To 'patch up' or to 'meet the needs': navigating the politics and visions of 'open school' collaboration and equity work in urban areas in Sweden

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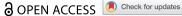
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how school community collaboration is given meaning by municipally employed coordinators whose task is to organise collaboration between schools and other actors in urban areas in Sweden. Inspired by Carol Bacchi's theorisation of the constitutive aspect of discerning problems, it examines how coordinators give meaning to the problems and challenges to which the initiative is intended to respond. The focus is on how coordinators rationalised the initiative and how they navigated and created directions within collaboration as practice across different areas of responsibility, such as school, leisure, and safeguarding work. Building on observations of coordinator meetings, interviews, and policy texts, the analysis shows how different rationalities and tensions permeated the collaboration, which, on the one hand, can be understood as something that added value and, on the other, as reinforcing a reduced or broken welfare system, while an overall rationality concerned making efforts for children and young people here and now.

Introduction

Collaboration between different sectors and organisations has become an increasingly common way of dealing with various problems in society – not least in relation to schools in urban areas. A common argument for this development is that complex societal challenges need cross-border collaboration to enable innovative methods and solutions (Sørensen and Torfing 2021; Youdell and McGimpsey 2011; Ball 2007). Cross-sectoral collaboration has been particularly highlighted as a way of dealing with the problems associated with young people growing up in metropolitan areas with a large proportion of foreign-born residents, high unemployment and low achievement of the objectives stipulated in the national curriculum among pupils in local schools (Swedish Government Official Reports SOU 2020; no 28; Dahlstedt and Lozic 2017). Visions of concentrating resources from different sectors, combined with hopes for democratic potential and network development, have made collaboration an attractive way of working for initiatives that aim to increase efficiency, development, social justice, and equity (Ruiz-Román,

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Molina, and Alcaide 2019; Herz 2016). Collaboration as a concept can thus be said to embrace visions that can be understood as (politically) contradictory and hopes of bridging different levels of execution and responsibility (Sørensen and Torfing 2021; De Corte et al. 2017; Woolford and Curran 2013).

This paper focuses on how collaboration is given meaning by municipally employed coordinators whose task is to organise collaboration between schools and other actors in society. More specifically, departing from Bacchi's (2016) theorisation of the constitutive aspect of discerning problems, the purpose is to examine how coordinators understand the problems and challenges to which the initiative is intended to respond, which rationalities – in the meaning of what logics appear appropriate and acceptable – that are expressed for the initiative in relation to the problems identified, as well as how coordinators navigate and create directions within collaboration as practice.

The paper is based on material from a research project that followed a municipal initiative related to primary and secondary public schools (pupils aged 6–16 years) in a Swedish metropolitan area that is identified as 'particularly vulnerable'. In the munici-pality's policy document, the initiative is placed within the goal of offering all children a 'good start in life' and 'equal living conditions' [jämlika uppväxtvillkor]. In this context, the term 'equal living conditions' refers to rights such as access to education and healthcare, and to factors that influence people's basic health and living opportunities such as overcrowding, unhealthy housing, unemployment, and insecurity. Overall, the initiative can be described as a collection of measures aimed at raising pupils' achieve-ment in relation to educational objectives through (for example) homework assistance, offering meaningful leisure activities, supporting pupils' guardians, and working for safer districts by opening up the school to the local community through arranging various activities on the school premises. The name of the initiative emphasises the school as both an open and accessible place and phenomenon and is referred to in this text as 'Open School' to capture the hopes and positive connotations associated with a school that opens up to society. The paper describes how this idea of openness was transformed and debated and how the notion of openness infused the debate with hopefulness. At the same time, the participants in the study expressed criticism of and concern about, what this hopefulness entailed and the ways in which it sometimes came into conflict with different assignments, professional roles, and areas of responsibility. The paper sheds light on collaboration as a work practice from a practitioner perspective, as well as critically discussing the political implications and possible effects of cross-sectoral collaboration that extended across different areas of responsibility, such as school, leisure, and safe-guarding work.

