educator, and other professional in striving to provide teaching and educational support that meets each pupil's needs (cf. Creagh et al., 2023). Taking this into account, and recognising that school staff operate within limits set by actors and power dynamics beyond their control—for example, the finite number of qualified teachers available or the budgets set by local politicians—provides reason to acknowledge the uncomfortable nature of decision-making regarding provision of educational support. If there is a class in which ten pupils are at risk of school failure, and the organisation has capacity to assess only five of them, how should it decide which five to assess in a way that aligns with the striving for equity in education and society? Perhaps the two

statements above offer a starting point: it may at least be possible to say how an organisation should not prioritise, and from there move towards preferable ways of doing so. There are probably no fully generalisable rules or guidelines for such detailed decision-making, but it can at the same time be argued that the policy principles of the Swedish welfare state and the Education Act are sufficiently clear to support local decisions of this kind. As far as the empirical material and its analysis can reach the underlying processes, a key issue is that explicit prioritisation decisions are often absent. It simply *happens* that some pupils are assessed and others are not. And then it *happens* that those not assessed are pupils whose parents have fewer resources—who in this case are pupils with migrated parents. In another context, it could be another group *problematised* in ways that enable low priority and subsequent displacement from the assessment queue. Returning to Foucault's concepts (1980:50; 1988: 257) reminds us that, while such processes may be non-deliberate, consciousness is always involved (1978/1990: 94f). The only explicitly and deliberately adopted, consensual guideline made visible in the empirical material is the use of formal medical diagnosis as an entry ticket to assessment and provision of educational support, as already observed and criticised in Sweden and elsewhere (SNAE, 2008; 2014; 2022; Tegtmejer et al., 2023). Given that this study is only the latest among many showing how such a practice enables already resourceful families to acquire still more resources, thereby compromising the equity ambitions of both welfare state and education system, this remains a crucial point to examine and rethink in every school that adopts formal diagnosis as a criterion for support.

Decisions about how to allocate available time and resources across tasks inevitably involve judgements about what—and whom—to prioritise. Such decisions are inherently difficult, particularly in contexts where experienced and competent professionals feel disempowered and lost (cf. Bornemark, 2018b: 76ff, 94ff, 105; Creagh et al., 2023). Applying equity in teaching is already a complex matter in itself and, as Clark, Dyson, and Millward (1998) argued, full of contradictory values, commitments, and demands. In its most concrete form, doing equity in schools becomes a question of attention: who should be provided support now, and who must wait. In an educational landscape that also distorts the concept of equity and leaves it open to interpretation, it is understandable that professionals may feel lost, like the maths teacher cited in article 2: "I don't know how we are supposed to go back to what a school is." Stengers (2023) discusses the broader societal tendency to seek binary, black-and-white answers, and the discomfort that arises when such clarity is unavailable. Yet perfection is an illusion. In practice, decisions must be made that are necessarily imperfect and open to criticism, and that professionals must nevertheless stand by. In a complex and contradictory reality, teachers, special educators, and other education professionals are "rarely faced with unequivocal choices" (Clark et al., 1998: 170).

When work and decision-making in schools are characterised by fear of accountability and by ethical stress (Bornemark, 2018a: 94ff), reluctance to make high-stakes decisions may increase. In such circumstances, and given the impossibility of making perfectly safe choices, professionals may be inclined to avoid deciding at all and instead allow processes to unfold without intervention. Yet non-decision is itself a decision, for which only the responsible professional can ultimately be held accountable—however understandable the hesitation may be. As Stengers (2023: 7) writes: “Evolution strips critique of its power when it strives to hold us accountable by demanding guarantees and discounting what it calls beliefs.”

Can policy ease the tensions, improve provision of educational support and get equity on track?

As outlined in the historical discussion of the Swedish education system, macro-level policies intended to increase educational equity have generated better opportunities for some pupils and challenges for others—such as the unitary school introduced in 1962 (Swedish Government, 1974; Lindensjö & Lundgren, 2000: 71f), the new grading scales (Murray, 2007), and the decentralisation and marketisation reforms of the 1990s (Bunar & Ambrose, 2016; Magnússon & Pettersson, 2021). The findings of the present study suggest that macro policy designed to improve equity may have positive effects for some pupils when implemented in local contexts, while also distorting existing forms of equity and proving harmful for others. In more recent history, also covered in this study’s contextual and historical overview, the increasing detail of mandates in the Education Act has produced similarly ambiguous results. The introduction of a specific mandate granting disabled pupils the right to educational support (ch. 3, §2) increased resources in terms of staff and tools for this purpose within the education system, while at the same time making use of this right increasingly contingent on presenting a medical diagnosis as evidence of disability, thereby leaving many disabled pupils with less or no provision of educational support when they do not present such evidence. Another example is the mandate entitling recently migrated pupils to multilingual classroom assistance (ch. 3, §12i), which seems largely to be understood as the *only* form of educational support to which this group is entitled, thereby sidelining the possibility of other types of support.

