Inclusion in the light of competing educational ideals: Swedish Policy approaches to differentiation and their implications for inclusive education

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ABSTRACT
Teachers and schools face multiple demands regarding how they should respond to student diversity. Thus, it is crucial to study these different demands in order to understand how they shape inclusive education in practice. Following this line of reasoning, this article presents an analysis of Swedish educational policy documents, which shows that differentiation policies are constructed as answers to different educational problems, and that these problems are framed by different ideals and assumptions about education. Five different policy approaches to differentiation are described and discussed in relation to the ideal of inclusive education. By studying the Swedish case, the article illuminates how different policy approaches can interact over time within the context of an educational system. The policy approaches can thus be understood as ideal types that can be used in analyses of other educational systems. Implications for inclusive education in Swedish schools are addressed in the article by discussing the conditions for schools’ and teachers’ enactments of the conflicting policy demands.

Introduction
In order to understand the conditions for inclusive education in practice, we need to gain knowledge about the various and often conflicting demands that teachers, schools and educational systems have to enact (Ball et al., 2012; Clark et al., 1998). However, Clark et al. (1998) point out that empirical research on inclusive education often ignores this aspect while investigating whether practices are inclusive or not. This, they mean, is due to a one-sided focus on criticizing schools’ failures in handling diversity, within which all problems that arise in practice are interpreted. In line with Clark et al. (1998), I mean that, although criticism of segregating structures is important, research on inclusive education also needs to study the complexities and dilemmas that schools and teachers face while attempting to realize inclusive education in relation to other competing values and practical educational concerns.

Inclusive education is understood here as an educational ideal that advocates a school designed to meet the needs of all students. It is a way of responding to diversity that speaks to wider issues of social justice, equity and democratic participation (Barton, 1997). As an educational ideal, it provides certain answers to the dilemma of how to teach a diverse group of students with different needs and interests (Clark et al., 1998). Differentiation can be understood as all the different answers to this dilemma where some aspect of education in some way differs between students. Thus, differentiation can imply a wide range of different classroom practices, some of which harmonize better with inclusive education than others (Graham et al., 2021).

In this way, different forms of differentiation can rest upon different assumptions and ideas about education. Thus, policy analyses as well as studies of the enactment of differentiation policies are important. However, policy studies are rare in contemporary research on differentiation. For example, the majority of the studies in four recent research reviews are mainly focused on teacher practices or the effects of differentiation (Bondie et al., 2019; Deunk et al., 2018; Graham et al., 2021; Lindner & Schwab, 2020). This article employs an understanding of policies as constantly transforming products of struggles and compromises between actors and interests at multiple levels (Ball, 1993; Dyson & Millward, 2000). These conflicting interests frame and represent educational problems in certain ways, to which certain policies are created as solutions (Bacchi, 1999). It is therefore of importance to gain knowledge about how the idea of inclusive education frames educational problems, and how it interacts with other ideas about how school systems should handle student diversity through different forms of differentiation.

In order to pursue this line of argumentation, this article presents an analysis of approaches to differentiation in Swedish educational policy. Sweden is an interesting case for such a study, since the Swedish school system has gone through drastic changes...
during the last decades, which have had implications for inclusive education. Similar to the other Nordic countries, Sweden introduced a highly centralized comprehensive school system in the 1960s, with the aim to increase economic growth and to strive for democratic socialization and a reduction of social class differences (Imsen et al., 2017; Telhaug et al., 2006). The Swedish school of the 1960s was influenced by progressive education, and national curricula emphasized the importance of differentiated instruction. In the following decades, streaming of students was gradually decreasing, and special educational needs were increasingly expected to be handled within the framework of general teaching (Giota, 2013). The conception of an inclusive education came to emphasize further the responsibility of schools to meet the needs of all students. Collectivist ideas about a school for all and integration of students in general classroom settings were already established in the Swedish school system. However, inclusive education as a transnational educational ideal, for example, as described in the Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994), also contained other dimensions, such as a greater focus on individual rights (Magnússon, 2019).

The view of education as a private good came to grow stronger in Sweden in the 1980s due to neoliberal ideas about freedom of choice and local autonomy, which criticized the Swedish welfare project (Carlgren, 2009). In the 1990s, the Swedish school system went through an extensive decentralization. The responsibility for financing and organizing education was transferred to the municipalities, while the state became reliant on management by objectives (Lundahl, 2005). Other important reforms included the introduction of a voucher system for school choice and a liberalization of the regulations for establishing independent schools, which has been argued to create a uniquely liberal public education system (Wennström, 2020). In the 2000s, declining results in international large-scale assessments such as PISA strengthened the influence from external actors on Swedish educational policy (Grek, 2017), and Sweden became more adapted to transnational policies promoting competence-based curricula with an emphasis on learning outcomes (Nordin & Sundberg, 2021; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). In relation to inclusive education, researchers have argued that this development towards a competitive and standards-based school system has led to a subordination of inclusive ideals (Isaksson & Lindqvist, 2015; Magnússon et al., 2019).

