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Is Equity in Education Possible? A Study on the Power of the Swedish Superintendent

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the power dynamics experienced by superintendents (SIs) in Swedish municipalities, highlighting how their power is influenced by various local factors. While SIs assert their autonomy, local economic conditions and external influences significantly limit their capacity. Five key factors are identified: history and culture, economy, central governance, and the needs and interests of stakeholders. The study explores three forms of power: substantive (control over resources), relational (interpersonal networks), and institutional (established norms). It concludes that SIs must navigate formal structures and informal relationships to promote educational equity, though challenges like insufficient resources often impede this goal.

Introduction

Ensuring equity in education is a central goal in Sweden, yet the superintendent (SI) responsible for this task often faces unclear authority and limited power to influence outcomes. Leadership is strongly associated with power, and without power, leading becomes difficult (Christensen et al., 2014). In Sweden, the state has determined that each school board must have at least one (SI) responsible for the overall education system. However, no formal power is attributed to the SI. The SI's task is to ensure that the education system fulfills the compensatory assignment (CA), which central aspect of equity in education in Sweden. The CA is a central component of educational equity, aiming to ensure students have equitable opportunities to benefit from their education. It is up to each SI to decide how to achieve educational equity, through making decisions on methods and approaches in collaboration with various local actors and stakeholders. In addition to the local actors, structural conditions affect the SI's power and discretion of action.

In Sweden, the SI plays a prominent role within the chain of governance (Seven & Foss, 2024). Various actors who decide and implement initiatives crucial for achieving educational goals (such as equity in education and the CA) operate within the chain of governance (Ryffe, 2019). Opportunities for making decisions and starting initiatives are termed "transitions." During these transitions, central actors such as SIs can act and exert influence (Johansson & Ärlestig, 2020) and the SI's power to act to further the CA becomes evident. The current study aims to create new knowledge about SIs´ power to create conditions for and fulfil the CA. To this end, the study investigates the following research question:

How is the SI's CA enabled or limited by power dimensions?

In this study, the dimension of power will be primarily conceptualized in relation to how various local actors and contextual conditions shape and influence the authority and agency of the SI, particularly in relation to the school's CA.

Actors within the Swedish Education System

In Sweden, the school system comprises both public and independent (private) schools. The focus of this study is the public schools. The governance of the school system occurs through parliament enacting laws which the government implements (Lindvall et al., 2020). Municipalities elect political representatives to

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committees that handle education-related matters. These committee positions are often part-time, making the elected representatives reliant on the SI's expertise (Liljenberg et al., 2023; Quennerstedt, 2007). The work of the committee involves balancing different aspects of the municipality's operations and interests that affect the SI (Johansson & Ärlestig, 2021).

Municipalities are responsible for determining how resources are distributed for education. This tends to create inequality for students and has led to the state investigating whether it should take greater responsibility for funding decisions (SOU, 2022, p. 53). The SI is responsible for ensuring both that sufficient resources are available for high-quality education and that these resources are allocated based on students' varying needs (SFS, 2010, p. 800, Chapter 2, Section 8b). The SI's role also involves supporting the school board by providing policy guidance and ensuring compliance with regulations (SFS, 2010, p. 800, Chapter 2, Section 8a).

The SI works closely with headmasters to identify needs and present the school board with materials to support its decision-making. Although headmasters have significant autonomy over their institutions, they are in a dependent relationship with the SI, who is their superior. The dialogue between these actors is crucial to ensuring resources are used effectively to promote students' development.

In the Swedish context, laws and ideology (as reflected in the curriculum) are consistently aligned across the country. However, the financial conditions differ throughout the country, as municipalities themselves decide how large a portion of the total budget is allocated to schools. This affects the SI's power and autonomy. In addition to the formal actors in the chain of governance, trade unions, other municipal leaders, civil society, and local conditions affects the SI´s and the chain of governance (Hallinger, 2018; Wiborg, 2016). How such contextual variations affect governance practices remains underexplored – a gap this article seeks to address.

The Superintendent – A Central Actor in the Chain of Governance

The SI plays a central role in the leadership and governance of the education system. The SI is expected to take responsibility for the entirety of the education system (Foss and Krantz, 2022; Roos et al., 2022). The municipal school board expects the SI, as part of their role, to be accountable for the school's performance (Rapp et al., 2022; Roos et al., 2022).

