



*Sustainable education for quality and equity
- understanding and addressing differences in education
systems*

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Abstract:

Sustainable education has recently emerged as a new comprehensive approach to understanding the sources of differences between schools, as well as what changes are needed and how to make sure the progress towards greater quality and equity is durable. To that end, and based on a review of international literature, the aim of this article is to analyze and discuss how the approach of sustainable education, and in particular school culture as one of its pillars, can contribute to address the quality and equity differences in education systems produced by school segregation. Schools in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods, often labelled as segregated, low performing, fraught with disciplinary problems, are possible to improve if school culture is addressed and adjusted properly to serve the interests of all students, their learning and achievement. Nevertheless, a sustainable education and a durable school improvement can only take place if changes in school culture are paired with broader changes in relations between schools in the educational field. Inclusion, equity and justice are the imperative and guiding principles in achieving that goal.

Key words: *sustainable education, school culture, school segregation, quality, equity*

I. INTRODUCTION

The highest performing education systems are those that combine equity with quality. They give all children opportunities for a good quality education. (OECD 2012, p. 3)

Quality and equity are probably the two most recurrent discourses and policy goals in modern education systems throughout the world. Quality refers often to employing highly skilled professionals and to excellent pedagogical practices promoting learning, high grades and safe social environments of schools. Quality, defined in these terms, is recognized by parents, students and external evaluators, school inspectorate or in media accounts. The recognition bestows schools a symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1994) and good reputation, which serves as a commodity on the school market, further attracting socially well-established families (Bunar & Ambrose 2016). Reproduction of basic conditions for upholding quality – continuous inflow of sufficient resources, student composition, engaged parents, low turnover of school staff – are thereby preserved. In a sense this is, at least as a pure theoretical model, a self-perpetuating system as long as no major disturbances occur. These could be for example, changes in student composition due to inflow of migrant students and students with low socioeconomic status (SES) as a result of changes in admission policy or changes in the surrounding local community and repeated violent incidents that affect school reputation inciting the socially strongest families to opt out. The point is that quality is not just about resources and teaching skills, it is also highly dependent on schools' student composition and reputation (Bunar 2022a, Kessel 2018).

Equity as a discourse and policy deals primarily with two conditions. First, with differences within and between schools. Some differences within schools, i.e. the level of achievement across academic subjects, are attributed to individual characteristics such as cognitive ability and motivation. Yet some are distinguishable along sociological categories (Gil-Flores et al. 2011) such as gender (girls outperforming boys), socioeconomic status (students with high SES outperforming students with low SES) and migration (generally low achievement of newly arrived, and in particular so-called late arriving, migrant students). Nevertheless, as long as the overall achievement of a school is at or above the national average, these internal differences are treated as a quality rather than as an equity issue. It means that a range of pedagogical support strategies are deployed to fill the gap. Lack of success is often deemed as a failure of an individual student, not the system.

Differences between schools are for the most part attributed to student composition. Segregation between schools, based on students' socioeconomic status, ethnicity and migration background and the status of local community (socially strong versus socially disadvantaged) has been presented in policy and research as the main factor behind increasing disparity in achievement (OECD 2012, Silva-Laya et al. 2020). In addition to this achievement gap, some researchers have even added a disciplinary gap (Kennedy-Lewis et al. 2016) portraying schools in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods as lacking in discipline and with weak school culture. Observable and durable differences at an aggregated level actualize conflation of quality and equity, meaning that the "ordinary" standards of quality ought to be redefined in order to address the effects of structural conditions propelling differences. Simply, students in low-performing schools are

deemed as needing something else or something more than relatively low-performing students in high-performing schools. Here, we are into the second condition that equity as a discourse and policy deals with: compensatory measures. It involves the reinforcement of structural conditions of low-performing schools which aims at elevating their results and thus make the education system more equal. In other words, diminishing achievement differences between schools – closing the gap – is the foremost goal of the equity policy and its instruments. The most pressing issues are: What to prioritize, what is promising policy and what are promising practices?