In summary, a study of the Swedish case has the potential to identify several different policy approaches to differentiation, constructed under the influence of different educational ideals, societal changes and other contextual factors. In order to examine how the issue of diversity is problematized in policy proposals (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016), the analysis starts off from a selection of Swedish policy documents, limited to the years between 1980 and 2011 due to the major changes in the Swedish educational system that characterize this time period. The empirical data are used to construct a typology of different policy approaches, which are then contextualized in the Swedish educational system.

Aim and research questions

The aim of this article is to gain knowledge of how the enactment of inclusive education is conditioned by educational policies. In this endeavour, the article explores different policy approaches to differentiation in Sweden and their relation to inclusive ideals, with the aim of shedding light on the conflicting demands that are placed on Swedish schools and teachers who try to develop practice in a more inclusive direction.

Three research questions are asked:

- Which educational problems are expected to be solved by Swedish national policies promoting different types of differentiation?
- How are these problems framed by different ideals and assumptions about education, and how do they relate to inclusive ideals?
- What consequences can these different policy approaches to differentiation have for inclusive education in Swedish schools?

Theoretical points of departure

The theoretical understanding of policies and their effects in this article draws mainly on the work of Stephen Ball, along with some theoretical ideas by Carol Bacchi, who also provides a framework for analysing policy. From Ball’s perspective, policies are understood as statements about practice, aiming to solve diagnosed problems (Ball, 1990). Such policies are created in struggles between conflicting interests on different levels, which means that policy texts are to be seen as compromises that contain a mixture of statements with different ideological foundations. Thus, they are often contradictory and incoherent. In practice, these statements are not only represented as texts, but as complex and contextually mediated compositions of regulations, guidelines and artefacts, which are enacted in various ways by local school actors through interpretations, translations, negotiations, engagement, resistance or neglect (Ball, 1993; Ball et al., 2012). However, policies have certain effects on practice that limit this agency. These effects are partly material in that policies constrain actors’ decision-making through direct regulations or allocation of resources. The effects are also partly discursive in that policies shape the
understanding of what can be considered valid knowledge by presenting certain sets of ideas as self-evident, common sense or truth (Ball, 2008, p. 5).

Furthermore, Ball et al. (2012) stress that policies have different strength. Imperative policies are able to position actors in certain ways and construct them as policy subjects, while exhortative policies open up for agency and different interpretations by local actors to a higher degree. In this article, Ball’s theoretical account provides an understanding of policy as a concept. It also constitutes a frame for discussing how different policies on differentiation can shape schools’ and teachers’ enactment of policy in different ways, both by regulating how schools should be organized and function, and by creating concepts of ‘good teaching’ or constructing students, teachers and special educators as subjects (Ball et al., 2012).

A central concept for Bacchi is problematizations, which in this case means the ways in which ‘problems’ are produced in policies, implying that policies are not rational answers to existing problems (Bacchi, 1999, p. 199). In a similar vein to Ball, Bacchi understands policies as created in the interplay between different interests, educational ideals and underlying assumptions about education, such as the purpose of the school, the role of teachers and the nature of learning. These different assumptions produce certain ways of understanding, framing and representing educational problems, which makes certain policy solutions seem rational (Bacchi, 1999; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Bacchi’s analytical approach takes texts as the starting point for analysis, or more specifically: ‘texts written for the purpose of offering rules, opinions, and advice on how to behave as one should’ (Foucault, 1986, p. 12, in Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). By focusing on proposed solutions, the aim is to ‘read off’ the implicit representations of problems within policies and thereafter work backwards to examine the underlying assumptions (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). It is then possible to compare competing representations of problems and discuss their implications in terms of their potential consequences for practice (Bacchi, 1999, p. 200). However, it is also important to take context into account in all steps of the analysis, since both problem representations, policy solutions and their enactments can take different shapes depending on contextual factors related to location, history, institution, economy, professions, etc. (Bacchi, 1999, p. 7; Ball et al., 2012, p. 21).

The analytical method of this article draws on Bacchi’s approach and consists of the following steps:

- Analysis of which educational problems specific forms of differentiation are expected to solve.
- Analysis of the different ideals and assumptions about education that frame these problems, and how they relate to inclusive ideals.
- Analysis of the conflicting demands that are placed on schools and teachers who try to develop practice in a more inclusive direction.

The concepts of inclusive education and differentiation

As a theoretical concept, inclusive education is rooted in a sociologically inspired criticism of traditional special education (Slee, 2008). In particular, the criticism has been directed towards the use of medical-psychological models to explain special educational needs as the result of students’ deficits, and towards the use of special education as a functional answer to these problems, which has been argued to lead to categorization of students and exclusion from general education settings (Clark et al., 1998). Thus, a central aspect of inclusive education is the understanding of school difficulties as arising out of the encounter with the surrounding environment. However, many researchers agree that inclusive education is not only about students’ access to the general classroom. In a research review, Göransson and Nilholm (2014) present four different definitions of the concept, as used in educational research:

a. Inclusive education as placement of students in need of special support in general education classrooms.

b. Inclusive education by meeting the social and academic needs of students in need of special support

c. Inclusive education by meeting the social and academic needs of all students

d. Inclusive education by creating inclusive communities with specific characteristics.