When the role of the SI was formalized in 2019, the state intended for the position to contribute to equity (Nihlfors & Bröms, 2021). While the SI is tasked with ensuring equity in education, their power is affected by several other central actors within the education system that compete to protect or preserve their positions (Coviello, 2024; Pröitz et al., 2023). Key actors, such as teachers' unions, safeguard their interests and have, to some extent, hindered school development (Wiborg, 2016). Other actors, such as civil society, the OECD, other municipal leaders and educational authorities, exert direct or indirect influence over the education system and the SI (Eilard, 2022; Novak, 2018).

The SI receives directives, policies and objectives from the national level (Bjursell et al., 2023). However, knowledge about how the SI handles these in relation to the CA is limited (Seven & Foss, 2024). Given that the SI prepares materials to inform the school board's decision making, power is, to some extent, found in both the administrative and political spheres (Johansson et al., 2016). The SI has significant power over the development of education within the municipality (Johansson et al., 2016). Their influence is, in fact, so significant that it has been argued they are holding the true authority within the governance framework (Quennerstedt, 2007). How this influence is manifest depends on various factors, including the SI's personal competencies and the local context in which they act (Johansson et al., 2016; Quennerstedt, 2007).

The SI's ability to act should be understood as both situational and context dependent (Foss & Krantz, 2022). Accordingly, the SI's leadership is strongly linked to their specific tasks, situations, and actions (Yukl, 2012). A deeper understanding of the SI's power and autonomy can be gained by identifying the SI's activities, which in this context are expressed through their own statements regarding the CA.

Leadership must, among other things, relate to economic, political, and sociocultural circumstances (Hallinger, 2018; Chingara and Heystek (2019)). Additionally, the legal context, which is central in Sweden, plays a key role in the chain of governance (Eilard, 2022; Novak, 2018). Analysing the conditions created by this context and their impact on the SI reveals the prerequisites for successful leadership and, consequently, the potential for achieving the desired outcomes concerning the CA (Hallinger, 2011; Poekert et al., 2020).

The extent to which leadership and the ability to fulfil the CA depends, among other factors, on the SI's power and the local context (Paulsen et al., 2014; Seven & Foss, 2024). This study focusses on the local context in which the SI operates. Examining this context and the influence of local actors on the SI is crucial for fulfilling the CA.

In conclusion, existing research on SIs has identified several different contexts and settings in which they act, but studies on SIs and equity in education are limited (Epps, 2022). This study aims to generate new knowledge about the Swedish SI's power to be able to fulfil the CA at the local level, an area that has yet to be fully explored (Seven & Foss, 2024).

The Compensatory Assignment, a Central Feature of Equity in Education

In this study, the CA is defined as organizing education in a way that minimizes disparities in students' ability to benefit from their education. The SI's role in this context is to implement the necessary measures to achieve equity, making their power and decisions crucial (Möller, 2017; SOU, 2020, p. 28). Equity and fulfilling the CA are issues that both the state and school boards struggle to manage, and this is a persistent issue in the Nordic countries (Moos et al., 2016, 2023; OECD, 2015, 2023; Pröitz et al., 2023). Government investigations and the Swedish educational authority (Skolverket, 2023, p. 9; SOU, 2020, p. 28) have highlighted the continuing downward trend for equity in Sweden, underscoring the need for effective interventions. Inefficient use of resources contributes to increased disparities in student outcomes, particularly for students who need the most support. The SI's role and function become essential in this context, due to their unique position.

In Sweden, there is a clear correlation between low student performance and socioeconomic conditions (Johansson & Ärlestig, 2021; Skolverket, 2023). To meet the state's requirements for equity in education, several measures have been implemented, including regulating the SI's role (Nihlfors & Bröms, 2021). The SI is intended to be a central actor responsible for the overall education system and to have direct influence on ensuring equity in education (Ministry of Education and Research, 2018, p. 182; Nihlfors & Bröms, 2021). The SI is expected to have an overarching view of the educational operations in order to steer them in the right direction. This entails adapting their initiatives and actions to local conditions.