The last major governmental inquiry, reported in 2015, was filled with apparently promising improvements that would supposedly follow from its proposals. Among them was the equity funding programme examined in this study, which in practice has produced some equity and a great many new dependencies and incoherencies of debatable value to the education system and its equity ambitions. Regardless of causality, the rate of school failure—if

measured as the proportion of pupils failing to progress from lower to upper secondary education—has remained steadily around 15% since rising to that level in 2015. In this respect, there is no visible impact from the policies implemented during the first quarter of this century. In light of this history, it is reasonable to assume that the many proposals generated during the present decade (e.g., Swedish Government, 2025a; 2025b; 2025c; 2025d; 2025e) are unlikely to reverse this trend and bring about the desired change.

Previous research and policy theory show that national policy tends to be informative for schools and their personnel, but is usually adopted in ways that ‘fit’ already existing conditions or dispositions (Ball et al., 2012; Haug, 2017). In the Swedish context too, it has been argued that micro policy ‘wins’ over macro policy (Blossing et al., 2015: 66f). This aligns with the findings of the present study concerning the emergence in Swedish schools of a parallel set of policies regarding equity and provision of educational support.

Understanding these findings through Foucault’s theoretical perspective on power and governance adds something further to the idea that equity is simply ‘lost in translation’ when macro policy becomes local micro policy. Rather, this perspective invites engagement with Foucault’s understanding of power as a process rather than an object to be used. Within such processes, politics and other forms of macro policy are active within a multi-level system of governance, yet always together with numerous actors participating in the power dynamics (Foucault, 1978/1990: 93). In light of this study’s findings, and of the genealogical contingencies visible in their complexity, it is probably more accurate to understand equity as being conceived bottom up, even if it is mandated top down, as other scholars have also suggested (cf. Blossing et al., 2015; Clark et al., 1998). Deep and enduring human strivings such as power, control, safety, survival, meaning, and relationships can be presumed to play out in contemporary processes as they always have, thereby displacing the intentions of political policy. This is not to suggest that well-intentioned macro policy is without value, but rather that a shift of focus may be worth discussing. What might have happened if the national policies of the 1960s had remained untouched to the present day, and the discernment and experimentation required to enact and realise the high ideals of school equity had instead been entrusted to education professionals? These are not disguised recommendations for the future, but a way of critically questioning the lack of consistent evidence that equity and school improvement are strengthened by national politics if fundamental building blocks are missing at the micro level (cf. Barrenechea et al., 2023; Hopkins et al., 2014). Moreover, as research and governmental inquiries have for decades shown how new conditions, standards, rules, and tasks imposed on education professionals become sources of stress and ‘time theft’ (Creagh et al., 2023). The 21 inquiries launched in the first three years of the current Swedish government’s term contain proposals intended to reduce teachers’ workload and ‘make more time for teaching’, while simultaneously introducing new reporting systems, new organisational

structures, new concepts and tasks related to educational support, a new grading system, new educational professions, and so on—all of which require substantial time to dismantle the old and to understand, deliberate, enact, and adjust to the new. While the rationale is that the new arrangements replace earlier, less efficient and more time-consuming ones, this remains to be proven and is, for the moment, contradicted by current knowledge about the results of similar policy waves over recent decades. Closing this discussion of the limits of national policy in moving towards equitable education, the focus now turns to the historical contingencies linked to the present situation. A critical genealogical examination of these is useful for understanding the power dynamics operating in everyday life in schools today, and for considering how they might influence provision of educational support in ways that improve equity rather than undermine it.

Contingencies of the education system and special education

Situating the study within the field of special education through a critical genealogical approach offers an analytical vantage point that can be useful for inquiry into the provision of educational support and its relation to educational equity. What are the linkages and processes that constitute the current power dynamics influencing provision of educational support? How did—and still do—these things happen? (cf. Foucault, 1983: 171ff; 1980: 50f). The findings of the present study are contingent on the history of the Swedish education system and its relation to special education, in a continuum of categorising groups of pupils as responsible for their own school failure, thereby enabling responsibility to be shifted away from mainstream education and onto special education. The historical categories of failing pupils compiled by Hjärne (2016) can be extended with labels that have become hegemonic in the decade since her review: unmotivated (*omotiverad*), home-sitter (*hemmasittare*), multilingual (*flerspråkig*), and NDD-pupil (*NPF-elev*). These labels can be linked to the problematisations of attitude, absence, migration, and NDD, which this study suggests are pivotal in forming the overarching problematisation of school failure, described in more detail in article 3. These problematisations of school failure are historically contingent not only because they label and simplify problems, thereby enabling both deferral of responsibility (cf. Allan, 2007; Hjärne, 2016; Skrtic, 1999) and ‘pigeonholing’ (Skrtic, 1995: 212), but also because they form part of discourses, truths, ways of thinking, and practices that serve the preservation of dominant positions within power dynamics (Foucault, 1978/1990: 98ff) in the Swedish education system, much as they do in other contexts (Allan, 2007; Allan et al., 2023; Florian, 2019; Skrtic

1991; 1999). They are also contingent on the historical striving for equity and equal opportunity for all.