The different definitions highlight a paradoxical relationship between inclusive education and special education. On the one hand, inclusive education can be argued to presuppose identification of students in need of special support in order to be able to meet their needs. On the other, such an identification can also lead to categorization of students and thus be a foundation for exclusion. This dilemma can be elaborated in relation to Nancy Fraser’s (1997) theoretical distinction between socioeconomic redistribution and cultural recognition as remedies for injustice and goals for political struggles. The two kinds of remedies are associated to different ways of understanding injustice.
Redistribution is the remedy for socioeconomic injustices in traditional Marxist analyses. Newer postmodernist understandings focus on cultural injustices related to social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication, which requires remedies of recognition (pp. 13–14). However, Fraser emphasizes that the two kinds of injustice are often intertwined in practice, and that there are several social groups that are subject to both cultural and economic injustices. Although both kinds of remedies are needed, there are tensions between the two that complicate such efforts. In relation to special and inclusive education, this could be translated to recognition of difference within the general education setting in order to facilitate students’ sense of belonging, and a redistribution of teaching resources in order to meet the academic needs of students and promote social mobility.

Inclusive education also has a complex relation to the concept of differentiation. Research on differentiation in teacher practice has shown that many different frameworks are used to define the concept, which has led to many different classroom practices being performed in its name (Bondie et al., 2019). Some of these frameworks can be considered as compatible with the ideal of inclusive education. For example, Carol Ann Tomlinson’s conceptualization of differentiated instruction promotes a proactive approach to teaching where the teacher modifies educational content, processes and products in dialogue with students, according to their readiness, interests and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson & Eisdor, 2003). Other definitions also highlight other aspects of the concept. Dahllöf (1967) describes two main kinds of differentiation: Organizational differentiation means that students are divided into different school forms, study paths, courses or teaching groups. Pedagogical differentiation involves different adaptations of teaching within the classroom, such as individual or subgroup differentiation of educational content or teaching methods in accordance to different students’ needs and interests. Lindner and Schwab (2020) suggest that the practice of differentiation can include instructional, organizational and social practices. For example, feedback, assessment, extent, time frame, grouping and personnel support are highlighted as elements that can be differentiated. Some of these practices, such as ability grouping, can be understood as less compatible with inclusive education (Graham et al., 2021). An extensive differentiation of educational content can also come into conflict with aspects of inclusive education that stress access to the general curriculum (Moljord, 2018).

Moreover, Deunk et al. (2018) emphasize that the purpose of differentiation may vary. Differentiation can aim towards convergence; that all students achieve certain basic goals, which would imply that a larger amount of teachers’ time is reserved for students who need it the most to achieve these goals. Differentiation can also aim towards divergence, where teachers spend an equal amount of time with all students to help them reach their highest potential, even if it will widen the gap between students in terms of academic achievement (Deunk et al., 2018). The ambivalent relationship between inclusive education and differentiation that has been described in this section can be seen as a result of the different nature of the two concepts. Unlike inclusive education, differentiation is not necessarily ideological in itself, but can be characterized as all the different ways of organizing and implementing teaching differently for different students. As a method, differentiation can thus be rationalized based on different educational ideals.

**Differentiation, special education and inclusive education in Swedish educational policy 1980-2011**

This section presents an account of Swedish educational policy for the comprehensive compulsory school from the years 1980–2011 with a focus on curricula and other reforms considered important to understand how approaches to differentiation, special education and inclusive education have changed over time.

The 1980 Swedish curriculum for compulsory school, Lgr 80 (National Board of Education, 1980), was different from its predecessors in several ways. Pedagogical differentiation had already been pronounced as important in order to meet the needs of the more heterogeneous group of students after the abolishment of the parallel school system and the emergence of the comprehensive compulsory school in the 1960s (Giota, 2013; Haug, 1998). However, this aspect of teaching became further emphasized after a national committee report revealed that about 40% of Swedish compulsory school students at some point in time received some form of special support (SOU 1974:53). Influenced by the criticism of special education that followed this report, Lgr 80 made it clear that all students, as far as possible, should receive their education within the framework of the regular class. In line with new trends and approaches to teaching and learning, the curriculum also promoted exploratory and cross-disciplinary teaching, and on students’ active role in their own learning process (Giota, 2013). Sundberg and Wahlström (2012) describe how this curriculum meant a shift from the content-driven curricula of the 1960s towards a curriculum focused on process and development. Instead of describing educational content in detail, desirable processes were described as goals, open for adjustment by professionals according to local conditions and the individual needs and interests of students. The ambition to create a school for all students was further strengthened in the 1980s, resulting in a reform in 1990 replacing special education teachers with special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs).
The SENCOs were supposed to supervise teachers and engage in organizational work, rather than teach students in special educational settings (DsU 1986:13; UHÅ, 1990).