Granting the SI the mandate and responsibility to lead efforts toward equity in education makes it essential to understand how the SI operates and the specific opportunities available to them within their specific context. According to the Education Act (SFS, 2010, p. 800, Chapter 1, Section 4), educational institutions must take into account students' varying needs and strive to compensate for differences in their ability to benefit from their education. This means that the SI's work is expected to significantly influence student outcomes, which are central to students' progress through the education system, for example, from primary school to upper secondary school.

The CA can be understood and implemented in various ways. The SI's ability, competence, and experience are crucial to this understanding and implementation. Together with the local and structural conditions, they determine the ability to fulfil the CA. The SI plays a central role in ensuring that resources are fairly distributed and that the correct measures are carried out at different levels. This may involve ensuring that school headmasters have the necessary resources and conditions to implement measures to promote equity. It may also include decisions regarding financial and human resources, professional development, and ensuring that students in need of support from qualified teachers and headmasters receive it (Åstrand, 2020). It should be noted that municipalities facing the greatest challenges often allocate fewer resources to these students, which hinders the ability to fulfil the CA (Åstrand, 2020; SOU, 2020: 28.).

Power and Its Different Dimensions

This study takes a theoretical approach based on power. Power originates in three different dimensions, giving rise to three types: substantive, relational, and institutional. These forms of power emanate from the interaction between actors and structures. This interaction implies that actors both influence and are influenced by the structures they inhabit (Archer, 2003; Giddens, 1984). Within this dynamic interaction, agency is present in the capacity for action and discretion (Giddens, 1984, 1991). Power is present when individuals have the ability to act and to act in different ways. Thus, agency and power are linked.

Power is understood as the individual's ability to choose alternatives and influence others (Giddens, 1984, 1991). When this ability is limited or absent, it affects power. Power is not static, but rather contextual, relational, and situational, meaning it can be redistributed and altered depending on the circumstances (Foucault, 2002; Giddens, 1984, 1991).

The content of substantive power is characterized by and associated with what are termed "substances" and "resources." These can be capital, technical and social in nature and may manifest in various arenas that affect an individual's ability to decide and act. Such arenas may be formal, where central actors have strong mandates and exert significant influence (Dahl, 1957, 1961). Another aspect of substantive power is informal power, which can be seen when issues are strategically removed or blocked. This occurs when an individual or group has the power to exclude certain questions from the agenda. This phenomenon is referred to as "non-decisions" (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962).

The third aspect of substantive power manifests through influencing the interests and needs of one's environment (Luke, 1974). This aspect suggests that power is embedded in common perceptions of the environment, which can be at odds with an individual's own perceptions. These three aspects of substantive power indicate that different strategic actors compete to gain influence over other central actors. Relational power in an organization is expressed through interactions, networks, and relationships. Power here entails the ability to influence others, both formally and informally. It is based not only on the hierarchical structure, but also on the social, emotional and communicative bonds between actors (Christensen et al., 2014). Relational power is dynamic and continuously negotiated in different contexts, and an individual's or group's ability to exercise power depends on how well they navigate and manage their relationships within the organization. Transformation occurs when actors in social relationships influence each other's perceptions of reality, and it is particularly in this interplay that relational power emerges (Christensen et al., 2014). Relational power is flexible and adaptable, making it changeable in nature (Foucault, 2002; Giddens, 1984).

With institutional power, the institution itself holds the power. This means that when a norm is well established in the form of laws, regulations, and conventions, it is reproduced and becomes institutionalized. The more established it is, the less likely those within the organization are to question it (Christensen et al., 2014). Institutions are an expression of power relations that result from discursive struggles, which in the short term are independent of agency. When a particular discourse becomes dominant and accepted as the norm, institutional power is established. This means that the majority of those within the organization take this perception of reality for granted.

In this study, power is understood as the SI's ability to influence the CA in a positive direction by controlling and influencing the various dimensions of power.

Data and Method

The aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the SI's power and discretion by studying the CA within the framework of the local context and local conditions. The methodology is qualitative and exploratory in nature, and the data consists of eight semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen as it offers the researcher and the interviewee flexibility, affords deeper understanding, and provides a balance between openness and structure. It also allows the interviewee to alternate between being guided and freely expressing their opinion. The exploratory approach provides the opportunity to explore a small-scale, uncharted topic to uncover new ideas, insights, and perspectives (Denscombe, 2017). This approach has distinct advantages, particularly in cases such as this where the researcher seeks to explore an uncharted area, and where unexpected or extreme examples may illuminate the area of study, thus potentially revealing entirely new phenomena (Denscombe, 2017).