As described in the opening chapters of the thesis, the historical continuum of schools unsuccessfully striving for equity and success for all pupils has long contained a tension around responsibility when making sense of failure (Allodi, 2017; Helldin, 1997; Magnússon & Pettersson, 2021).

The 19th- and 20th-century separation of pupils according to ability, traits, and social class into different schools with different curricula persisted even after the shift to a unitary school system in 1962, through the retention of help classes, which later became special classes and eventually developed into special education (Tinglev, 2014: 6ff). The present distortion of equity, as shown in the empirical findings, is thus argued to be linked to the historical contingency and inherent complexity of special education, originally introduced to manage pupils whom mainstream teaching was considered unable to accommodate (Allodi, 2017; Florian, 2019; Skrtic, 1999). These historical complexities include power dynamics such as those identified in the study: contested understandings of what education is and can be, of disability, of social stratification, and of the labelling of normative and ‘other’ pupils and families—issues foregrounded early in special education research (Allan et al., 1998; Skrtic, 1991). At the same time, the empirical material shows that the decisive turning point for pupils at risk of school failure often seems to be an assessment carried out by a special educator and the resulting action plan, which is also often developed and at least partly enacted by special educators. To add further complexity, this turning point is often made available to pupils closer to the normative centre and belonging to relatively resourceful families. Thus, it simultaneously supports pupils in disadvantaged situations and reproduces and reinforces their disadvantage.

Special educators mediating provision of scarce educational support through categorisations

It is central to any discussion of the contingencies of special education and its historical power dynamics that, in the studied schools, most provision of educational support is mediated by special educators. Special educators, and occasionally other members of PSS teams, encourage teachers to adopt critical and alternative perspectives and to develop more inclusive teaching for the benefit of pupils who are not learning or who are disruptive in class. Teachers, in turn, often want special educators to remove such pupils from their classrooms. Yet special educators themselves often decide to supplement mainstream teaching with special educational support in segregated settings. At times, a special education teacher is introduced into the mainstream classroom. More frequently, however, mainstream teachers are relieved by having

pupils withdrawn for individual teaching or for teaching in smaller groups. In this way, special educators may contribute to the continued use of exclusion as a solution—if not *the* solution—particularly where such arrangements are perceived to be successful. At the same time, special educators are leading advocates of inclusive solutions and seldom prefer exclusionary ones, as the accounts in this study show, in line with previous research (Corral-Granados, 2024; Menckel et al., 2024; Ross-Hill, 2009; Saloviita, 2020). Their inclusive ambitions, and the discourse that inclusive mainstream teaching is the key to success, lose force because of the apparent success of exclusionary special educational practices. Given the varying ambition and success with which mainstream teachers attempt to adopt inclusive practices, the discourse that some pupils ‘cannot be taught in mainstream class’ remains strong. Within this complexity, it is difficult to see how school would immediately become a better place for pupils experiencing difficulties if special education did not exist tomorrow. At the same time, the present findings and their genealogical contingencies support the claims of scholars who have positioned themselves critically in relation to special education, arguing that it perpetuates the perceived need for something special to complement the mainstream, since the mainstream has fewer incentives to become inclusive if problems can be solved elsewhere by the special educator (cf. Allan, 2007; Florian, 2019; Skrtic, 1999; Slee, 2008). Addressing this raises further critical questions that go beyond simply treating special education as a scapegoat. To paraphrase Clark, Dyson, and Millward (1998: 169f), it is possible to recognise that, since ‘the need for differential response is not itself removed when the special-mainstream distinction is removed’ and ‘forms of provision can be dismantled, but the dilemmas and complexities out of which they arise cannot’, ‘we can relate the complex features of special needs education in practice to the complex processes which produce it’. The empirical findings of this study show that educational support mediated and provided by special educators appears to work when it is actually provided to pupils experiencing school failure, including when it is delivered by mainstream teachers in inclusive forms. It is therefore reasonable to consider that educational support mediated and provided by special educators on equitable grounds could prove crucial for school improvement and equity, if it encompassed all pupils who need it. It is also relevant to underline that it is exclusionary special education that appears to hamper the development of mainstream teaching, whereas special educators’ advocacy of *inclusion* and *inclusive* provision of special educational support probably contributes to making mainstream teaching more inclusive.

The problem of unequal selection of pupils for assessment and adequate provision of educational support can partly be understood as underpinned by the unfortunate compounded effects of the continued reliance on exclusionary special education. Because exclusionary arrangements are resource-intensive, they reinforce the idea that educational support is scarce, which in turn renders rational—and therefore true—the need to regulate and limit access to it. The

challenge of regulation is then managed within the domain of special education and takes on a *modus operandi* that can be straightforwardly traced: selection is based on categorising pupils through medical-psychiatric diagnoses and moralising judgements.