Sustainable education (van den Branden 2012, Bunar 2016) has recently emerged as a new comprehensive approach to understanding the sources of differences between schools, as well as what changes are needed and how to make sure the progress towards greater quality and equity is durable. To that end, the aim of this article is to analyze and discuss the approach of sustainable education, and in particular school culture as one of its pillars, can contribute to address the quality and equity differences in education systems produced by school segregation. Sustainable education is in the context of this article understood as a semi-theoretical concept, a policy and a set of practices.

Some of the questions the article aims at answering are:

- How does school segregation affect quality in and equity between schools?
- What is sustainable education and school culture?
- How can the enactment of the principles of sustainable education, with focus on school culture, contribute to enhanced quality in and equity between schools?

In the next section the method and analytical approach are clarified, followed by three sections on school segregation, sustainable education, and school culture. In the final section some main conclusions are presented.

Method and analytical approach

Even if the article is based on a thorough review of international literature, it is not written as part of what is presently known as a systematic literature review (Institute of Education Sciences 2022). This tradition follows particular techniques for data-mining in research data-bases, criteria for inclusion and exclusion of findings, and analysis in accordance with strictly defined epistemologies. This article follows a slightly different path, an exploratory one, that allows me to start with somewhat broadly defined questions within a particular realm of interest, search in data-bases and in other sources (literature lists of the most important publications), refine the search, analyze and re-analyze and discuss the available material.

The original search for material was conducted in databases Scopus, EBSCO and Science Direct using the words school quality and equity in education. The volume of identified articles and books was overwhelming and the search was far from precise. However, gathering and processing a number of key-texts led me to identify the semi-theoretical concept of sustainable education and further, through its literature, what I analytically came to categorize as its fundamental elements. School culture was one of them and a subsequent search for literature about school culture was conducted. At the same time, but also due to my research interests, the concept and phenomenon of school segregation emerged as one of the most detrimental for quality, equity and sustainable education. Instead of dealing with an enormous international literature body within this area, I

zoomed in on one national context, Sweden. The country is an interesting empirical case since it clearly exemplifies segregation forces, their consequences for schools and attempts to alleviate them.

The analytical approach has followed the principles for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2013) and iterative categorization (Neale 2016), which means that a selection of material has been categorized under three broad subjects: school segregation (focus on Sweden), sustainable education and school culture. The selection of material from Swedish and international research has attempted to present as accurate picture of the mainstream research as possible. For the reasons of space limitation not all identified articles and books have been included in the article. However, the broad epistemological base the article is leaning on equips it with sufficient depth and reliability.

II. SCHOOL SEGREGATION

Segregation is primarily a spatial phenomenon, but also a social construction utterly depending on the construction of different groups based on categories such as education, employment, income, ethnicity and migration background. Allocation of these categories across urban settings shapes the status of local communities, their social life, symbolic representation, economic opportunity, and perhaps the foremost, the conditions for their schools (Silva-Laya et al. 2020). However, it would be wrongful to claim that a particular neighborhood or a particular school is segregated, despite their obvious negative distinctions from the municipal or national average (Brandén & Bygren 2018). Segregation is a relational phenomenon, implying that the city or a municipality or the educational field itself is segregated, gauged against the backdrop of distribution of material and symbolic resources between neighborhoods and schools. In order to closely illustrate school segregation and some compensatory measures, the example below is focused on Sweden, a welfare country whose education system for a long time has been marred by extensive school segregation (Bunar 2001, 2009, 2022a, 2022b).

Ethnically and socially induced school segregation and its negative effects for quality, equity and social mobility has for years been defined as one of the major challenges for the Swedish education system (Delmi 2021). Governmental agencies, such as National Agency for Education (Skolverket 2018) and National School Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen 2015, 2021), public inquiries (SOU 2020:28) as well as Swedish scientific research (Bunar 2001, 2009, Sernhede & Tallberg Broman 2014, Lund & Lund 2016, Bunar et al. 2021) have provided systematic explanations about how school segregation is being created and perpetuated. Thus, we have learned that migration, especially the narrow opportunities for settlement experienced by refugees upon arrival in Sweden, lack of social and symbolic capital among migrants (Behtoui et al. 2019) and the segmented housing market (Wimark 2019), lay ground for housing segregation in municipalities all over the country. Since the majority of Swedish elementary schools (age 6-16) still tend to recruit most of their students from the surrounding community, this housing segregation is being replicated in school segregation. We have also learned that unrestricted school choice policy and the attendance-zone boundaries have further exacerbated differences and inequalities (Ambrose 2016, SOU 2019:40). The outcomes of these socio-historical patterns, policies and “market games” for schools in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods are too well-known: poor academic performance, bad