Lundahl (2005) describes how challenges to the bureaucratic structures of the centralized school system in the 1980s led to a further movement towards goal-orientation and local autonomy. The first curriculum for the compulsory school after the decentralization reforms of the early 1990s, Lpo 94 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 1994), was focused on generic competencies and did not include any direct regulations of educational content or teaching methods (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). The curriculum stressed the importance of student influence and adoptions to students’ needs, interests and experience in general terms, but without providing advice on how to take on this task (Giota, 2013). Studies have later showed a heavy increase of individual work in Swedish classrooms following the 1994 curriculum (Carlgren, 2009). In a report from the Swedish national agency for education, this development is highlighted as a possible reason for an increase in special support measures in this time-period, as individual work places high demands on the ability to plan and carry out studies independently (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2009).

In the late 1990s, the Swedish school became the target of increased criticism, arguing that the soft governing had caused a decline in results (Carlgren, 2009). The competence-based knowledge goals in Lpo 94 were considered too vague and incapable of giving enough guidance to teachers (SOU 2007:28). In the mid-2000s, the newly elected liberal-conservative government introduced several reforms and regulations, aiming to ensure school quality by taking back control over educational processes (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). These reforms included the establishment of a school inspectorate, new school legislation and a new curriculum, Lgr 11 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011), with standardized knowledge requirements connected to a new 6-scale grading system (Imsen et al., 2017). Similar to its predecessor, the new curriculum was competence-based. However, it introduced an understanding of competencies as subject-bound. In this way, the curriculum could balance domestic demands for reintroducing subject content with transnational frameworks promoting competencies important for the modern global knowledge economy (Nordin & Sundberg, 2021). Isaksson and Lindqvist (2015) argue that the increased focus on student performance that characterize this time period has re-established an understanding of school difficulties as caused by students’ shortcomings, which has created a need for traditional special education. To support this argument, Isaksson and Lindqvist highlight the re-introduction of special education teachers, who were supposed to work alongside SENCOs (SFS 2007:638), and a government report on a new teacher education programme, suggesting increased training in special educational knowledge for general teachers (SOU 2008). However, the general teachers were now supposed to use this knowledge to identify students in need of special support, while special education teachers were given the main responsibility of providing such support.

Materials and methods

The documents that were selected for the analysis of policy approaches to differentiation in Sweden are the two most recent education acts: SFS 1985:1100 and SFS 2010:800, the school ordinance from 1994: SFS 1994:1194, and the three most recent curricula for compulsory school: Lgr 80, Lpo 94 and Lgr 11. These policy documents were chosen because of their heavy legal weight for the Swedish compulsory school and for their importance for professionals. In a first step, each policy document was read through in order to establish an initial understanding of its content and possible underlying meanings in the document as a whole. Thereafter, special attention was given to those parts of the texts that emphasized solutions where some aspect of education should in some way differ between students. This included specific regulations of what aspects of education could or should be differentiated and guidelines of how to differentiate, but also more general formulations about why different aspects of education should be differentiated.

In all, 82 pieces of text, each between about 30–150 words, were extracted and coded into categories using NVIVO software. Table 1 illustrates how the textual excerpts were categorized based on type of differentiation. While not all excerpts specified a particular type of differentiation, some excerpts referred to several types, and were coded into more than one category.

The next step of the analysis focused on the representations of problems that underlie the different policy solutions. Since problem representations are often implicit in policies, this step of the analysis involved a substantial degree of interpretation (Bacchi, 1999; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). The selected

| Table 1. Types of differentiation as policy solutions; number of excerpts in parentheses. |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Organizational differentiation of       | Pedagogical differentiation of           |
| School form (4)                         | Tempo, structure and extent (11)        |
| Course of study (13)                    | Methods, tasks and materials (8)        |
| Teaching group (13)                     | Educational content (6)                 |
|                                          | Goals and assessment (7)               |
textual excerpts were then sorted into new categories of suggested problem representations. Some of these patterns were already identified in the first categorization. In order to validate the accuracy of the categories, they were thereafter tried against the textual excerpts from the different policy documents, taking into account the meaning of each text excerpt within the context of the policy document as a whole.

**Findings**

This section presents the five different problem representations that were distinguished in the analysis, and their associated policy solutions. These are briefly presented in Table 2, and then more thoroughly described in relation to different educational ideals and assumptions about education.