In 19th- and early 20th-century Sweden, it was legitimate to say that some pupils were impossible to teach because they were ‘vagrants’ or ‘morons’ (Hjörne, 2016). A century later, similarly dismissive claims remain legitimate when directed at pupils described as ‘unmotivated’ or as “not giving a damn”, to re-cite a learning mentor quoted in article 3. There, the quotation exemplifies discourse shaping one of the main problematisations of school failure—pupils’ *attitude*. The present study also shows how the separate classes that once existed for ‘morally deviant’ pupils or for pupils judged ‘insufficiently mature for school’ now have their counterparts in separate classrooms for, more or less, the same categories of pupils, albeit under new labels. The historical contingency is difficult to dismiss. Moreover, the contingency of disability and medical diagnosis as central to special education must be understood in light of the power that formal diagnosis now exerts as a key to access special educational support (Asp-Onsjö, 2017; Laurin, 2021; Tegtmejer et al., 2023). This thesis adds to the growing body of research on diagnosis by confirming that diagnoses have become assets by which families acquire resources from the education system, and that this occurs more efficiently where families already hold considerable resources (Allan, 1995; Laurin, 2021; Skrtic, 1995; Skrtic et al., 2021). Medical diagnoses providing access to resources such as educational support while also preserving a good position in status competitions are preferred, and subsequently disproportionately assigned to pupils from families located in the upper tiers of the socioeconomic hierarchy (Skrtic et al., 2021). The process by which families from these tiers acquire and protect resources and privileges by exerting pressure on schools and school personnel can itself be understood as part of a historically contingent accountability structure (Hirschman, 1970; Reay, 2004) that continues into the present (Curran, 2022; Jobér, 2015). Public-sector accountability structures have also expanded, reaching a current peak in the implementation of New Public Management practices (Bornemark, 2018a; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). The pressure to withstand scrutiny and be able to present documentary proof of action taken in accordance with formal mandates contributes to the importance now attached to formal medical diagnosis, which is provided by a third party deemed professionally qualified to judge pupils’ neurological and cognitive abilities. Yet, because this third party distributes diagnoses disproportionately across social groups—in Sweden as in many other countries (Adams Lyngbäck et al., 2023; Gubi et al., 2022)—the effect of allowing diagnosis to determine the distribution of educational support is the continued reproduction of inequality between social groups.

Narrowing provision of educational support through categories and limiting tools

The tendency to narrow and limit understandings of which pupils need educational support has further implications. The problematisations of school failure made visible in the empirical findings (Article 3) extend earlier discussions (e.g., Skrtic, 1995: 211ff; Slee, 2008: 102) of the vicious circle that hinders school development. Categorising and simplifying school failure and the diversity of educational needs leads to a narrow range of solutions into which pupils are pigeonholed (Skrtic, 1995: 212). Besides making provision of educational support suboptimal, this simplification at times contributes to support being withheld altogether, when no special tools are perceived to be available. This occurs when the absence of tools coincides with what Foucault (1980: 131) would call a *truth* according to which mainstream teaching is already adequate and school failure is a pathology of the pupil for which the school is not responsible (Skrtic, 1995: 213). If there are no tools for addressing lack of motivation, to take one example, and the problematisation surrounding it directs responsibility to the pupil rather than to the school, a teacher may consider it sufficient to have a motivational talk during class and, when that proves ineffective, conclude that “I can bring the horse to the water, but I can’t force it to drink”, as cited in article 3. In the case of pupils experiencing difficulties related to an NDD, special educators do provide teachers with tools to use, and the mere existence of such tools positions school personnel as responsible for acting in relation to the school failure that occurs. Yet if the school runs out of available tools, rationales of the ‘I did what I could’ kind may gain collegial legitimacy through micro policy stipulating that, if the tools offered by special educators are not sufficient, nothing further can be done. This rationale appears to deactivate the possibility of learning or acquiring new tools, whether individually as a teacher or collectively through collegial collaboration. In the case of the problematisation of migration, the tools understood to exist within schools are mainly other personnel, rather than strategies or techniques that a mainstream teacher could adopt. If a pupil has recently migrated, a multilingual classroom assistant is often assigned through a standardised procedure within the school organisation. Yet while this support is often limited to two or three hours a week, there is little corresponding adjustment in the pedagogy or didactics of mainstream teachers, such as through translanguaging or other language development approaches. In the examples of needs related to migration and of those related to NDD, it becomes visible, as already described, that pressure from parents matters, depending on their resources. As far as this study’s empirical findings can show, support for pupils with an NDD—especially where formally diagnosed—is often resource-intensive, but is nevertheless generally provided more or less in line with pupils’ needs, as mandated in the sections of the EA concerning educational sup-

port (ch. 3, §5–9). Support from a multilingual classroom assistant, by contrast, is almost never provided at a level corresponding to pupils' needs, even though the EA stipulates this specifically for that form of support (ch. 3, §12i). While this disproportionality was visible in every case observed during fieldwork, it was not questioned by parents, LEAs, principals, or other personnel in any of those cases. The prevailing *truth* concerning MCAs is that they can spend only a few hours per week with a newly arrived pupil because the LEA does not provide enough MCA personnel to the school—even though it remains the responsibility of the school and its principal to supplement staffing if the LEA allocation is insufficient.