The school and the community

Compared with many other countries, schooling in Sweden and the Nordic countries is relatively equal, due to an expanded welfare system and a cohesive system of compulsory education. At the same time, it is possible to discern a development in Swedish schooling whereby the differences between how pupils perform in different schools have increased and that it is in schools in the poor suburbs of larger cities, in particular, that school results have deteriorated (Gustafsson, Katz, and Österberg 2017). One reason highlighted as driving this development is that schools have been increasingly unable to compensate,

in the sense of balancing differences regarding pupils' different social backgrounds and living conditions. The objective that the school should strive to be compensatory, which is stipulated in the Educational Act (2010:800, chapter 1, §4), is related to the standpoint that a school that is equal for all still can contribute to unequal results. The obligation for the school to compensate is therefore close to the concept of equity, based on an acknowledgement that pupils' living conditions and support vary and that allocation of resources, such as support and adaptations, is needed in order for all pupils to develop according to their potential. However, despite the obligation to compensate, Swedish schools have never fully succeeded in compensating for pupils' different socioeconomic backgrounds and, since the school reform of 1990, the impact of the pupils' backgrounds has increased and especially for pupils growing up in vulnerable urban areas (Gustafsson, Katz, and Österberg 2017). Studies in several areas show that the difference between schools located in different areas is far from an isolated societal phenomenon. On the contrary, the differences can be understood as part of an increased polarisation in society between rich and poor, as well as increasing housing segregation (Gustafsson, Katz, and Österberg 2017).

It is also possible to see a development whereby the guardian's educational background has not only come to determine where pupils live and who their classmates are, but also their health and risk of exposure to crime (Nilsson, Estrada, and Bäckman 2017; Malmberg, Andersson, and Bergsten 2014). As a result, schools have been assigned more and more responsibilities as societal challenges have become increasingly interconnected and place-bound. In this situation, which can be described as the pedagogicalisation of problems, schools have become involved in collaborations with other authorities and organisations to deal with challenges that lie beyond their teaching duties (Smeyers and Depaepe 2008).

Historically, in Sweden there has been a clear division between the school's educational mission and for example sports activities for children and youth that take place after school under the auspices of various associations and organisations in the local community. With the development of the unitary school system, equality and national unity became more important than local anchoring and character. A shift towards school decentralisation took place during the 1990s, when responsibility for schools was transferred from the state to the municipalities in Sweden (Román et al. 2015). In parallel, there was a change in the view of the associations and organisations that had previously gathered under the concept of popular movements and historically played an idea-bearing role in society (Lundberg 2020). To mark this change, the term 'civil society' began to be used to describe groups and organisations that act together on the basis of common interests that are not the state, the market or individuals (Reuter, Wijkström, and von Essen 2012; Levander 2011).

In the 1990s, these ideas aligned well with a policy that advocated decentralisation and deregulation in the public sector, which can also be seen as a development where the Nordic countries became more similar to the UK and USA (Andersen 2018; Román et al. 2015). In this context, civil society in Sweden became a broader, less ideologically charged concept than the popular movements associated with ideologically driven organisations. In the investigation *Skolfrågor – skola i en ny tid* [School issues – school in a new era] (SOU 1997 no 121), the decentralisation and deregulation of the state-run school system was described as an opportunity to open schools up to the local community. Unlike in the

previously centralised school system, where decisions and regulations were made at a distance from the users, the deregulation and decentralisation of schools were described in terms of being a democratisation of the sector (Román et al. 2015). This was expressed as new opportunities for inclusive perspectives on learning to be developed in the interaction between school, guardians and the local community, where the ideal is an open school:

> That the school is open can mean several things: that it is open to all pupils and to all pupils' experiences, that it is characterised by an open conversation where everyone can state their opinion and be treated with respect, that the teaching opens up to the resources available in the surrounding society, that it is open for parents to come to school and influence its work, etc. (SOU 1997 no121, 219).

Many of the progressive ideas that came with decentralisation and the deregulated school reform were, in the 2000s, replaced by demands for the state inspections, tests, and grades which can be traced to earlier periods (Román et al. 2015; SOU 2020 no 28). What has remained of the reforms of the 1990s is, above all, the establishment of independent schools that have developed into a state-regulated market where companies sell educational places to municipalities. There are similarities here with how the relationship between associations and idea-driven organisations and the public sector developed during the same period, in that social entrepreneurship and a strong civil society were pinpointed as a complement to the welfare state (Herz 2016; Andersen 2018; Levander 2011).