reputation, fewer number of well-educated teachers, continuous student outflow and a considerable group of students in need of learning support (Hansson & Gustafsson 2016, SOU 2020:28, Saminathen 2020, Skolinspektionen 2021). Some schools have even been closed down, doomed as incapable of providing decent educational quality (Arneback et al. 2021, Behtoui 2023). In other words, we have supportable knowledge about how school segregation has emerged, how it is being maintained and about its effects.

As Bunar (2022b, p. 2) argues, there is no lack of dedication, ideas, proposals, and even resources devoted to the cause that “something should be done” about school segregation (Regeringskansliet 2018, SOU 2020:28). Regardless of efforts and concerns, it seems tremendously difficult to make decisive interventions in the dynamics of these inequality generating processes (Jahnke & Hirsh 2020). Is it, to paraphrase Wacquant (2008), the inevitable outcome of advanced marginality which Sweden is facing, meaning that school segregation cannot be solved without profoundly challenging privileges of the broad middle-classes on housing and school markets? Since no political option seems to be ready to do that, the policy repositions its focus from addressing the root of inequalities to facilitating its consequences by throwing integration projects and second language learning models at children and schools in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods (Schwartz 2014, Urban 2018). And it has done so for the last 30 years. Schools in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods are indeed frequent recipients of extra resources, quality enhancement measures, interventions and integration projects under the auspices of, what Arneback et al. (2021, see also Trumberg et al. 2022) label as, the reinforcement-oriented policy. Some of the resources are generated at the national and some at the local level through deployment of various indexes for redistribution of schools’ budgets (Skolinspektionen 2014). Hence, schools with a large number of students with low-educated parents, newly-arrived and students with Swedish as a second language receive more money. The money is often invested in hiring more personnel, such as teacher assistants, which has led to higher student-school personnel ratio than the municipal average (SOU 2019:40).

Other more common improvement measures, interventions and projects deployed in these schools have been: professional development of teachers, especially in language and content integrated learning; more so-called first teachers (selected as particularly skilled in their area of expertise); strengthened student health function, including more special education coordinators; extended teaching hours in Swedish as a second language; summer school; help with homework (Skolverket 2018, Trumberg et al. 2022). Some schools have for decades participated in large scale integration projects aiming at improving everything from the facilities to teaching and relations with parents (Lunneblad & Johansson 2012). Additionally, civil society organizations and local communities have been engaged (sometimes financed by the local municipalities or non-profit organizations) to support learning, homework and sports for children enrolled in schools and living in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods (Helander & Leviner 2019, Behtoui 2023).

As evident from this brief account of the causes and the measures enacted to alleviate the consequences of school segregation in Sweden, school segregation is one of the main drivers of differences in quality and equity between schools. Despite all progressive policy measures deployed for decades, school segregation is persistent and is in fact

growing. One of the identified shortcomings of these measures has been lack of comprehensiveness, lack of coordination between various actors within and outside of schools and their temporariness (Bunar 2022a, 2022b, Urban 2018). Obviously, in order to diminish the detrimental effects of segregation for schools in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods a new approach is needed (Grönqvist & Niknami 2017). Sustainable education as a semi-theoretical concept, policy and practice harnesses some of the promises for permanent changes. In the next two sections, the focus is on sustainable education and on one of its main elements, school culture.

III. SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

After being closely linked to environmental and infrastructural issues for many years, the concept of sustainability has recently also gained wide acceptance in social sciences. Socially sustainable society is a notion presently well-known and used in politics, policy and research (Bäcke & Vigmo 2024). However, the concept of sustainability has not yet gained any larger traction within educational sciences. Nevertheless, some theoretical attempts to explain school development through its lenses are notable. Thus, Zhou and Alam (2024, p. 3) posit: “The focus of sustainable education and learning broadly covers any topic that is related to the quality of education and national and international developmental agendas.” Focus on sustainable education guarantees that attention, developmental strategies and practices embrace all students, diminish quality differences, and promote learning and achievement. Van den Branden (2012, p. 291) offers three elements of sustainable education: a) the needs of all students are addressed; b) students acquire what is necessary and useful to address their own, and society’s, present and future needs; c) the natural resources that are available (the students’ talents, prior knowledge, learning potential, and learning motivation and the teachers’ competencies, experience, and motivations) are tapped as renewable resources rather than being wasted or depleted. For Lambert (2007, p. 321): “Sustainability is considered to be a process, rather than a state, and to hold promise for continued improvement in spite of personnel changes.” It means that sustainability must be disconnected from dedicated and enthusiastic teachers and principals and made a hallmark of school organization. Sustainable education is one of the pillars of a socially sustainable society, a society distinguished by resilience and social cohesion, where the question of school success does not solely depend on the parents’ socioeconomic background, but is an issue for the entire society. As Escudeiro et al. (2023, p. 1) note: “Sustainable education has many facets involving not only the conservation of our natural ecosystem and the development of a sustainable society but also promoting equity and ensuring lifelong learning opportunities for all regardless of any handicaps or circumstances.”

In a study on what factors can improve educational outcomes for students from the Batek minority in Malaysia, Abdullah, Ahmad & Ismail (2023, p. 895) argue: “Our findings reveal that trust, commitment, conducive environment, appropriate policy and regulation, and community support are all significant factors in sustaining Batek children’s education.” Sustainable education is in its foundations a democratic and moral perspective whose enactment provides all students with a palpable chance to achieve their dreams. It is also a question of justice in education, having a school environment able to release the potential of every child (Purkey et al. 2020). As Reynolds et al. (2014, p. 221)

put it: "If we suggest that the natural environment of education is schools, we can ask ourselves these questions: Are schools equitable for all students? Are schools bearable for all students? Are all schools viable in the current climate? We might suggest that schools, as they are currently constructed, managed, and operated, are not sustainable. Something needs to change...". The question is what and how?

Hopkins et al. (2014, p. 276) propose three necessary steps to promote sustainable education. The first is about strategy: "The key here is not simply to identify the factors that characterise high-performing educational systems but to understand how these factors combine in different ways – in different innovation clusters – to drive reform in systems that are at different stages of their progression along the performance cycle." The second is about learning, meaning "the transfer of power to the learner within learning environments that are structured and well designed, profoundly personalised, inclusive, and social." The third is about intelligent implementation: "Implement with precision and energy, then study the effort, reflect on it, re-energise and refine." In other words, strategically devised and sustainable (time, resources) reforms, inclusive, individualized and learning of high quality and holistic approach are the essential elements of sustainable education (see also Hattie 2009, Scheerens 2012, Scheerens et al. 2011). In a similar vein Reynolds et al. (2014) highlight leadership, positive and developmental school culture, including high expectations, relations and power-sharing, professional development of school staff, effective teaching and focus on students' rights and obligations, as the most influential for school improvement and school efficiency. As noted by Hess (2005), with regard to improvement in urban (low-performing) schools:

School improvement is arduous, different, controversial, and sometimes frustrating work. Change takes time, commitment, and seriousness. Producing sustainable changing in attitudes, behavior, and expectations is not the work of a season or of a year – it is a process. Improving instruction, strengthening content, and building dynamic management and support system is arduous work because of the challenges faced by urban youth and because urban system have too long languished amid instability and incoherence. Urban reform efforts are unlikely to succeed amid the kind of unstable leadership, inchoate governance and desire for "silver bullet" reforms that has characterized urban public education system for the past generation. (p. 340)

Sustainable education is not just some new "fancy" concept, but its ambition and importance lay in its potential to connect within-school activities with broader social issues (Zuilkowski, Sowa & Ralaingita 2023). Additionally, it points at detrimental consequences of unequal education for the entire society. Much more is at stake than passing grades for individual students.