**Problem 1: Traditional teaching is not interesting and/or meaningful enough for students**

In this representation of the problem, differentiation is a pedagogical approach that concerns all students. By emphasizing differentiation based on students’ different interests and learning styles as a solution, the problem can be argued to be an inflexible and conformist school that does not provide students with meaningful education. Lgr 80 contains several recommendations and advice that were sorted under this category. For example, the curriculum emphasizes that the school should support and encourage everyone to develop their abilities and interests. It also stresses that teachers and students, within the framework of the syllabi, should be able to choose study areas that engage and interest them and influence the choice of methods, tasks, materials and structuring of content. A considerable part of the differentiation that is expressed as desirable in Lgr 80 is linked to students’ opportunities to influence and design their own education. For example, a lot of text space is devoted to the students’ own study choices, which are described as thematic and cross-disciplinary in-depth studies or interest profiles.

Differentiation based on students’ interests and learning styles is also very central to Lpo 94. The curriculum emphasizes that each student should be able to find his or her unique identity and that the school should stimulate each student to grow. This is related to a varied and balanced teaching where students have access to several different forms of knowledge and ways of expressing themselves. Lpo 94 also points out that students can develop their ability to exercise influence and take responsibility by being allowed to choose courses and subjects and by participating in the planning and evaluation of daily teaching. Moreover, the curriculum declares that the school should strive for each student to develop the desire and curiosity to learn, and for each student to develop their own way of learning. Another important aspect of Lpo 94 in relation to this problem representation is that the syllabi do not contain any prescribed educational content, which opens up for a highly differentiated teaching. Lgr 11 has kept many of the formulations about differentiation from Lpo 94. It stresses the importance of teaching being varied and balanced. It also states that students are different and should be allowed to develop their curiosity and desire to learn in a harmonious way. Differentiation according to students’ interests is, however, somewhat toned down in comparison with the previous curriculum, which can be understood in relation to the increased focus on educational standards in this time period.

This representation of the problem is based on an assumption that teaching needs to be meaningful to students, either as a means to achieve other goals, or as a goal in itself. Furthermore, it assumes that teaching becomes meaningful for students when it connects to their interests and experiences and when they actively engage in their own learning process.

Overall, this problem representation can be said to be influenced by progressive and student-centred educational ideals. The associated solutions in the policy documents give a prominent place to students’ own perspectives and meaning making rather than their learning of specific knowledge. Thus, they can be interpreted as underpinned by a view of knowledge as subjective, from which follows that it is not possible to decide in advance what is desirable for everyone to learn. It is therefore important that educational decisions are made as close to the teaching process as possible, and that students gain influence over their own education so that they can develop in different directions and achieve unknown goals.

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**Table 2. Problem representations and suggested types of differentiation.**

| Problem representations                                      | Suggested types of differentiation                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Traditional teaching is not interesting and/or meaningful enough for students | Student-led differentiation of study paths, study areas, tasks, materials and examinations. |
| 2. The school limits students’ opportunities to reach their full potential | Differentiation of methods, tasks, materials, tempo and extent according to students’ abilities. |
| 3. The school reproduces inequalities in society by giving some students better opportunities than others to succeed in life | Compensatory differentiation through extra support, extra time, or modifications of general teaching in order to make it suitable for disadvantaged students. |
| 4. Some students have difficulties in school and need support | Organizational differentiation of school form, course of study, teaching group or special support for students with special educational needs. |
| 5. The school excludes students by not designing an education suited for all | Proactive differentiation of general teaching in order to facilitate adaptions to the needs of a wide range of students. |
**Problem 2: The school limits students’ opportunities to reach their full potential**

This way of representing the problem also focuses on a perceived one-size-fits-all approach of schools and teachers, and can thus be confused with Problem 1. However, the solutions sorted into this category do not suggest that teaching should be differentiated based on students’ own preferences. Instead, they emphasize the importance of all students being taught in accordance with their abilities and in ways that challenge them to reach as far as possible within the framework of predefined knowledge goals. These solutions are mainly represented in the later policy documents among those selected for analysis. For example, the current Education Act (SFS 2010:800) states that the school shall inspire and motivate all students to develop as far as possible in accordance with the goals of the curriculum. It also stresses that students who easily reach the knowledge requirements that are to be achieved should be given guidance and stimulation to be able to advance in their knowledge development. The Education Act also emphasizes that feedback on students’ progress in parent-teacher conferences should primarily concern their development in relation to the knowledge requirements of the curriculum.

In Lgr 11, solutions of this type are not as explicitly expressed. Overall, there are few concrete recommendations about how to differentiate instruction in the two latest curricula, which can be seen in the light of the decentralization in the 1990s that resulted in a new way of governing schools by setting goals instead of regulating the educational processes. However, compared with the previous curriculum Lpo 94, there is a much stronger focus on the acquisition of specific subject knowledge in Lgr 11, both in the general goals of the curriculum and in the syllabi. Thus, some policy solutions in Lgr 11 can be understood as implicitly connected to this problem representation. One example is the statement that teaching should facilitate students’ continued learning and knowledge development taking into account their background, previous experiences, language and knowledge.