The sample includes representatives who cover the three categorizations of municipalities in Sweden: A, B and C. The division is used in Sweden to facilitate comparisons and analyses in various ways. Participants were purposively sampled to ensure coverage of diverse local contexts and municipal characteristics relevant to the SI's role. Recruitment was conducted through direct contact, aiming to secure informants with pertinent knowledge and experience.

I transcribed all the interviews and conducted an inductive analysis to gain an overview of general trends and patterns in the material. I then applied a deductive method, coding the material based on themes derived from theory, local contexts, and the research question (Braun & Clark, 2006). Some scholars have

criticized using coding in qualitative research, due to the method's tendency to fragment the text (Bryman, 2008). I addressed this concern by initially conducting an inductive reading to gain an overview and holistic understanding of the material. The analysis was not a linear progression from one phase to the next. Instead, it was a recursive process, involving movement between different phases of analysis, as needed (Braun & Clark, 2006). This recursive process ensured that the division of the empirical material formed a coherent system. The various themes thus emerged through an iterative process and are derived from the theoretical starting point, local context, and research question (Braun & Clark, 2006; Cohen et al., 2018).

The text was interpreted and understood contextually, as I analyzed the data both within individual themes and in relation to the whole, where relevant (Bryman, 2008; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The analysis of the material was conducted with reference to the theoretical approaches and the local arena in which the SI operates. This involved interpreting meaningful sections of the material – whether a word, sentence, or entire paragraph – in their broader context.

The coding system was developed through a reflexive and iterative process, grounded in my disciplinary expertise in educational governance, ontological stance on agency-structure relations, the theoretical framework of power dimensions, the research question, and detailed knowledge of the local context (Asper, 2007). This approach ensured a coding schema that was both theoretically informed and empirically nuanced, enabling the identification of meaningful patterns in the data.

To enhance transparency and credibility, selected verbatim quotations are presented in the findings to "give voice" to participants and substantiate analytical claims, an important practice in exploratory research with limited prior studies (Braun & Clark, 2006). Reflexivity was maintained throughout analysis to address potential researcher bias by revisiting codes and interpretations as new insights emerged.

The interviews examined the aspects that impact the SI's power and discretion. Among the factors considered were the local contexts that influence the SI, as reflected in the SIs' statements. Additionally, the study took into account the SIs' statements related to demography as well as other factors they highlighted that may influence their power and discretion (Lund, 2021). To anonymize the SIs' statements, the study refers to the interviewees as X1, X2, etc.

Results

All the SIs who were interviewed stated that they have power and discretion and that they can influence their local context. However, the results indicate that the local context significantly impacts the SIs. Some factors can be attributed to aspects outside the SI's mandate, such as local economic conditions, while others are related to factors that either directly or sometimes indirectly affect the SI.

Based on the systematic review of the empirical material, the following themes emerge from the SIs' statements regarding factors that influence their power: 1) History and culture, 2) Economy, 3) Central actors in the chain of governance, 4) Needs and interests of relevant actors, 5) Other relevant findings.

Historical and Cultural Aspects

In the interviews, several SIs emphasized that certain areas within the municipalities are characterized by a tradition and culture of deprioritising education. These priorities affect academic outcomes and the SI's power and autonomy. Some SIs argued that civil society may lack trust in local politics. This can be traced back to historical events that have led, for example, to parents not trusting local politicians or municipal civil servants. One SI recounted:

> The municipality . . . went along with families exploiting the municipality for money and travel, deceiving it a lot, so there is a hostile attitude in/ . . . /towards politics as well as higher-level civil servants. So, they have no trust in it. This is shown, for example, when surveys are conducted. (X1)

Another SI pointed out that there is a culture and historical foundation of feeling neglected in the municipality, which creates hindrances for the SI. In one part of the municipality, the people see themselves as victims, while in another part of the municipality, there is a completely different view of education and a higher proportion of parents with post-secondary education:

> There is a historical connection, a feeling of being a victim, that's my interpretation./ . . . /They have felt a bit left out, subordinated, and it reflects the area's different conditions and influences. It's a bit like, "Poor us, we've had it worse," and this affects how you work with different issues. If you hit a roadblock, it's often: "Yes, you see, we still have the fewest resources. We have the worst facilities." (X4)

The same SI continued, stating that in another part of the municipality, the conditions are very different:

> A completely different atmosphere, a completely different viewpoint based on the societal structures and perceptions of society. There, there is no victim mentality, but rather a view of, "Here we are, we can do this, we're good. We know we can, and our children will succeed." They have a completely different expectation of the school than parents in the/ . . . /area. There, they somewhat pity themselves. (X4)

The historical and cultural aspects highlighted here exemplify the segregation within society, illustrating its impact on the SI's power and autonomy in relation to the CA. These statements reveal both resistance to and opportunities for the SI's influence. The SIs' statements suggest that in areas where conditions are worse, they have less authority over the schools, which also applies, to some extent, to the schools and their staff.

Economy

Sweden's school funding model is based on each student being assigned a school voucher. The value of the school voucher differs from one school board to another. Each school board also has the ability, based on different calculation methods, to redistribute financial resources to fulfil the state's requirements for the CA. However, it is not uncommon for the allocation of additional resources to have no measurable effect, and there is also often no follow-up on how the extra funds are used. One SI highlighted that the additional resources they receive are insufficient, arguing that the system, with its selection processes and segregated housing, significantly limits the SI's autonomy:

> In the catchment areas, it becomes a difficult issue if management points out—Here we have a highly segregated area. We have a very high school voucher. We have school flight among high-performing students. It becomes a group of students who actually create a downward spiral with very low results, if you look at peer effects. If there were mandatory legislation for school boards to make decisions/ . . . /, there would be a completely different dynamic. Now, many in politics are unable to make that decision. (X3)

> There are also cases where resource allocation can no longer compensate for the difficult circumstances. That's when you need to look at the student composition. (X3)

Another SI claimed that resources are not the reason they struggle to fulfil the CA, stating:

> As a/ . . . /I have quite a bit of influence over which resources we have to help schools with the compensatory assignment. Even if we ask about how the resources are used, I think it's difficult to always get relevant answers. (X8)

Another SI suggested that the issue of the CA is connected to people's desire to associate with others belonging to the same economic class:

> It's that the resource-rich don't want to mix with the resource-poor. That's the core issue. We can try fighting an uphill battle and redistributing resources, and so on. But I mean, we have strong segregation throughout society, and it works so that people always want to strive upwards, so to speak, and where we have systems that involve a high degree of choice, we/ . . . /will have segregation. I think the Swedish debate overemphasises this—They see it as an ethnic issue. I still see it as a class issue. (X5)

Although many argue that the redistribution of resources is insufficient and limits the SI's power and ability to implement the CA, many SIs point out that merely providing resources does not solve the issue. They assert that the challenge is linked to housing segregation, personal life conditions, school choice, and access to linguistic and cultural capital. The results suggest that SI´s feel constrained in their power and discretion, as many factors influencing the CA fall outside the education sector's responsibility. At the same time, many SI´s claim that there is little to no follow-up and oversight regarding how redistributed resources are used for the target group. This further limits their discretion, due to insufficient competence and data, as follow-up is inadequate.

Central Actors in the Chain of Governance

The SIs and their administration are mutually dependent on both the headmasters and the chairs of the school board. The SI is expected to collaborate with the chair and the entire school board to present materials to support decision-making. At the same time, they need to maintain a good relationship with the headmasters, who have a strong mandate and autonomy under the regulations. One SI stated that they ended their previous tenure as an SI because of this:

> I resigned in/. . ./because we had, among other things, two rural schools with 30 students in each school, and I said that this cannot go on./. . ./We have to allocate so much extra money that would have otherwise been spent on the other schools. (X1)

Another SI said that they try to challenge headmasters to broaden their perspective on pedagogical leadership:

> I tell them that yes, decisions about financial organisation – that is also part of pedagogical leadership. You also exercise your pedagogical leadership there. It is not something separate, but that is where you should address, and at your level, so to speak, the shortcomings you observe. (X5)