The boundaries between what is private, public, and idea-driven social entrepreneurship in the 2020s are no longer as clear as they were in Sweden in the 1990s. Private companies are engaged in social initiatives, such as homework clubs, financing school trips or arranging holiday activities for pupils. In parallel, there has been a corporatisation of municipal activities and, within both idea-driven organisations and municipalities, terms such as 'group' and 'director' are used to describe the organisation and its management (Lundberg 2020; Levander 2011).

The transformation of the Swedish school system can be put in relation to parallel transformations of welfare systems in international contexts, for example in the United Kingdom. Critical voices underline that such developments have transformed the welfare system into a form of quasi-market where citizens, companies, and organisations buy and sell services, which means a shift in responsibility from the state to the individual and the voluntary sector (Youdell and McGimpsey, 2011).

If opening up the school is the solution, then what is the problem?

In social science research, there has been ongoing interest in how different social problems are interpreted and understood. What is defined as a social problem is thus not something objective; instead, it depends on the knowledge and explanatory models established within different institutions in society (Dean 2002; Foucault 2003). The goals and efforts formulated within the Open School initiative can thus be understood as constituting what the problem is, in the sense that they enable certain measures and explanations, while other interventions and interpretations will appear to be less suitable or credible (Bacchi 2016).

In this text, the concept of problematisation is central to analysis of the work with the Open School. The concept of problematisation is used in different ways within different research traditions. A frequently used definition is that problematisation is a way of thinking critically about something that appears to be a truth. In this text, we approach problematisation inspired by Carol Bacchi's (2016) and her readings of Michel Foucault's work on discourse and power. Following Bacchi, problematisation refers to the practice whereby certain situations, events, etc. will appear as 'a problem' and how actors negotiate, interpret and establish rules, routines, and rationalities and interact with other actors to deal with these 'problems'. As Bacchi's (2016) points out, solutions are based on rationalities of what the problem is. Solutions assume a problem, reproducing rationalities of what the problem is in rather salient ways, as the supposed condition that makes the solutions logical and legitimate. In this paper, we use Bacchi's approach as a discourse analytical tool to study how the coordinators who worked with the Open School initiative reasoned about their work, how they identified and understood both opportunities and challenges, and how they defined and assumed certain problems in their work on developing collaboration as a strategy of governance (Dean 2002; Foucault 2003).

The material in the paper derives from a regionally funded research project conducted in connection with Open School initiatives aimed at schools and local communities from 2017 to 2021. The focus of the overall study was on the policies and practices of the initiatives. Together and separately we followed coordinators, municipal actors, and other key people linked to five primary and secondary schools in five different districts of a major Swedish city. These districts were similar in that the inhabitants had lower incomes than the average in other areas, fewer pupils left compulsory school without the grades to enter upper secondary school than in other districts and the proportion of inhabitants born abroad was above the average in other parts of the city.

A coordinator employed by the municipality worked with each school affiliated with the Open School initiative. In one case, two coordinators worked with the same school. The six coordinators working with the schools had different backgrounds, including social and pedagogical work, public health work, and project management. For the majority, the assignment as coordinator was their main work task and they worked full-time with that task for a defined period. Their task was to establish contacts with actors who wished to participate in collaboration around activities and initiatives for pupils, such as local associations, idea-driven organisations, property owners, and businesses. In connection with such activities, the coordinators also, to some extent, performed practical tasks, such as meeting up with the leaders of different activities, being responsible for registration lists, and taking children to activities. However, besides covering the coordinators' wage costs, there were few or no funds for the actual activities in the Open School budget, and activities were mainly financed within the partnerships and collaborations that the coordinators established. In addition to these tasks, the coordinators met regularly to exchange experiences and undertake joint strategic work. These meetings were convened by a development leader of the compulsory school administration at the municipal. For the analysis in this paper, a special interest was given to these joint meetings since the discussions and reflections provided insight into the ongoing construction and negotiation of the problems and challenges the initiative was intended to respond to.