Adopting a critical gaze as key for equity in the education system

Foucauldian genealogy and problematisation aim to make visible what has not previously been visible. The emphasis is not on concluding that it is inherently bad that present practices are historically contingent, and then building an attitude of denunciation on that basis. Rather, the interest lies in *how* present practices are contingent and in how they have remained so throughout the studied piece of history, including the two-year span examined in this study (cf. Koopman, 2013: 143f). This is the aim of critical inquiry and curiosity within a Foucauldian approach. While this tradition invites non-normative conclusions and suspends judgement, it nevertheless opens space for critical responses to what is made visible. The discussions in the articles comprising this thesis may be seen as stepping beyond objective examination and exposure into a more evaluative register. They contain concrete suggestions for improving coherence in equity work, such as requiring the central government to define the concept more clearly in its funding programmes (Article 1) or increasing scrutiny of provision of educational support in order to ensure that it is substantial and adequate (Article 3). This concluding discussion has likewise articulated some relatively concrete ideas about how teachers and other education professionals might act within the power dynamics made visible here in order to safeguard and improve equity. Even so, the thesis's main contribution lies in showing that there is more to it than we recognise—or want to recognise—when it comes to educational support and equity. It is not necessarily the case that the ones made visible here are the power dynamics that should now be mastered or controlled. Rather, the findings invite everyone holding responsibility within the education system to be touched by what is made visible and to test their thinking, as Stengers (2021) suggests. There are likely to be particular power dynamics operating within each individual setting, within each person, and within each of the contexts in which responsibility is held. This study is intended as an invitation to go deeper and critically

examine individual and collective *truths*, the *problematizations* occurring in schools and administrations, and to ask: “How do things happen?” (Foucault, 1980: 50). That question enables critical responses to be developed in a variety of settings, where other things will be happening that also influence the provision of educational support and equity. There will be other power dynamics, other problematizations, and other contingencies and complexities linked to other historical contexts. Critical inquiry remains key: curious, probing, and free from judgement or denunciation. For how are schools supposed to develop and improve if only superficial problems are addressed and deeper examination is avoided—examination that might reveal and recognise the problems that truly require our engagement?

Svensk sammanfattning

Ungefär samtidigt som den här avhandlingen läggs fram, runt månadsskiftet maj–juni, får alla elever som avslutar årskurs 9 sina slutbetyg. För ungefär 20 000 av dem kommer betygen inte vara tillräckliga för att komma in på ett nationellt program på gymnasiet (Skolverket, 2025a: 19). Även om de får en ny chans genom introduktionsprogrammet, är det statistiskt bara var fjärde som kommer att avsluta gymnasiestudierna med ett examensbevis i handen (Skolverket 2019: 26; 2026).

Möjligheten till likvärdig utbildning är central i det svenska välfärdssystemet. Det har varit grundläggande för den svenska modellen att en familjs resurser inte ska bestämma barns livschanser. I vårt utbildningssystem kan till exempel ingen betala för att gå i en bättre skola, och alla studier på universitet och högskola är avgiftsfria för bosatta i Sverige. Att få tillägna sig högre utbildning ska inte bero på föräldrars ekonomiska situation eller goda vilja. Men för de 20 000 som får för många F i sitt slutbetyg från grundskolan varje år, dimmar möjligheten till högre studier ut i horisonten – liksom mycket annat. Statistiskt ökar sannolikheten för fysiska och psykiska åkommor senare i livet, lägre löner och till och med kortare liv, än för de som kommer in på gymnasiet. Att fördjupa förståelsen av detta skeende blir än mer angeläget när barn från vissa grupper i samhället är överrepresenterade (Skolverket, 2025b).

Den här avhandlingen redogör för en studie som fokuserar på arbetet med stödinsatser i det svenska utbildningssystemet – stödinsatser som oftast sätts in med avsikt att förhindra skolmisslyckanden. Det huvudsakliga intresset har varit att förstå processer som är involverade i och påverkar arbetet med stödinsatser, bortom det pedagogiska och didaktiska. Baserad på en kritisk, reflexiv och relationell onto-epistemologisk ansats, ger avhandlingen vikt åt historiska såväl som nu observerade processer. För detta syfte har den teoretiska grunden hämtats från Foucault, och framförallt koncepten *problematiseringar*, *makt*, *diskurser*, *kunskap* och *sanningar* (Foucault, 1972/2002; 1988: 257). Avhandlingen redogör för historiska processer relaterade till utveckling av likvärdighet i utbildningssystemet, samt det specialpedagogiska fältet i relation till detta. I den avslutande diskussionen sätts studiens fynd i relation till dessa processer, med hjälp av foucauldiansk teori.