Obviously, the semi-theoretical concept of sustainable education emerges from and leans heavily on insights from the fields of school improvement and school effectiveness. Hallinger and Heck (2011, p. 3) summarize the topics that the various branches of school improvement research traditionally have been focusing on: effective teaching and learning (Creemers 1994, Creemers & Kyriakides 2008, Hattie 2009), teachers' professional development (Fullan & Hargreaves 1992, Joyce & Showers 2002), effective schools (Edmonds 1979, Hallinger & Murphy 1986), school leadership (Leithwood et al. 2004, Robinson et al. 2008), organizational, cultural and educational changes (Kotter

1996, Firestone & Corbett 1988, Fullan 2007, Hall & Hord 2002, Slegers et al. 2002), implementation of curriculum (Crandall, Eiseman & Louis 1986), schools as learning organizations (Leithwood & Louis 2000, Mulford & Silins 2003). These findings are corroborated in Evans and Cowell (2013, p. 221) that, after a thorough review of available meta-studies, argue: “To summarise, the main elements identified in the literature on school improvement were: (a) school stability, (b) school culture, (c) staff engagement, and (d) ability of organisations to learn.” Furthermore, van den Branden (2012, p. 287-288, see also Fullan 2011, van den Branden et al. 2011) have discussed and analyzed the factors that dominate research about school reforms. Among the most important, the authors highlight: enrolment in preschools, more resources to schools that have student composition with larger educational challenges, meticulous programs for students at risk of not achieving the prescribed results (mostly within literacy and numeracy), close cooperation with parents and local community and evaluations.

As evident from this brief review of international literature on sustainable education, school improvement and school effectiveness, in order to address differences, enhance quality and equity in an education system, a number of factors must be considered and a meticulous and holistic strategy deployed. Among the most influential factors, besides the somehow obvious factor of teachers’ competencies and quality in pedagogical practices, are: school culture (even labeled as ethos and climate), leadership, schools as professional learning communities, the ability to accommodate teaching to particular needs of every student, relations with parents and local community, and allocation of resources in accordance with students’ needs. These factors, properly addressed, could be considered to be basic elements of sustainable education.

Since the research body covers a wide scope of elements of sustainable education, in the rest of this article I only focus on school culture. The reason for zooming in on school culture is that in the literature it is presented as being among the most salient and influential for quality and equity and ultimately for sustainable education. Simultaneously, it is possible to mold without entirely shifting the blame for low achievement to external forces, such as school segregation.

IV. SCHOOL CULTURE AND SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION

School culture may be a cause, an object or an effect of school improvement: indeed, all three are possible. It is said that school culture should be a target for change, on the grounds that in due course it will exercise an improving causal influence on other variables, and eventually on student outcomes, which in turn reinforce the culture. (Hargreaves 1995, p. 41)

We argue, in addition, that there is a need to shift the policy conversations toward understanding that a “strong culture” can be critical for sustainable school improvement. (Lee & Louis 2019, p. 92)

School culture is a concept that educational researchers have a somewhat ambivalent relation to. On the one hand, there is “a growing consensus that school culture is an integral part of school improvement” (Lee & Louis 2019, p. 85, Gruenert & Whitaker 2015, Louis & Lee 2016). As Evans and Cowell (2013, p. 220) noted: “Existing literature identifies school culture as a vital component in bringing about positive school