The methods used to study the work with the Open School initiative were qualitative and included participatory observations at Open School activities and different types of

meetings, semi-structured interviews, and email correspondence with coordinators and other key people. In addition, analysis of policy documents was carried out. The material on which the analysis in this paper is primarily based consists of field notes and recordings of conversations at the regular meetings mentioned above where coordinators discussed the work and collaborations undertaken within the initiative. These meetings were guided by the coordinators' ideas and needs. As researchers, on some occasions we were invited into the discussions to comment, provide perspectives on various issues, or give feedback based on our observations. However, for the most part, our roles were as observers. Material from seven meetings (six two-hour meetings and one whole-day meeting) from December 2019 to December 2020 has been included in the analysis for this paper. Additional material for the analysis in this paper consists of individual interviews with four of the coordinators during the years 2020 and 2021. The work with material collection and handling, analysis, and feedback to the participants was based on the Swedish Research Council's (2017) ethical guidelines regarding information, consent, and confidentiality. Overall informed consent to participate in the study was received at the beginning of the fieldwork. Consent to audio record meetings and interviews was renewed on each individual occasion. To minimise the risk of identification of individual participants, the terms Coordinator A, B, etc. have been used to label the six coordinators' statements.

The coordinators' narratives concerning the Open School initiative were, in the context of meetings and interviews, understood as meaning-creating works; thus, their words are analysed as actions, where different knowledge and explanatory models are given meaning in relation to what is considered relevant to their specific assignment. These knowledge and explanatory models constitute both resources and limitations for how the work with the Open School is problematised (Bacchi 2016). While Bacchi's analytical approach was developed for analyses of policy documents, we suggest that the more general notion – analysing discursive constructions of problems by critically evaluating the solutions advocated by authorities – is also possible to use in relation to our diverse material: interviews, observations and documents. We did not follow Bacchi's step-by-step analyses, but rather used the general analytical approach of analysing problematisation. Also, we were not doing comparative analyses of the material but rather looking for recurrent and resurfacing themes of problematisation in the material. The analysis was carried out by searching the material for the ways arguments were put together (or set against each other) and how meanings were linked to different contexts when the coordinators talked about the Open School, which initiatives were important, and the collaborations that took place around the Open School. The starting point for how the material was thematised was an interest in which social challenges the Open School initiative was suggested as an answer for. Questions guiding this work were: what are the problems that the Open School could solve? What needs are identified in pupils, guardians, and society? And in what way does the Open school collaboration appear to be a solution to the problems and needs described? In the following section, we examine three main themes that emerged in exploring these questions. The first theme deals with conflicting rationalities around the core and starting point for cooperation, and tensions regarding how problems, needs, and opportunities were described. The next theme highlights how the Open school initiative was given meaning in relation to various tasks and areas of responsibility, how resources could be distributed, and what these

resources might cover or compensate for. The last theme focuses on how the coordinators described directions for their work and how they navigated within the collaborations. Here, it became clear how Open school solutions became constitutive of how problems were understood, and how this permeated the coordinators' reflections.

Needs, shortcomings, and opportunities

As described above, the stated purpose of the Open School initiative was to contribute to promoting and strengthening actions beneficial to children's living conditions in districts identified as vulnerable. These efforts included ensuring pupils had access to meaningful leisure activities, as well as strengthening social networks and abilities. A central value in this work was to foster the participation and influence of both children and guardians. To enable these ambitions, collaboration between different sectors was emphasised; the school and its premises were identified as the focal point of this work. Not only are schools often centrally located in districts, but school is imbued with symbolic value, its trust capital was highlighted as an asset in meetings with residents. The school's role within the Open School initiative was articulated, in this context, as a platform and contact area providing opportunities to create activities for pupils after school as well as to engage and strengthen parents and families in the area. By linking both collaboration between different sectors and actors and participation for pupils and guardians to the initiative, the issue of participation at different levels became the subject of coordinators' discussions. During a meeting, the role of guardians in the collaboration around Open School was highlighted as follows:

> In the Open School initiative, it is not just children and young people. I think that hopefully you also get the guardians, or the families, to come in as a voice or as an actor in this. We are talking about trying to have a consensus about our shared mission between home and school. That you get on some kind of conversational level with each other [. . .] We all agree that we want to engage and strengthen the parents, the guardians (Meeting, Coordinator A).