This problem representation presupposes that education should primarily be about teaching a certain selection of knowledge and skills, and that teaching should be differentiated in accordance with students’ abilities to learn and master these skills. The emphasis on educational standards indicates an understanding of knowledge as more or less objective as it recognizes knowledge hierarchies and the value of common knowledge goals. Therefore, the teaching content cannot differ too much between different students. Consequently, pedagogical differentiation is limited to adapting methods, tasks, materials, tempo and extent according to students’ abilities to help them achieve the knowledge goals. Ability grouping is another form of differentiation that can be associated to this way of representing the problem, although it was not emphasized in the analysed documents.

**Problem 3: The school reproduces inequalities in society by giving some students better opportunities than others to succeed in life**

The pieces of text that were linked to this problem representation advocate differentiation as a way of compensating students who due to disadvantaged backgrounds may be less equipped to succeed in school. These proposals were mainly found in Lgr 80, although the Education Act (SFS 2010:800) also states that the school shall strive to compensate for differences in students’ personal resources for learning. The fundamental problem that calls for these solutions is that society is unequal. Some textual passages in Lgr 80 explicitly mention that schools are at risk of reinforcing these inequalities, for example, by not attending to students with a lack of prior knowledge. Thematic teaching and explorative and applied tasks are described as particularly suitable approaches to prevent teaching from being designed only for high-achieving students.

In addition, Lgr 80 establishes that teachers and school counsellors have the task of guiding students’ interests towards areas of importance in order to prevent their future study and career choices from being limited by, for example, social background or gender. This can be regarded as a form of differentiation since some students are considered to need more ‘support’ in their free choice. In Lpo 94 and Lgr 11, similar ways of reasoning are used in relation to gender. In other respects, issues of students’ different backgrounds are discussed at an individual level in these curricula. They both declare that the school has a special responsibility for those students who have difficulties achieving the goals. However, differentiation is not proposed as a way of resolving structural injustices linked to students’ different backgrounds as in Lgr 80.

This problem representation takes its point of departure in an understanding of society as fundamentally unfair, where some people have considerably lower chances of success in life right from birth. Primarily, the policy solutions associated to this representation of the problem emphasize that schools and teachers should compensate for social inequalities by adapting teaching to the needs of disadvantaged students. From this perspective, the reproduction of inequalities can be avoided by attending to disadvantaged groups. The differentiation that comes into question is therefore initiated by the teacher rather than the
student, and can take the form of, for example, extra support, extra time, or adaptions of general instruction in order to make it suitable for these students. However, the representation of this problem does not necessarily imply a presumed need for a radical restructuring of society. Rather, the compensatory form of differentiation advocated in the policy documents operates within the framework of society’s structures and conceptions of knowledge in order to enable social mobility and reduce class differences.

**Problem 4: Some students have difficulties in school and need support**

Within this category, the problem is attributed to the individual student’s shortcomings. Although the representation of the problem produces compensatory solutions, it differs from problem 3 in that it is more individualistic and does not problematize the school’s role in reinforcing inequalities in society. Some of the pieces of text categorized as belonging to this problem representation deal with the placement of students in special schools or the regulation of deviations from the regular course of study based on students’ social and academic development. These formulations were mainly found in the legal texts from 1985, 1994 and 2010. Other solutions apply to the ordinary compulsory school and describe differentiation as various forms of support measures that students may need and are entitled to. This support can be provided in smaller groups or through special educational interventions in the regular classroom. Such solutions are expressed in several of the analysed policy documents, but in different ways. Lgr 80 clarifies that some students are in greater need of help, and need extra support and more time for the training of different skills. The use of special educational methods in the regular classroom and the establishment of individual education plans are emphasized as important aspects of this work. The curriculum also states that it may be justified to place students in great need of emotional support and encouragement in smaller teaching groups.

The 1985 Education Act only states that special support should be provided to students with difficulties. In the 1994 School ordinance, this is somewhat clarified by articulating that special support should be given to students if they are at risk of not achieving the minimum goals, or if they need special support for other reasons. SFS 2010:800 differs from the previous legal texts in that students’ right to special support is declared as dependent on whether the student is considered to be able to achieve the knowledge requirements for a passing grade. The support must also be designed and provided to the extent necessary for the student to be able to achieve these requirements. Both SFS 1994:1194 and SFS 2010:800 also describe procedures and distribution of responsibilities linked to special support. In these documents, emphasis is placed on the head teacher’s responsibility for investigating the need for support and for deciding on the establishment of an individual education plan or adapted course of study.

As with problem 2, this problem representation focuses on the transfer of a certain selection of knowledge and skills to students. A basic assumption is that teachers are not capable of adapting their teaching to all students in their classroom. Therefore, the teaching should be designed to suit most students, for example, by directing the teaching towards an imaginary average student with minor adjustments to the different needs of the students in the class. As a result, special educational support measures become a solution for those students who deviate from this norm. In the later policy documents, the solutions are very similar to those belonging to problem 2 in their emphasis on ability and performance in relation to standardized knowledge requirements. However, the focus here is on a defined group of students considered to have special educational needs.