outcomes.” For Law et al. (2024, p. 1): “The culture and climate of a school are critical to ensuring students feel invited to come and learn, where teachers with high expectations for all seek to use the highest probability teaching interventions, and where students are safe to develop as individuals and be active participants in the culture of the school.” Although sometimes difficult to clearly articulate, school culture is considered as an appropriate analytic instrument illuminating sets of important practices for schools’ daily operations. It could embrace social and pedagogical climate (safety, discipline and motivation), trustful relations, values and norms that pervade an organization. The quality of school culture is often linked to both physical (the state of school facilities such as classrooms, hallways and play grounds) and social environments (tranquility, safety and discipline or violence and disturbances). School culture is also tightly linked to a clear leadership (Carrington 2023), that promotes tolerance, learning, high expectations and mutual respects between school actors (Hollingworth et al. 2018, Palmer & Louis 2017, Leithwood 2018). Anticipation about the quality of school culture is also important for a school’s position in a school market (Ambrose 2016). For Lee and Louise (2019, p. 91) the elements of a strong school culture are: “Academic press, student support, trust & respect, low negativity (or optimism as the opposite of negativity), professional learning community (consisting of shared responsibility, reflective dialogue, deprivatized practice, and organizational learning). More importantly, results suggest that schools strongly equipped with those cultural elements showed higher levels of school performance than that of their counterparts; there were significantly positive associations between school culture constructs and the levels of school performance.”

On the other hand, some researchers have criticized the concept of school culture as being too diffuse and underdeveloped (Reynolds & Packer 1992, Lieberman & Miller 1984) in order to use it as an analytical instrument (Finlayson 1989, Kent 2006). Some of the critical questions posed are: Whose culture? Who has the power to identify what the hallmarks of one organization’s operations are? Does everybody accept the description? Which are the consequences of the politics of a school culture definition? The critiques do not question the existence of certain types of attitudes, norms, values, relations within schools, but rather that the dynamics and flexible nature of these aspects got lost when summarized into one concept. Additionally, the critics argue that the existence of a particular school culture is notoriously difficult to empirically prove as well as underlying that every categorization holds traces of power-infused struggles about definition, prestige or what Bourdieu (1994) has labelled symbolic capital.

The concept itself originates from organizational research on what distinguishes successful and prone-to-changes companies (Schein & Schein 2016). In that sense, the concept of culture is used in an anthropological sense depicting a way of life or “the web of significance” (Geertz 1973). Scheerens and Bosker (1997, p. 17) consider organizational culture to be: “... the set of shared meanings, collective norms and views on interaction and collaboration. As such, culture is considered to be of great importance in providing the normative glue that holds the organisation together” (c.f. Evans & Cowell 2013, p. 220). Lange et al. (2012, p. 4-5) write with reference to Marzano et al. (2005) and Owens and Valesky (2011): “Organizational culture describes what members of an organization believe and deem significant, as well as how groups process situations.” For Kohler-Evans et al. (2013, p. 22): “School culture can be described as the *modus operandi*

that determines the school's effectiveness and productivity. It is the manifestation of the written and unwritten rules, behaviors, traditions, beliefs, and expectations that undergird everything that happens in the life of the school. This includes the totality of the academic and social environment of the school.”

Hargreaves (1995) has in an influential article distilled four major types of school culture: a) *formal school culture* is distinguished by discipline, formal relations between students and teachers, focus on learning, high-grades, socialization to traditional values, evaluation of students' progress and individual accountability; b) *welfarist school culture* is generally distinguished by a relaxed atmosphere, visible in friendly and informal relations between students and teachers. Focus is on learning, but even more on “feel-good” and “feel-safe” for students in a socially protective environment. According to Hargreaves this type of school culture generally dominates schools in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods with a majority of students with minority and low SES background. Teachers act more like social workers than as educators, something that has long-term consequences for the students' educational careers; c) *hothouse school culture* is characterized by a high level of competitiveness, teachers are dedicated and innovative, the students are diligent in pursuit of success. Those students who for various reasons do not partake in this type of school culture are left outside and left behind; d) *survivalist school culture* is in major parts detrimental to students' opportunities to succeed in education. Social relations are weak, teachers struggle to uphold a minimum of disciplinary control by engaging in negotiations with students proposing passing grades if they do not disturb. Teachers are disengaged and receive little support from their principals, which also leads to a high level of turnover. Students are bored, alienated from learning with little motivation to engage in something they do not understand. These schools are on the verge of being dismantled and in systems with a school market many students eventually opt out (Bunar 2022a).