The school was described, both in the governing documents and by the coordinators, as the contact area where opportunities for bridging and trusting relationships could be developed. However, the ambitions that Coordinator A raised around inviting guardians and seeing or recognising them as actors, had the potential to come into conflict with different interests and focuses. Enabling participation places demands on the distribution of power. How this distribution of power should be implemented or carried out, or who actually has the opportunity to work for governance and development, was not self-evident. It is clear from the coordinators' descriptions that, in practice, there was a tension between how the Open School initiative could be developed in a place and context in a way that strengthened democracy and local mobilisation on one hand, and a view of the initiative as an effort to compensate for what, for example, school staff saw as short-comings in pupils and guardians. At the same meeting the excerpt above, one of the coordinators talked about an occasion where the Open School initiative was presented to school staff:

> The question to the staff was: What do you think the parents need or want to do? Then the answer was that what they needed was to 'learn Swedish', 'learn about society', 'learn about the Swedish school'. Maybe that was not really what I was looking for. I was thinking about

> what would benefit the guardians as a group. What activities they wanted and so on. But there were answers based on where they saw shortcomings – only. Not based on capabilities (Meeting, Coordinator B).

In the conversation between the coordinators, frustration was expressed about the fact that the focus often ended up on what were perceived as problems rather than opportunities. This tendency was associated with a kind of unreflective benevolence and narrow assumptions about 'others' needs. Opportunity for participation is, implicitly, linked to those who already meet certain requirements or qualifications, for example certain language skills. In relation to such dimensions, the coordinators emphasised that the Open School had the potential to overlap with the school's democratic mission and function as a platform for meeting residents' needs for, for example, information about other forums of participation and influence, such as civic offices. An obvious tension between different perspectives and goals was expressed during the coordinators' meetings and discussions:

> [Open School] can also be a way of meeting the lack of promotional and preventive measures. With the Open School, we can come in early, both at an early stage and at an early age. We can start with preschools and work all the way up and offer leisure activities. It is a fact that leisure activities are often started when you go to primary school or lower secondary school. Then we can build relationships with children and parents at an early stage. So that we do not 'lose' them (Meeting, Coordinator C).

In the conversations, dialogue and relationship building were emphasised as important parts of the Open School's work. The opportunity to meet the needs of children and guardians through the contact areas and activities arranged was emphasised as a strength. At the same time, it was clear that a strong rationality legitimising the initiative was that it was a promoting and preventive effort; hence, the participation and autonomy of guardians and pupils could be included – but not as an obvious starting point or centre. The tension between functioning as an arena where children and guardians themselves define their needs and interests and as a compensatory effort based on what school and government officials define as the needs of the residents, appeared in several ways. This tension, as well as tensions between the Open School initiative and other actors, in terms of being responsible for compensating for differences in living conditions, is focused on further in the next section.

An extended compensatory assignment

Throughout the coordinators' descriptions, they emphasised that the identification of certain areas as 'problem-laden' was a basic motivation for the efforts made within the Open School initiative. The material also showed how the programme was described in terms of a compensatory assignment. Coordinators talked about this as a selection made based on the difficulties and challenges that characterised the different districts. Coordinator C described how:

> I would have liked this to be possible in all schools. But it's not possible. Then you have to choose where the needs are perhaps greatest. Where the lowest achievement of the objectives is. We know that if you pass your primary school, it is a protective factor for the future. There are many children of other ethnic backgrounds here. We know that they do not come

to the school of the arts [Kulturskolan] or to club activities. We have to make that selection or identify where there is a major problem (Meeting, Coordinator C).

The Open School's compensatory mission is articulated here as a way to increase the achievement of the objectives with a focus on individuals by engaging and gathering young people who do not usually participate in the (subsidised but not free-of-charge) municipal school of the arts activities or are not part of any association. In other words, the openness that was highlighted as the basis for the Open School vision can, paradoxically, be seen as exclusionary as most of the activities that took place within the initiative were aimed only at pupils at certain selected schools. In the interviews, it was also clear how the Open School initiative was described as a complement to primary school and leisure activities through initiatives aimed at pupils as a group. This was something that developed in the following example, regarding what can be said to be central to the Open School mission:

> To be part of the school's compensatory mission, because the children here need extra help. That is what we do with the [NGO 1], which has student support for the pupils. It is the real estate company that provides the finances so the children here can have equal conditions growing up. But also to offer meaningful and fun leisure time for the children. In this area last year, more than half of the girls were doing no after-school activities. In other areas, children may be doing too many. But this is not the case here, so offering activities is important (Interview, Coordinator F).