Studiens empiriska material kommer från en omfattande fältstudie på två högstadieskolor, en intervjustudie med skolchefer och rektorer i nio kommuner samt en problemdriven innehållsanalys (Krippendorff, 2013: 355ff) av

statliga och kommunala policydokument relaterade till arbetet med stödinsatser. Empirin synliggör på så sätt processer på flera nivåer och har möjliggjort en grundlig analys av arbetet med stödinsatser på de två skolorna. Fältstudierna pågick under tre terminer och var särskilt fokuserade på en klass i vardera skolan, från att de gick i årskurs 8 tills att de avslutade årskurs 9. En etnografisk ansats (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019: 3) användes för att samla in data genom deltagande i skolans vardag, på lektioner, möten, raster och i personalutrymmen. Materialet omfattar också intervjuer med elever, vårdnadshavare, lärare och annan skolpersonal. Intervjuer och fältanteckningar har varit föremål för en tematisk analys (Braun & Clarke, 2022: 35f).

I formen av en sammanläggningsavhandling omfattar kappan utförliga beskrivningar av det som sammanfattats ovan och en diskussion av studiens resultat. Kappan i denna sammanläggningsavhandling omfattar utförliga beskrivningar av det som sammanfattats ovan samt en diskussion av studiens resultat. Studien har tidigare publicerat resultat genom tre artiklar, som avhandlingen bygger på. Artiklarna behandlar i tur och ordning *policy och finansiering* av stödinsatser, stödinsatser i *praktiken* och *tänkande* om stödinsatser. Den första artikeln redogör för en analys av policydokument samt intervjuer med skolchefer och rektorer, där det blev särskilt intressant att analysera arbetet med Statsbidraget för likvärdig skola. I de intervjuades utsagor, liksom i dokumenten som redogjorde för användningen av statsbidraget, framträdde en rad intressanta fynd. Spänningar uppstår i styrningen av bidraget, relaterade till styrningen av skolan generellt. Skolchefen, som i relation till de kommunala skolorna inte kan besluta om hur dessa använder sina medel, nyttjade i hög grad möjligheten att använda statsbidraget för likvärdighet utifrån sitt tycke, hellre än att överlåta medel direkt till skolorna att användas utifrån det rektor ansåg lämpligast. Denna process, präglad av dessa aktörers inbördes maktrelation, är en av flera som synliggjorts under studien och benämns som *maktdynamiker*. Utgångspunkten har varit Foucaults förståelse av makt som något som alltid finns överallt och som alla innehar, där makt dessutom kan vara eller göra både gott och ont. Makt är enligt Foucault inte heller nödvändigtvis hierarkiskt organiserad, utan en pågående och historisk process (Foucault, 1978/1990: 93). Resultatet av maktdynamiken som blev synlig i relation till arbetet med det statliga likvärdighetsbidraget, visar att begreppet likvärdighet tolkades fritt. I regeringens reglering av bidraget uppmuntrades visserligen en fri tolkning utifrån lokala behov, men i de studerade kommunerna tolkades likvärdighetsbegreppet också utifrån aktörers egna intressen av att behålla eller stärka sin position i den pågående maktdynamiken, snarare än inkom för att stärka likvärdigheten i kommunens skolor.

Den andra och tredje artikeln redogör för resultat från fältstudien på de två skolorna. I den första är den huvudsakliga maktdynamiken som blivit synlig baserad på spänningar mellan organisationslogiker och professionslogiker (Lundström & Parding, 2011). Där organisationslogikerna präglas av mätande, utvärderande och jämförande, präglas professionslogikerna av tillit till

den kunskap och erfarenhet som kommer med professionen och en flexibilitet i mötet med olika situationer som uppstår. I sina olika roller i skolan upplever personalen press ”uppifrån” att nå uppsatta mål, inte minst att godkänna så många elever som möjligt. Ett återkommande vittnesmål är att pressen leder till försök att ”hålla ryggen fri”, snarare än försök att göra det som läraren, specialpedagogen eller annan i personalen tycker är rätt sak att göra. Pressen får ytterligare lager då skolpersonalen upplever *tidsfattigdom* (Creagh et al., 2023). Slitningen som uppstår i spänningen mellan organisations- och professionslogikerna förstås i studien leda till *etisk stress* (Bornemark 2018a: 94ff), som i sin tur försvårar likvärdighetsarbetet. En av flera effekter av dessa makt-dynamiker är att skolpersonal i olika roller dokumenterar att stödinsatser gjorts, insatser som i verkligheten inte alltid varit stödinsatser. I avhandlingen beskrivs det på engelska som *illusional support*, i kontrast till educational support. På svenska kan det i en liknande språklig figur benämnas *spökinsatser*. Några exempel är när ämnet Svenska som andraspråk (SVA) kategoriseras som en stödinsats för elever som har F i matematik, eller när elever ges möjlighet att frivilligt gå till en speciallärare, som de då nästan aldrig går till. Det framgår i det empiriska materialet att spökinsatser i högre grad tillfaller elever vars vårdnadshavare är mindre påstridiga rörande skolans insatser. Givet det sedan länge beforskade sambandet mellan en familjs resurser och dessas engagemang och stridbarhet i relation till skolan (Curran, 2022), finns i denna studie liknande mönster som också blir synliga, bland annat i samband med tillhandahållandet av särskilt stöd och åtgärdsprogram. I de två klasserna på skolorna där fältstudien gjordes var det 20 elever som vid starten av årskurs 9 hade F i minst ett kärnämne och därmed riskerade att bli obehöriga för gymnasiets nationella program. Av dessa hade 11 elever föräldrar som hade migrerat, och 9 hade föräldrar som var födda i Sverige. Av de senare fick samtliga 9 pedagogiska kartläggningar genomförda och åtgärdsprogram med särskilt stöd sattes in. Inga av de 11 eleverna med migrerade föräldrar fick kartläggningar eller åtgärdsprogram. Resultatet för eleverna med föräldrar födda i Sverige blev att 7 av 9 till slut höjde sina betyg så att de blev behöriga, medan endast 2 av de 11 eleverna, vars föräldrar hade migrationsbakgrund och som inte fått vare sig kartläggning eller åtgärdsprogram, lyckades bli behöriga.