Yet another SI asserted that the headmasters are strong, but that a good working environment and close cooperation with the headmasters is a prerequisite for effectively working within the organization by strategically collaborating with them and encouraging their professional development. The SI stated:

> I have very good contact with my headmasters. I also have clear check-ins, and they always know when they can book time with me./. . ./I also work a lot with the headmasters on their own development, and that has been greatly appreciated. (X2)

Finally, one SI highlighted the necessity for close collaboration with and education of the school board to build good and trusting relationships:

> My chairperson is very dependent on me, but for me, it's also about respect, that we respect each other's roles. So, the politicians work with *what*, and I work with *how*, and we respect each other in that regard, and we work together, not against each other. (X2)

> Educating them has been an ongoing effort over the years. Educating them, providing input on the operations at every opportunity, through training and information, so that they feel secure. It's the same, they should feel secure. Creating security in the role. (X2)

The SIs' statements suggest that local politics strongly influence and constrain their power and discretion. Local politics are deeply rooted in the local context, and they consider factors beyond those the SI must address. This influence is reflected in the political decisions that limit the SI's power and autonomy.

The statements suggest that the school board and the SI are mutually dependent. However, the picture that emerges shows that the SI's power and discretion to carry out the CA is strongly dependent on local politics as well as on headmasters. Several SIs pointed out that it is difficult to work with local politicians to the schools as the politicians lack expertise in the subject area. When SIs present materials to support a decision on closing an underperforming school, based on academic results and financial concerns, they argue that the local politicians do not act in the best interests of the students. This means that local politicians set the agenda, prioritizing the interests of parents, even though this may be detrimental to the students. By preventing certain issues from being included in the agenda, local politicians limit the SI's power, and in turn, their ability to carry out the CA.

Headmasters have a strong position, which directly impacts the SI. The SI needs to foster good relationships with headmasters, yet, as the SIs' statements highlight, they have limited ability to direct the headmasters due to the extensive autonomy they are granted by regulations. This presents a challenge and a dilemma for the SI in fulfilling the CA.

The Needs and Interests of Relevant Actors

There are several different actors within the municipal arena that directly or indirectly affect the SI. These actors are often within other departments, such as staff within the IT unit that provides systems necessary for the schools, heads of facilities, or employees in the HR department. These individuals often have managers other than the SI, requiring the SI to collaborate with them. Some SIs argue that these roles significantly affect their power and discretion, and in turn, their ability to carry out the CA. One SI commented:

"They are also strong in the private market, so they want me as an individual/. . ./to be influenced by a phone or a computer. So I already have ideas, when I come in here as an employee, about the resources I need, and these companies have been very good at influencing our employees' perceptions of these needs, which means that these managers have had a significant impact on how our operations function, which the operations themselves are not aware of, and this has consequences. And then again, our HR manager gets involved, and we start talking about digital safety rounds, which should be done in a certain way, and it then ties into work environment issues. So these/ . . . /significantly affect our school's operations, in many ways, more than the facilities." (X4)

"But when there are restrictions on which premises we can use, under what conditions, it gets difficult when we go back to operations and describe that this part of the resources, we need in this area is not available. We don't get that money." (X4)

The SIs operate in multiple arenas and have to navigate different needs, conflicts of interest, and conditions. There is frustration among the SIs over their lack of control over central matters, such as facilities, which directly impact core operations and their ability to fulfil the CA. Local conditions dictate the agenda and influence the SIs' (as well as the headmasters' and teachers') power. Furthermore, there are public calls for the state to take greater responsibility for these issues to ensure that disparities in local conditions do not hinder the schools' access, for example, to appropriate facilities or their ability to carry out the CA (SOU, 2020, p. 28).

Other Relevant Findings

Various aspects recur in the SIs' statements, both those that have enabled and limited the SI's power and discretion in carrying out the CA. The most prominent of these is union representatives, but the issue of local economic conditions also evokes strong reactions from the SIs.