The example describes the work with the Open School initiative as an expanded part of the school's compensatory responsibility. Activities gained their legitimacy from the fact that the children in the area needed support with schoolwork in order to achieve equal conditions in which to grow up. At the same time, the compensatory assignment took on a broader meaning that included the children's free time or out-of-school time. The Open School initiative was justified by the fact that the activity offered children and young people in the area leisure activities that were meaningful and fun, the purpose of these activities was to increase participation in groups that undertook less organised leisure activity than other groups. What was included in or attributed to being part of the school's compensatory assignment was thus extended to activities outside the school's teaching remit. In this way, the Open School's enabling of compensatory efforts was articulated in two directions: 'inwards', into what fell within the school's compulsory responsibility and 'outwards', towards activities that fell outside the school's areas of responsibility.

An additional aspect in the description of the Open School initiative as a form of compensatory effort is not that it primarily identifies needs in pupils or guardians, but that it focuses on conditions and possible solutions from the perspective of social responsibility. In this context, the initiative appeared to be a way of identifying needs from its potential to bridge several sectors' areas of responsibility. The following statement about 'patches' highlights how the role of strategic work in the identified districts could be understood as a form of compensation:

> As I see it, we need to mobilise and use this way of working with Open School. I think that work in this area is needed and to be mobilised right here because we are not delivering the welfare we should. So, what this is doing is that we are patching up for something that we would not need . . . we patch for bad [political] decisions, for example. I usually say this when

> I'm frustrated: it's so bad that we're trying to find and construct patches for a situation that is right now. A broken welfare system that does not work (Meeting, Coordinator E).

In relation to the rationalities expressed in the descriptions of the importance of early intervention and the initiative's compensatory function aimed at pupils and guardians, the initiative was, in the description above, motivated by a pragmatic and solution-oriented approach. Within this rationality, the work with the Open School initiative was turned into a direct and tangible way of patching up and repairing a broken welfare system. The Open School became a solution to equality problems, based on the assumption that it is the welfare system that should maintain equality. From this perspective, collaboration within the Open School initiative would be a way of finding other ways to give residents in areas that served by the Open School model the support and community service that was lacking but to which they were entitled under the municipality's equality policy. However, the Open School did not provide these services. Based on the tasks that fell within the coordinators' area of responsibility, the coordinators navigated between different sectors and actors to find alternative ways to offer cultural and leisure activities in the districts. This scenario located the work of the Open School initiative, both politically and practically, in a border public area where the problem of whose responsibility it was to deliver welfare remained unanswered and the focus shifted to the initiatives that were being implemented (here and now).

Navigation in the borderland of cross-sectional collaboration

In interviews and discussions, certain concrete problems and challenges recurred. These concerned the need for practical solutions, such as how information was shared and made clear, the organisation of schedules and registration, responsibility for activities, locks and alarms, etc. However, they were also about broader or more in-depth issues of responsibility for Open School assignments. It was clear that the idea-driven and private businesses that participated in the work had different interests in and perspectives on the needs of the districts, as well as offering examples of how different challenges could be overcome and common goals achieved. The following dialogue discusses how opportunities were created through the collaborations that took place under the Open School initiative:

> B: [Open School] can also be an opportunity that gives more actors the opportunity to develop . . . and contribute to a good society. It's the other side of the coin.
>
> E: Mm . . . yes . . . other actors can contribute to welfare.
>
> B: Yes, that the public sector does not have a monopoly on . . . creating welfare . . . I do not say that I think that this is how it should be. But somehow, it's true too (Meeting, Coordinators B and E).

This pragmatic attitude brings a further form of articulation of the need for collaboration which has to do with expansion, where openness signals that many different actors bear responsibility. It can be understood as an in-depth shared responsibility. In the coordinators' discussions, gaps and shortcomings as well as openings and opportunities emerged simultaneously. The cross-sectoral collaboration that enabled the Open School model to offer support for education and meaningful activities for children and young people was

described as rooted in necessity as the public sector no longer had sole responsibility for welfare. When the coordinators talked about the cross-sectoral collaboration that would enable the Open School initiative, hopefulness was created in different ways and with different rationalities.

In the data, however, it was also clear how collaboration exposed tensions between actors who wanted to come to school to help and efforts that contributed to a sustainable organisation that was able to offer pupils equal conditions in which to grow up. The section that follows focuses on how the coordinators problematised the ways collaboration within the Open School initiative was organised.