Artikel tre fördjupar förståelsen av hur det kan bli så, genom att synliggöra hur skolmisslyckanden *problematiserar*. En problematisering utifrån Foucaults begrepp är en process där något konstrueras utifrån olika maktrelationer och intressen som går bortom intresset för ett problem som sådant. En problematisering skapar inte problemet, utan formar förståelsen av det utifrån dessa intressen. För Foucault (1985: 11ff; 1988: 257) är en problematisering inte heller ett intellektuellt arbete för att fördjupa förståelse för problemet och hur det kan lösas. Den här presenterade studien har gjort synligt hur en övergripande problematisering av skolmisslyckanden formas genom fyra särskilda problematiseringar av *attityd*, *frånvaro*, *migration* och *neuropsykiatriska*

funktionshinder (NPF). Det empiriska materialet gör synligt hur dessa problematiseringar formas i en process som också förskjuter ansvar från skolan och dess personal till eleven och dess familj. Tydligast är det i problematiseringen av attityd, som formas av diskurser om bland annat ”curlingföräldrar” och föräldrar som ”inte bryr sig”, vilket leder till att elever ”skiter i skolan”. Det görs genom problematiseringen tydligt att elevernas bristande motivation eller attityd till skolarbete ligger bortom lärares kontroll. Problematismen möjliggör utvecklingen av en *mikropolicy* (Ozga, 2021) där en elevs bristande attityd kan göra det okej för en lärare att minska sina ansträngningar att nå fram med undervisningen. En annan mikropolicy som föds genom problematiseringen påverkar fördelningen av särskilt stöd och andra stödinsatser: när det inte går att ge stöd till alla prioriteras elever med ”rätt” attityd eller med vårdnadshavare som har ”rätt” attityd. Liknande exempel finns kopplade till de andra problematiseringarna, till exempel i en uppfattning att skolan inte kan göra något åt en elev med omfattande frånvaro eller brister i svenska språket. Problematismen om NPF är den enda som formas med skolan som ansvarig för att anpassa undervisning och tillhandahålla det stöd eleven ses vara i behov av. Samtidigt utvecklas mikropolicy om att elever som får en formell medicinsk diagnos går före för kartläggningar och sedermera åtgärdsprogram. Detta, likväl som idén om att prioritera elever med ”rätt” attityd, är exempel där den mikropolicy som utvecklas avviker tydligt från makropolicy, som skollagens bestämmelse om att elever i behov av stöd ska få det – utan ytterligare villkor. Att engagerade vårdnadshavare stärker elevens möjligheter att få stöd kan också ses i relation till välfärdsstatens fundamentala strävan att ett barns familj inte ska påverka möjligheterna till utbildning och dess livschanser. Maktdynamiken i problematiseringarna visar liksom i fallen med likvärdighetsbidraget och organisationslogikerna att den som är i dominerande ställning agerar utifrån intressen att behålla och stärka sin dominerande position, utöver intresset för elevernas skolgång och att tillhandahålla stödinsatser till dem på bästa möjliga sätt.

Sammanfattningsvis har studien i sin helhet synliggjort ett antal processer som framförallt förstås som maktdynamiker, vilka på olika sätt påverkar arbetet med stödinsatser:

- Likvärdighetsbegreppet är öppet för tolkning i policy, praktik och tänkande om stödinsatser, trots att det definieras i den nationella politiken i allmänhet och i utbildningspolitiken i synnerhet. Den grundläggande principen att barns utbildnings- och livschanser inte ska vara beroende av deras familjer är i praktiken åsidosatt.
- Lärare och annan skolpersonal upplever tidsbrist och begränsade möjligheter att agera i enlighet med sin professionella logik – exempelvis när det gäller att tillhandahålla stödinsatser som motsvarar elevers behov.

- Lärare och annan skolpersonal upplever press att lyckas med det som uppfattas som ett omöjligt uppdrag på grund av knapphet av tid och resurser. Detta leder till att de ”håller ryggen fri” och gör det de upplever att de måste, snarare än det de vill och själva tycker att de borde för elevernas bästa.
- För att hantera tidsbristen görs förenklade problematiseringar av skolmisslyckande och dess orsaker, vilket möjliggör motsvarande förenklade lösningar.
- För att hantera pressen och ansvarsutkrävandet förskjuts ansvaret bort från skolan och dess personal och riktas i stället oftast mot elever och deras familjer.
- Stödinsatser tillhandahålls i betydande utsträckning utifrån moraliserande bedömningar och kategoriseringar, ofta understödda av formella medicinsk-psykiatriska diagnoser, snarare än baserat på elevers behov.