Based on this typology Hargreaves (1995) proposes a fifth model, an ideal type:

In this model, the ideal school of the effectiveness literature is...striving to hold its chosen optimal position in the social control and social cohesion domains. Expectations of work and conduct are high - the principal's expectations of staff and the teachers' of students. Yet these standards are not perceived to be unreasonable; everyone is supported in striving for them and rewarded for reaching them. For both teachers and students, school is a demanding but very enjoyable place to be. It must be recognised, however, that the staff and clients of schools in many other positions...may well consider their school to be effective. (p. 28-29)

Saminathen (2020) identified, in her study on Swedish *deprived immigrant schools* (p. 43) *schoolethos* (school culture) as the strongest factor affecting students' achievements with the capacity to compensate for their lower SES. Schools with a higher level of estimated *schoolethos* had higher results. Students with higher results had lower levels of psychological distress and displayed lower levels of aggressive behavior, which in itself led to a calmer climate in schools.

School culture is something that indeed is affected by a wide range of external factors, but it is not just a pure reflection of what each individual takes with him/her into this new

organizational context. School culture is more than a sum of individual norms and values, it is a highly shapeable phenomenon. It has the capacity to affect how the very actors involved in its formation act in terms of behavior, relations and what is accepted as “ordinary and we do things in this way”. School culture creates and maintains not just the set of rules for desirable values and behavior, but it also sets the boundaries for what is unacceptable and how to sanction those who overstep the boundaries.

School culture and discipline

The question of school discipline is perhaps the foremost, or at least the most visible, indicator of a positive school culture. In many education systems, deteriorated school discipline has been accounted for as one of the main explanations for lower school grades, in particular in low-performing schools in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods (Bunar 2016). The logic is almost impeccable. If learning is to take place, the students need to focus on their tasks and that requires a certain level of discipline and tranquility. Thus, discipline in the classroom is directly linked to learning and achievement (Jennings & Greenberg 2009). Nevertheless, an interesting question to pose is: Is the causal relation between discipline and achievement as straight as anticipated? To start with, it is important to acknowledge that a minimum of shared codes of conduct is necessary in an organizational context where virtually hundreds of individuals gather every day and spend up to eight hours. Otherwise, it could hardly be anything else than the rule of individual wills. Every organizational context and indeed every social relation is underpinned with formal and informal social codes, so it is nothing unique for schools. How was it with links between discipline and learning? Ning et al. (2015) took their analytical point of departure in PISA material and explored what the lack of discipline in the classroom means for students’ results in literacy tests. Some of the interesting conclusions are: discipline is an important explanatory variable, but its strength varies considerably between the countries and even more if the attention is paid to the number of students in a classroom, cultural traditions of a country, socioeconomic status and gender of students (see also Cheema & Kitsantas 2014, Ma & Willms 2004). Schools with generally better discipline achieve better results on standardized tests, but according to Ning et al. (2015) it depends more on the fact that they have more students from socioeconomically well-established families and they have more girls, who have generally better results than boys. A particularly interesting conclusion is that the link between discipline and achievement is not always that straight:

Although the improvement of classroom disciplinary climate of schools has a general positive effect on reading achievement in most countries, the educational inequality or gender gap in reading achievement might decrease in some countries but increase in others as a result of such an improvement. Therefore, when considering school improvement projects regarding classroom disciplinary climate in a specific country, one should keep in mind that classroom disciplinary climate of schools relates differentially to school economic, social, and cultural composition and school gender composition across countries. (Ning et al. 2015, p. 601)