> We also have breakfast here at school in the morning. It would not have been possible without the collaboration that takes place on the basis of Open School between business and civil society. The local sports association contributes by providing staff. The sports association's staff have an employee at the school and they serve the food in the morning. They are employed by a non-profit association that works with social issues and receives financing for that service from an insurance company. The food for breakfast is contributed by a local grocery store and the housing company is responsible for the entirety of the financing (Meeting, Coordinator B).

The quote above describes how several actors worked together to offer breakfast to pupils at this particular school: the local grocery store donated the food for breakfast which was served by a school security guard together with staff from a local sports association. The security guard was employed by a non-profit association in the district and the guard's salary was financed by an insurance company. In this case, collaboration between non-profit, private and public sectors created opportunities for more adults on the school premises. For example, it was not possible for a company to employ staff for the school, but the school could make an agreement with an association that its staff arrange activities at the school for the pupils. Collaboration also enabled breakfast to be available to all pupils at the school, not just those enrolled in the after-school centre, to which only children whose parents worked or studied were entitled.

Collaboration between different organisations could, as in the example above, mean a resource for the school and the pupils in the area. However, it could also be a challenge for the coordinators to organise. During an interview, one of the coordinators elaborated on the challenges when describing the work of organising homework help at school:

> In the past, we have had various homework help systems. But this year I got it together. We have homework help on the same weekday between 3 pm and 5 pm for all school years. And everyone gets the same snack. Then, it is the case that the [NGO 1] holds for this year and [NGO 2] for that year and the [NGO 3] and the local NGOs for the next. And to get it together is a challenge. Previously, we had the local NGO. Year nine had homework help four days a week. And then there is a foundation that should be paid for its services. Two of the housing companies in the district paid for homework help. But there were so many things that did not work. It was about how they work around pupil support. You need to have contact with the teachers as well, to be able to know what the pupils need help with (Interview, Coordinator D).

The coordinator describes how the school used various non-profit associations and foundations to offer the children support with their homework. In a similar way to the previous example, the company – in this case, two of the housing companies in the district – was responsible for financing the services offered by the non-profit associations. Previously, homework help aimed at different year groups was held on different days and

the responsibility for it was distributed among different organisations. The challenge was partly to organise times and days and partly to ensure that the same snack was offered to pupils across all year groups. It also appeared that, for various reasons, the organisations that delivered homework help did not always do so effectively and the pupils did not receive the support expected.

In the conversations, the coordinators also discussed the risk that the work might be perceived as yet just another more or less urgent initiative similar to others that had come and gone over the years. In parallel with a rationality that was centred around making a difference and being solution-oriented, it was suggested that there was a risk that such an approach could, in fact, stand in the way of long-term sustainable methods. From the coordinators' perspective, this was described as something of a dilemma, where the Open School initiative both took place in and became part of supporting a public borderland through floating or temporary space-bound solutions. During a meeting discussion, these concerns were described:

> There is a risk that Open School will only be an expression of the notion that everything must be 'suburbanised' [förortsanpassad in Swedish, a direct translation would be poor-suburban/urban area-adapted]. Notions of how different this area is are reproduced in that way. When there are people who have an idea of what they want to do, that they present to the district … then the officials think that they need support and help and suddenly they have hired this person on hourly employment. In other areas, you might instead run it on a non-profit basis or turn to a study association to implement what it is you want. It does something to the non-profit associations when you start paying them to carry out activities that could actually be part of what you want to do as an association (Meeting, Coordinator F).

The example highlights a concern that benevolent attitudes contribute, in the long run, to reinforcing the image of the poor urban suburb as a different or passive place. Several efforts were described as being 'suburbanised' in this way through a mixture of misguided helpfulness and lack of confidence in the residents' own abilities. In the meaning-making of the coordinators, this was exemplified by the fact that initiatives that, in other areas, would be implemented by local associations with non-profit initiatives, were instead undertaken by the municipal organisation and became an assignment for a fee. The consequences were that what could be seen as an internal learning of organising and carrying out activities risked being lost as culture arose where the activities that were the basis for the interests and driving forces around which the association was formed began to be considered as assignments and a source of income.

The collaboration that took place within the Open School initiative showed how coordinators navigated between different sectors and regulations to support pupils. The cross-sectoral approach signalled that organisational boundaries need to be exceeded in order to achieve specific goals. Whether the collaboration led to more resources for the school and the pupils, or whether the positive and negative experiences were more mixed, the work illustrates an understanding that the needs that exist in identified districts require different approaches than those commonly seen in public activities such as school, individual and family care and culture and leisure.