Dessa nu pågående processer diskuteras i relation till historiska processer kopplade till utbildningsväsendets komplexitet. Inte minst gällande likvärdighetsarbete och det specialpedagogiska fältet i relation till detta (Hjørne, 2016; Magnússon m fl., 2019). Det är grundläggande för diskussionen att arbete för likvärdighet med hjälp av specialpedagogik och stödinsatser alltid präglats av en komplexitet med konkurrerande värderingar och mål. Spänningarna och maktdynamikerna som blivit synliga i studien känns igen från historien och blir mer förståeliga i ljuset av den.

Det är tydligt att den pågående undermineringen eller ”lösgörandet” av likvärdighet som blivit synlig i studien huvudsakligen sker oavsiktligt och omedvetet, i samband med göranden som avser verka för likvärdighet. Konkurrerande intressen av makt och kontroll på olika nivåer. Intressen som till synes försämrar villkoren för likvärdighetsarbetet. På flera sätt är det förståeligt att skolans personal hamnar i att göra som de gör, till exempel när de skjuter ifrån sig ansvar och formar problematiseringar för att hålla ryggen fri – saker som dessutom ofta görs omedvetet. Det är helt klart svårt att arbeta i skolan, med all komplexitet och alla krav det innebär. Avhandlingen gör inte på något sätt anspråk på att döma någon. Samtidigt avskriver den inte någons ansvar för att, när oegentligheter blir synliga, ta dessa på allvar. En svår diskussion som följer de oegentligheter som blivit synliga i relation till den villkorade fördelningen av stödinsatser är hur en fördelning utifrån svensk likvärdighetspolicy borde se ut. Om inte alla kan få stödinsatser, för att det råder knapphet av

resurser, tid och möjligheter att genomföra exempelvis kartläggningar och åtgärdsprogram – hur ska en skola prioritera? I diskussionen lyfts det att detta kommer att se olika ut i olika lokala kontexter, och att det finns anledning att ställa sig frågande till att lösningen skulle finnas i ytterligare policy från regeringens sida. En historisk tillbakablick ger för handen att ändringar i betygssystem, finansiering, skolval, med mera, varit gynnsamt för vissa elever och elevgrupper, medan andra missgynnats. I det stora hela, har inga övergripande positiva trender ägt rum. Sett till skolresultat och gymnasiebehörighet har kurvan gått neråt sedan dagens behörighetskrav infördes 2011 (Skolverket, 2025a). Det finns goda skäl att förstå det som att likvärdighet i skolan åstadkoms nerifrån och upp, även om policybeslut kommer uppifrån. I relation till specialpedagogikens historiska processer, kan vi i de empiriska fynden se ett kontinuum i konstruerandet av elever som misslyckas i skolan som moraliskt avvikande och i behov av medicinska diagnoser (jfr. Hjørne, 2016). På skolorna finns en dynamik där specialpedagogisk personal tror på och arbetar för inkluderande stödinsatser och specialpedagogik i ordinarie klassrum, samtidigt som de också tillhandahåller stödinsatser och specialpedagogik utanför ordinarie klassrum (jfr. Paulsrud, 2024; Saloviita, 2020). När ordinarie lärare anser att den formen av stöd ger goda resultat, undermineras den specialpedagogiska personalens argument för inkludering och exkluderande stödinsatser etableras som en väg att gå när elever är i behov av stöd. Eftersom stödinsatser individuellt, i specialgrupper eller särskilda undervisningsgrupper är resurskrävande, går det att se att det bidrar till idén om att det finns begränsad tillgång till stödinsatser, och idén som följer om att dessa då måste fördelas och prioriteras mellan elever. Detta leder i sin tur till behov av att rationalisera beslut om fördelning och prioritering, till exempel genom att använda medicinska diagnoser som bevis för ett reellt behov av stödinsatser (jfr. Tegmejer et al., 2021; 2023).

Den avslutande diskussionen i relation till det empiriska materialet handlar om att alla med ansvar i utbildningssystemet – från klassrummet till regeringen – kan vara betjänta av avhandlingens fynd och analyser för att fördjupa tänkandet över vad som kan behövas i olika kontexter och tider. De specifika exempel på utmaningar, problem och komplexiteter som här görs synliga är inte nödvändigtvis de som är viktigast att ta tag i för en skola eller en stab på Utbildningsdepartementet. Snarare uppmuntras en stärkt reflexivitet kring vad som begränsar tänkandet, och hur tänkandet kring skolan och dess utmaningar och möjligheter kan nå djupare nivåer, förbi det som görs synligt som problem och ner till det som kan vara de verkliga problemen att ta sig an.

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