**Problem 5: The school excludes students by not designing an education suited for all**

Within this category, the problem is described as located in the surrounding structures rather than in the individual student’s deficiencies. Especially, the placement of students in special teaching groups is problematized as it cuts them off from their social and academic environment. The policy solutions that were considered to belong to this problem representation were partly those that emphasize the importance of the teaching being adapted to each student’s needs from the outset, and partly those that explicitly describe certain types of differentiation, e.g. grouping of students, as excluding. Such statements were to some extent found in several of the documents analysed, but are most prominent in Lgr 80. For example, this curriculum states that the school must design its content, its organization and its working methods so that it can easily adapt to the individuality of different students. Moreover, Lgr 80 describes special teaching groups and other forms of organizational differentiation as a last resort when teaching cannot be adapted to the needs of all students in a satisfactory manner. It also points out that such groups risk having negative consequences for students’ self-perception, and that lower demands may be placed on these students, which can lead to stagnant knowledge development. Lgr 80, SFS 1994:1194 and SFS 2010:800 state that special educational support should primarily be provided within the framework of the regular class. However, while the legal texts only state that special reasons are required for the special support
to be given individually or in a different teaching group, more space is provided for reasoning about these issues in Lgr 80.

This problem representation promote several aspects of inclusive education as described in the special educational field of research (e.g. Ainscow, 1998; Clark et al., 1998; Emanuelsen et al., 2001; Haug, 1998; Nilholm, 2003, 2005; Skrtic, 1991). One important assumption that lies behind this way of representing the problem is that everyone has the same right to education, which emphasize the responsibilities of teachers, schools and educational systems to adapt teaching to the needs of all students. It would also be reasonable to say that the problem representation is based on an understanding of schools not only as places for knowledge acquisition, but also as social arenas. Thus, participation in the classroom community is important for students’ wellbeing and social development, as well as their academic development. Although some of the solutions to this problem advocate special support, they emphasize that it should be provided within the ordinary classroom. This means that general education teachers and special educators are supposed to work together, rather than teaching different groups of students.

The focus of this problem representation can be said to be the right of the individual not to be excluded. This entails a certain degree of ambivalence regarding the desirability of differentiation. A certain degree of differentiation is required in order to create a learning environment adapted to all students. However, differentiation can also mean identification of students in need of something else or something extra, which can be understood as stigmatizing from this perspective. In comparison, this ambivalence is not as evident in problem 3, which focuses on justice and equity from a more collectivist perspective, and advocates compensatory differentiation as the solution to structural inequalities in society.

The problem representations contextualized in Swedish educational policy

Table 3 below shows how the different problem representations have differed over time in the analysed texts, which are divided into three time periods. As can be seen in the table, Lgr 80 is associated to most of the identified problem representations. This pinpoints Lgr 80 as a curriculum in a time of change, where the collectivist notions of education were accompanied by an increased focus on individual rights and local decision-making (cf., Giota, 2013; Sundberg & Wahlstrom, 2012). Another notable finding is that both problems 4 and 5 are present to some extent in documents from all three time periods, even though they do not appear to be compatible, which illustrates the often contradictory and incoherent nature of policy.

Other ways of framing problems have changed over time. For example, the latest policy documents no longer advocate differentiation as a solution to social problems, nor as a way of adapting educational content according to students’ preferences. This can be seen in the light of the increased emphasis on standardized knowledge goals, which to a greater extent than before have fixed the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of teaching. What remains to be problematized is thus the ‘how’ of teaching. In other words, when certain outcomes are expected and described in detail, the abilities of students and teachers are more easily understood as the problem that stands in the way of success. This development can be argued to entail excluding effects in practice since students who do not achieve the goals are considered ‘deficient’ and in need of special educational support (cf., Isaksson & Lindqvist, 2015).

It is also possible to distinguish some patterns and lines of development with regard to types of differentiation in the analysed policy documents. An observable change is a markedly reduced text space for recommendations about pedagogical differentiation in the later policy documents. Organizational differentiation, on the other hand, has undergone legalization, as almost all statements on how to work with these issues can now be found in legal texts (cf., Rosén et al., 2021, in relation to Swedish policies on equal treatment). This can be understood as a way of strengthening individual students’ rights not to be excluded, since the placement of students in smaller teaching groups becomes more regulated. On the other hand, the regulation of the procedures for special support in the legislative documents can also be

| Problem representations | SFS 1985:1100, Lgr 80 | SFS 1994:1194, Lpo 94 | SFS 2010:800, Lgr 11 |
|--------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Traditional teaching is not interesting and/or meaningful enough for students | x | x |
| 2. The school limits students’ opportunities to reach their full potential | | x |
| 3. The school reproduces inequalities in society by giving some students better opportunities than others to succeed in life | | |
| 4. Some students have difficulties in school and need support | x | x | x |
| 5. The school excludes students by not designing an education suited for all | x | (x) | (x) |
understood as a clearer division between such differentiation that can be categorized as special education and such that is considered to be part of general education.