One SI stated that collaboration with the union works well:

> We have a really good rapport and work well together. . .. I have never experienced it as the union versus the employer. (X2)

Another SI, however, pointed out a challenge related to unions:

> There are sometimes conflicts of interest, like when the unions build relationships with politicians. Politicians are the employers for the managers and administration. So I have been in situations where a politician calls me and says 'that person cannot be employed.' (X3)

This SI continued:

> I would say about 30% [of the time] they provide support with perspectives and so on, and the rest [of the time] I think they delay a lot, make it difficult, create fear, and I would say that the teachers' unions have been extremely aggressive in every municipality where I have worked. (X3)

A recurring theme in the SIs' statements is the funding of school operations. One SI commented:

> It is also very clear how important the budget is. It is, after all, the local [the municipality's] economy here. And here, it's a huge job, and I may sometimes be critical of my municipality, as the financial aspect takes up so much space compared to the democratic aspects, which I believe should weigh equally. But it's also about NPM [New Public Management]. (X2)

Another SI noted that schools are underfunded, and the SIs find themselves in a situation where they have to manage conflicting goals and other interests:

> The school board, the politicians in the municipal council, and also the Swedish National Agency for Education, should be more aware [of funding challenges]. In some municipalities, priorities differ. A lot [of the funding] per capita goes to elderly care and less to the school. This, in turn, affects the flexibility for planning, leaving very little room to manoeuvre. (X3)

The relationship between union representatives and SIs is complex. Several SIs believe that unions can directly hinder school development, while others believe that the unions can contribute to school development through offering new perspectives that the SI may not have considered. A recurring theme in these statements is that the union, as a strong force in the local arena, influences the SI's thinking even before any action is taken.

Finally, the issue that all the SIs repeatedly returned to is school funding. Most SIs argue that the economy is a tool of control and that limited resources hinder both the SIs and the headmasters. This in turn effects the CA. The examples presented highlight the complexity and interdependencies when conflicting interests and goals come into opposition.

It should be noted that there was one outlier among the interviewees who claimed that the funding of the local education system is good. According to this SI, the school board in question also achieved very good student results and has a strong economy and a high proportion of residents with higher educational levels.

Analysis and Conclusions

The results highlight the complex ways in which substantive, relational, and institutional power manifest within the educational landscape. This study's analysis draws on the theoretical framework of power. The SIs' quotes illustrate how power operates dynamically through the control of resources, relationships among actors, and the institutional structures that govern their actions. These findings align with Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (2000) research, which shows that trust and professionalism are central to the relational dynamics in effective school leadership. Moos et al. (2016) further reinforce this by showing that Nordic superintendents balance trust and control through structured dialogue, illustrating how relational power is both negotiated and institutionalized. At the same time, this study extends their analysis by showing how such trust is situated within broader power structures and not only interpersonal relations.

A key contribution of this study lies in its integration of these theoretical perspectives throughout the research design, data collection, and analysis phases, ensuring that power is understood as a multi-dimensional, interactive phenomenon rather than a static or isolated concept. This theoretical engagement shapes the study's core analytical approach and allows for a nuanced interpretation of the empirical material. It advances earlier work by illustrating how power is experienced and negotiated by SIs in their everyday leadership practice.

Substantive power is most clearly observed in the distribution of resources, such as financial capital and material assets, which fundamentally shape the SIs' possibilities and constraints. Several of the quotes illustrate how the allocation of municipal funds, prioritizing areas like elder care over education, exemplifies Dahl (1957, 1961) conception of power as resource control limiting decision-making. This reflects a clear interaction between substantive and institutional power, as resource allocation is governed by entrenched institutional norms and discourses prioritizing economic efficiency (Foucault, 2002). For example, the critique of New Public Management (NPM) demonstrates how institutional power naturalizes economic rationality at the expense of democratic and equity concerns. This is in line with findings by Adolfsson and Alvunger (2020).

Beyond mere observation, the study actively applies Dahl's and Bachrach and Baratz's theories to reveal how financial constraints do not simply limit what resources are available but shape the very agenda of what can be discussed or acted upon. This is evident through the application of Bachrach and Baratz's (1962) concept of "non-decisions" – where the absence or scarcity of funding effectively excludes certain issues or initiatives from consideration, rendering them invisible within the decision-making process. This analytical insight moves the study beyond description to a critical understanding of how power operates through silencing and omission in education governance.