Discussion

This paper has focused on how collaboration was given meaning by municipally employed coordinators whose task was to organise collaboration between schools and other actors in society. The purpose was to investigate how coordinators understood the problems and challenges that the initiative intended to respond to, as well as how they navigated and created directions and rationalities within collaboration as practice.

The results showed that the overall problem representation that the Open School initiative was described as responding to was the inequality in living conditions among the city's residents, identified by statistics on lower achievement of school objectives, higher rates of ill health, a greater proportion of residents in financial difficulty and higher crime rates than in the rest of the city. The need for expanded compensatory work in schools with a focus on early, promotional and preventive measures for children and guardians appeared as a guideline for this response. The main goal of the Open School initiative was thus to reduce the differences in living conditions in the city. The overall and cross-sectoral collaboration that the coordinators were tasked with coordinating was highlighted as necessary to be able to handle the complex issues that underpin inequality (see also Herz 2016; Andersen 2018; Levander 2011).

However, in the coordinators' narratives and discussions it is clear that there was constant negotiation about how the work was to be carried out and what the boundaries of the assignment were. Hence, different rationalities emerged within the Open School model in relation to how the coordinators defined their assignment – based on the resources that became available through collaboration with different actors (Dean 2002; Foucault 2003). This implied a need to be pragmatic and act in the 'here and now' – with the means available – which created discernment and a focus on possible efforts.

Previous research has shown that the Swedish school system can no longer compensate for the difference in pupils' living conditions as it once did, and that, above all, the differences between schools in low-resource areas that have increased (SOU 2020; Gustafsson, Katz, and Österberg 2017). This is not an isolated phenomenon; the risk of being exposed to crime, unemployment and ill health have also been concentrated in the most resource-poor districts (Nilsson, Estrada, and Bäckman 2017; Malmberg, Andersson, and Bergsten 2014). The consequence has been that schools in the lowest-resourced areas have been given an expanded compensatory task through a pedagogicalisation of societal problems whereby they have become involved in collaborations with other authorities and organisations to deal with challenges which fall outside the school's teaching remit (Smeyers and Depaepe 2008).

Against this background, the coordinators were faced with the dilemma of whether the work with the Open School initiative primarily as an extra resource within general welfare or as considered a compensatory measure specifically aimed at individuals who were identified on the basis of lack of abilities. In the coordinators' work, this became a matter of involvement and influence and there were fears that the Open School model would be 'suburbanised', based on a notion that the inhabitants of these areas have not only other needs, but also different or conditional rights and obligations, to other inhabitants of the city.

The investment in the Open School initiative thus risked creating a shift in meaning within the school's compensatory responsibility. The Open School model was described as

part of the city's mission to contribute to ensuring that children, in particular, were brought up in equal conditions to their age peers. At the same time, the organisational form meant that these activities did not fall under the school's legal responsibility with regard to the student's rights to receive the support needed to fulfil the goals of the school. The support offered after school hours by civil society organisations was based on the students' and guardians' own responsibility to participate. As help with homework was given, for example, by a non-profit organisation and financed by a private housing company, there were also no requirements for education or qualifications for the people the children met during the homework sessions. The commitments of companies and associations that provided these services were tied to economic agreements rather than to the rights of residents in society.

The democratic potential associated with the joint and cross-sectoral work within the Open School initiative also opened it up to questions of responsibility. An individual has, for example, lifelong rights and obligations in relation to the municipality, region and state. These rights include, among other things, the right to education and healthcare and obligations such as paying income tax and complying with laws in society. Elections to municipalities, regions and the parliament mean opportunities to change such rights and obligations in various ways. Voluntary organisations and companies, in contrast, do not attribute any rights to the individual other than those regulated within a possible agreement; nor do they have any obligation to recognise the individual as a political subject with the right to be involved in decisions. The results of this paper indicate that investments such as the Open School initiative need to be put in relation to what it is to be a political subject, with civil rights and obligations and what it is to have the opportunity to participate in activities organised by housing companies, companies that contribute resources to schools or organisations and foundations that sell services such as homework help and sports activities after school. It is therefore important to distinguish between what constitutes a municipality's mission and responsibility to offer all children equal and good conditions in which to grow up and in what way voluntary organisations, associations and companies can contribute to that work.

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