Discussion

The analysis illustrates how certain ways of representing problems can co-exist, but also replace each other under the influence of changes to the educational system or shifts in dominance between different educational ideals. The different problem representations presented in the analysis are constructed in relation to the Swedish educational policy context, but can be understood as ideal types based on different ideological assumptions, which can be used in analyses of other educational systems. However, the analysis is not argued to be comprehensive. Although educational systems all over the world have been claimed to have become more similar due to neoliberal globalization (e.g., Teodoro, 2020), transnational policies are always translated differently within different national contexts (Nordin & Sundberg, 2021). Thus, analyses of other educational systems might provide additional problem representations, but also challenge or refine those presented here.

Another contribution of this article is that it illustrates how the analytical method can be useful for interpretations of underlying meanings in policies. With some variations, Bacchi’s (1999), Bacchi & Goodwin (2016) approach has been used in previous analyses of inclusive or special educational policies in Sweden (e.g., Isaksson & Lindqvist, 2015; Magnússon, 2019; Magnússon et al., 2019). In this article, the approach was used to shed light on the relation between differentiation and inclusion and how differentiation policies can be related to different ways of representing educational problems. Furthermore, it was able to illustrate how educational ideals, assumptions and contextual factors can interact and construct policy approaches that are more complex than just being inclusive or not. For example, Problem 1 can be associated to educational ideals such as progressivism and ‘Bildung’, which both produce an emphasis on differentiation according to students’ own interests and preferences. Thus, it avoids categorization of students as proficient or deficient. On the other hand, a student-led differentiation is more oriented towards divergence than convergence (Deunk et al., 2018), and risk leading to elitism and greater differences in student achievement, where parental support and study habits become driving factors for segregation.

Moreover, depending on which aspects of inclusive education are considered the most important, both problem 3 and 5 can be regarded as promoting inclusive education. The differences between the two problem representations that were identified in the analysis highlight the tensions between recognition and redistribution as remedies for injustices (Fraser, 1997). Problem 3 advocates a redistribution of (teaching) resources to disadvantaged students, also by designing general teaching in accordance with their needs. Problem 5, on the other hand, is more focused on recognition of difference and students’ participation in the classroom community. Following Fraser’s line of thought, elements from both perspectives are important in the struggle for justice and equity. However, the findings in the analysis indicate a decline of both problem representations. In particular, the collectivist perspective of problem 3 has been toned down in the later Swedish policy documents. Inclusive education is not an isolated policy concept, but interacts with other policies (Clark et al., 1998; Magnússon et al., 2019). Thus, some aspects of inclusive education may be more prominent in a particular policy context (Magnússon, 2019; e.g., Engsig & Johnstone, 2015, in relation to the Danish educational system). In the case of the Swedish policy context, it can be argued that the movement towards a more individualized and standards-based school system has facilitated an individual rights perspective that emphasize access to the general classroom and the right to receive support to achieve standard-dized knowledge goals.

Implications for inclusive education in practice can be highlighted by relating this development to the shift in emphasis on different types of differentiation that were found in the analysis. The reduction of guidelines in relation to pedagogical differentiation can be understood as an increased autonomy for the individual teacher in this work, which is needed in order to adapt teaching in relation to particular students in particular contexts (Hopmann, 2007). However, there is also a risk that the regulation of organizational differentiation in legal texts constrain teachers’ creativity, reflection and professional judgment in their teaching of students with different needs. Ball et al. (2011) describe this as a construction of reactive and passive policy subjects by the use of imperative policies. Aspects of inclusive education such as social equalization and participation that are not as prominent in the policy documents are thus at risk of losing their importance, while inclusive education becomes understood more as a matter of goal achievement and placement in general education classrooms. The strong focus on organizational differentiation in the policy documents can also lead to a weaker collaboration between teachers and special educators, as their tasks, roles and areas of responsibility become more separated, which can have negative consequences for inclusive education (e.g., Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2020).

However, it is also possible that other factors are more important than contemporary policies for shaping the work of teachers and special educators. For instance, professionals can use historical discourses on teaching
to exercise policy resistance (Ball et al., 2012). Moreover, policies are always enacted within specific contexts that transform the way they are interpreted and translated into practice. The interpretations and translations of policies can also differ between different actors in the local school context, between teachers with different amount of experience, or between teaching traditions in different subjects (Maguire et al., 2015). Thus, enactment studies would be needed in order to further the understanding of how different policy approaches to differentiation can shape the conditions for inclusive education in practice.

One limitation of this approach to analysing policy is that it might not be fully able to capture other forms of differentiation that are not explicitly stated in policy texts. For example, the analysis did not take into account the increased school competition that followed the school voucher reform in the 1990s, which can be understood as another form of differentiation where students and parents actively choose different schools. This development has been argued to increase school segregation, also in relation to special education, since research has shown that the proportion of students in need of special support is much higher in some schools than in others (Magnússon, 2020). Research studies focusing on other aspects of school governance can therefore be a valuable complement for achieving a richer understanding of differentiation as a policy concept.

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