The theoretical framing of relational power provides a vital lens for interpreting the interpersonal dynamics and networks revealed in the empirical data. The relationship between SIs and local politicians, characterized by mutual respect and role recognition, illustrates Christensen et al.'s (2014) notion of

relational power as negotiated influence that transcends formal hierarchy. The quote about the municipal head's dependency on the SI highlights the fluid and reciprocal nature of relational power described by Giddens (1984), where trust and expertise enable the SI to subtly shape political decisions. Importantly, the study does not treat these relationships as fixed but analyses the ongoing negotiation and contestation of power within social interactions.

Furthermore, this analysis reveals the double-edged nature of relational power, where cooperation and trust coexist with tension and conflict. The "extremely aggressive" stance of unions points to conflictual dimensions within relational power networks, reflecting Christensen et al. (2014) view of power as continuously contested through struggles and resistance. This antagonism illustrates how relational power can also be a site of challenge to authority, complicating the SI's ability to navigate the local educational governance landscape. Such a nuanced view moves beyond simple depictions of power as domination or consensus, highlighting its contested and dynamic character.

Institutional power emerges as a pervasive force structuring the educational environment, manifesting through taken-for-granted norms, legal frameworks, and bureaucratic procedures. The interviewees' reflections on segregated areas and persistent underfunding illustrate Luke's (1974) argument that power is embedded in environmental perceptions and institutionalized practices that reinforce inequity. The discourse around municipal budgets and sector prioritization reveals how institutional power, through discursive struggles (Foucault, 2002), becomes naturalized and accepted as the status quo by actors within the system, consistent with Giddens (1984) theory of structure shaping agency.

This study's empirical analysis does more than merely document institutional constraints; it actively employs Foucault's concept of discourse to explain how certain economic rationalities and prioritization logics become hegemonic, shaping not only behavior but also the beliefs and expectations of educational actors. For example, the acceptance of budget prioritization toward elder care reflects how institutional power shapes "the rules of the game," making some choices appear inevitable and others unthinkable. This interpretation illustrates the critical role of discourse in reproducing power structures within education governance.

Additionally, Archer's (2003) concept of the enabling and constraining nature of institutional contexts is used to interpret how bureaucratic standardization and formal regulations create "little room to manoeuvre" for SIs, limiting their discretion and capacity for meaningful innovation. This highlights how institutional power structures are not merely background conditions but active forces shaping the scope of agency and reform potential in educational leadership. This perspective is substantiated by other researchers who argue that school leaders must balance bureaucratic demands with fostering innovation and trust, highlighting the tensions institutional power places on leadership (Moos et al., 2007).

By integrating these three dimensions of power – substantive, relational, and institutional – this study offers a comprehensive and interactive model for understanding the complexity of power in educational leadership. Rather than treating these forms of power as separate, the analysis demonstrates their interdependence and continuous interplay in shaping the environment within which SIs operate. This multifaceted approach provides a rich and nuanced understanding of how power influences educational governance, policy implementation, and ultimately, equity outcomes.

Practically, the study offers clear insights for current and aspiring SIs:

- Understanding the interplay between different power dimensions helps identify where and how CA can be exercised.
- Trust-based relationships can expand the SI's influence, but leaders must also be alert to how these relationships are shaped by broader institutional rules and expectations.
- Strategic awareness of how discourses normalize certain priorities equips leaders to challenge inequitable norms and advocate for socially just solutions.
- Recognizing the power of "non-decisions" enables SIs to uncover hidden silences in governance that may block progress on equity issues.

The power and discretion that SIs experience is linked to Archer's (2003) theory of agency being shaped and constrained by institutional contexts, providing a nuanced understanding of how bureaucratic standardization limits educational leadership.

This integrated theoretical engagement allows for a richer interpretation of the empirical findings, moving the analysis beyond description to a critical understanding of power dynamics in education. The study's contribution to understanding educational leadership not only as a function of position, but also as a negotiated, situated practice embedded in systems of power. For practising SI, this study offers valuable insights: awareness of the multi-layered nature of power equips leaders to strategically engage with resource constraints (substantive power), relational networks (relational power), and institutional norms (institutional power). Such theoretical insight can guide SI to build trustful relationships, recognize hidden power dynamics, and navigate institutional constraints more effectively. This may imply that, in the long term, a deliberate and reflective approach – characterized by the ability to navigate systemic complexity – can generate meaningful outcomes for those whom the CA mandate is intended to support.

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