The point is that classroom discipline can never be considered as an isolated factor, capable of unilaterally affecting students’ achievements. Even in empirical cases with a

high correlation between good discipline and students' low socioeconomic status, the researchers detected a high level of dropouts and low achievement. In other words, focus on discipline in classroom in itself did not have a capacity to compensate for structural differences and it may have led to downplaying other measures for school improvement. Likewise, OECD (2012) connects discipline in classroom, especially in schools in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods, to students' relations with teachers, feelings of meaningfulness, inclusion and perception of to what extent teachers are engaged in their school success. Discipline, as little as motivation (Håkansson & Sundberg 2012), is not primarily an outcome of psychological profiles and personalities. Both are to a high degree a product of the quality in relations students are involved in on a daily basis, expectations and encouragement from their teachers. Hence, OECD does not advocate for more and harsher disciplinary measures such as placement in smaller groups or even in remedy classes (Ballard & Bender 2022), in order to maintain discipline in the classroom. Punishment does not lead to better learning outcomes and higher achievement (Landau 2009). But, dedication, meaningfulness and positive relations lead to more motivation. Paired with targeted support, these two can lead to better achievement and more discipline in classrooms (Westling Allodi 2010, Lundberg 2006).

V. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this article has been to analyze and discuss how the approach of sustainable education, and in particular school culture as one of its pillars, can contribute to address the quality and equity differences in education systems produced by school segregation. All three main concepts in the study – sustainable education, school culture and school segregation – have been explained and exemplified with reference to international literature. In the case of school segregation, Sweden was used as an empirical case.

In this final section some main conclusions will be summarized.

First, school culture is an important dimension of school development and sustainable education and its existence has to be recognized, although all comprehensive changes also need to consider other important factors, such as resources, leadership, schools as professional learning organizations, student composition and teacher education. Second, there is no one model of successful school culture that can be replicated in all contexts. Various elements of school culture ought to be calibrated to fit local circumstances. Third, school culture is not a static phenomenon, created once and for all, even if it is proved to contribute to quality and equity. The success presupposes dynamics, change and negotiations between the school actors and about the basic structural conditions of a positive school culture: relations, values, engagement, respect for differences, high expectations, mutual respect, attitudes to school work, respect for different roles and for the common working environment. Fourth, school culture does not only affect teacher-led learning, but also the vital peer-learning, when students support each other (Tymms et al. 2011). Fifth, school culture is a prerequisite for school's ability to carry out its mission to raise students to become active citizens. Shared values and norms, inclusion, equity and equality and equal rights are as important as having pedagogically highly skilled teachers. Sixth, school discipline is an important element of school culture, but school culture is not only about school discipline. Discipline can never be considered as an isolated factor, indeed a silver bullet, able to on its own change students' achievements.

It ought to be understood and dealt with as imbedded in internal relations and values as well as in those circumstances students bring with them into schools. Seventh, discipline problems in classrooms cannot be solved by unilaterally referring to more and harsher punishment policy, but by larger engagement around students that act in an inappropriate way, something that can lead to a calmer social climate and better achievements (Landau 2009).

Finally, school culture is a basic fundament of sustainable education. As such, it ought to be among the priority areas when considering how to reform an education system or a school to elevate quality and equity and especially those propelled by school segregation. A clear and positive school culture benefits all students, but the greatest effects are on students enrolled in low performing schools in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods. As Lee and Louis (2019) argue in their study on school culture:

Even low-performing schools appeared to be able to sustain the improvement of academic achievement, especially when they were strongly equipped with those cultural elements. This suggests that the effect of school culture on school performance is not short-lived. It can be an enduring effect that counters organizational inertia. (p. 92)

In other words, schools in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods, often labelled as segregated, low performing, fraught with disciplinary problems, are possible to improve if school culture is addressed and adjusted properly to serve the interests of all students, their learning and achievement. Nevertheless, and to underline once again, a sustainable education and a durable school improvement can only take place if changes in school culture are paired with broader changes in relations between schools in the educational field. Thus, Bunar (2022b, p. 13) calls for a decisive intervention in the current system of differences and urban inequalities in schools undertaking simultaneous efforts on several tracks: continuous and enhanced support to schools in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods; establishment of new attachment zones embracing places with different social and symbolic status; restrictions of those aspects of school choice policy that elicit more segregation, divisions, and inequalities; equal distribution of newly arrived students among all schools in a municipality; reparation of broken ties with parents with migration background; and establishment of a qualified research and evaluation program that follows up the efficacy of policy interventions. Inclusion, equity and justice are the imperative and guiding principles in achieving that goal.

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