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Waiting for Discovery and Support? Neurodivergent Subjectivities in the Swedish Educational Landscape

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Abstract

PURPOSE: In this paper, we explore and contrast the Swedish state and NGO arguments for initiating two changes in national educational degree objectives in Swedish teacher education: one regarding sex and cohabitation education, and the other regarding support for pupils with ‘neuropsychiatric difficulties’ such as autism and ADHD (here referred to as neurodivergent pupils).

APPROACH: Using critical policy analysis, we compare the arguments from the government as well as responding bodies for introducing the two objectives, with a focus on neurodivergent pupils.

RESULTS: Our findings suggest that discourses concerning sex and cohabitation education for all pupils and support for pupils with ‘neuropsychiatric difficulties’ respectively derive from different educational ideologies and reproduce different ideas about pupils as active citizens versus passive objects of interventions. The objective of sex and cohabitation education is framed within a norm critical discourse putting forward reflexivity and identity, and where pupils are active subjects to be involved in the process. In contrast, neurodivergence is framed within a deficit approach as neurobiological, individual impairment, and a special educational problem that should be managed by professionals. It is seen as a risk for school failure, where neurodivergent pupils are passive objects of professional discovery and support.

CONCLUSION: In a Swedish educational policy landscape, stressing the importance of educating pupils in line with ideas of children as right-bearers, our exploration illustrates how ‘all pupils’ versus neurodivergent pupils, within teacher education, are positioned as belonging to different categories of citizens: as active subjects of rights, versus passive subjects of care. This perception of neurodivergence, we argue, hampers progress towards embracing neurodivergence as a social category, and neurodivergent pupils as political subjects.

Keywords: neurodiversity, teacher education, critical policy analysis, norm critical education

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Points of Interest

- The study compares how education for pupils with ‘neuropsychiatric difficulties’ and sex and cohabitation education for all pupils, are represented within two simultaneously launched degree objectives for Swedish Teacher Education.
- Discourses on ‘neuropsychiatric difficulties’ versus ‘sex and cohabitation’ derive from different educational ideologies, a deficit idea of impairment, versus norm critical educational ideals.
- Pupils are seen as active, self-reflexive agents regarding sex and cohabitation education, while neurodivergent pupils subjected to special educational interventions are portrayed as passive and waiting for professional help and support.
- The change of degree objectives illustrates how different pupils, in contrast to general goals of mainstream education stressing the importance of education as inclusive of all pupils, are placed in different citizen-in-becoming-categories.
- Concerns for the possible effects of the reproduction of discourses of neurodivergent pupils as passive objects of intervention, and not political subjects, are raised.

Introduction

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; UN, 1989) asserts the rights of children to be involved in societal decisions. In Sweden, the CRC has a strong influence on policy and legislation, and since January 2020 it has been incorporated into national law (Swedish Code of Statutes 2018:1197, 2018). One of the core principles of the CRC (Article 12) concerns children’s rights to voice their opinions and have their views taken into account (UN, 1989), which relates to the concept of children’s participation (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). Children’s participation in society is commonly framed as becoming citizens or future citizens, and as an ambivalence where children are positioned as in between autonomous subjects and as objects of protection (Jans, 2004). On the one hand children are framed within a principle of rights and on the other hand within a principle of care (Bruno, 2015). The principle of care focuses on the vulnerable position of children, whereas the principle of rights focuses on children’s agency and their right to participation (e.g., Eriksson, 2009). In the following, we will explore how this ambivalence is being enacted differently in the case of how school-pupils, the majority of whom are children, are displayed in education policy, depending on the policy concerning ‘all pupils’ or neurodivergent pupils specifically.

In the national educational degree objectives of Swedish teacher education (Swedish Code of Statutes 1993:100, 1993), two changes were launched in 2021, concerning student teachers’ abilities in approaching their pupils. The two twin changes in objectives focused on the enhancement of sex and cohabitation education, as well as interventions for pupils with ‘neuropsychiatric difficulties’ (NPS) such as autism and ADHD (here referred to as neurodivergent pupils). In the NPS objective, concerning neurodivergent pupils, the government memorandum states that student teachers need to be able to “demonstrate the capacity to identify and in cooperation with others handle special educational needs, including special educational needs among pupils with neuropsychiatric difficulties” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020a, p. 15). In the objective concerning sex and cohabitation education (SCE), student teachers need to “demonstrate the ability to communicate and reflect on issues concerning identity, sexuality and cohabitation” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020a, p. 15).

In this paper, we analyze the policy debates which preceded the changes in degree objectives: the Swedish government’s memorandum (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020a) in relation to a selection of the responding bodies (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020b). Following Bacchi’s (2009) critical policy approach, “What’s the Problem Represented to be?” or the “WPR approach”, we explore how problems of ‘neuropsychiatric difficulties’ are represented differently in contrast to problems of sex and cohabitation education. We refer to neurodivergence (ND), which also exists as a social category (Singer, 1999), as consisting of neurobiological components (Blume, 1997; Singer,

1999). Following Walker (2012), we consider neurodivergence as having a mind that functions in ways which differs from the societal ideas of what is considered ‘normal’. From a neurodiversity perspective, neurodivergence is conceptualized as a neurocognitive difference rather than a deficit (Walker, 2012). It points out the extensive diversity of human neurobiology, and the “countless ways in which the human brain and mind can develop, both structurally and functionally” (Pellicano & den Houting, 2021, p. 6). Those ways are neither better or worse than each other, and neurodivergence is not viewed as an incorrect neurodevelopment. Instead, neurodivergence is considered a valuable facet of human neurodevelopmental diversity (Pellicano & den Houting, 2021). In a research context, a neurodiversity perspective means not only using a theoretical tool but adopting a certain mindset based on the notion of the idea of cognitive normality (as harmful to everyone, especially to neurodivergent people). A neurodiversity perspective thus implies an ethical standpoint of queering the “cognitive normative gaze” (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2020, p. 228).

To understand the difference between discourses, we situate them in a wider context of educational ideas in the Swedish educational and political landscape. Focusing mainly on the NPS objective concerning neurodivergence, and using the SCE objective as resonance, we specifically ask: from what discourses are the arguments of respective goals departing? How are the pupils subjectified? In line with the theoretical assumption of policy being embedded in its historical and social context, we further ask what origins and positions do the discourses have in the Swedish educational landscape and interdiscursivity between state, academia, and civil society, constituting discourse, policy and lived realities?

Situating Neurodiversity and SCE in the Swedish Policy Landscape

The degree objectives are situated in a changing Swedish political landscape, rooted in a dynamic between the state, academia, and the civil society. The educational system, as a policy arena, is created, and counter-created, in this dynamic. Gender has long had a key status in Swedish educational governance (Forbes et al., 2011), with Sweden considered international pioneers in gender policy making and gender equality (Weiner & Berge, 2001). Gender equality has been a symbolic and cultural marker of Swedish national self-image in the positioning as a progressive, humane, and tolerant nation (Forbes et al., 2011). However, research problematizes Swedish gender policy making as masking structural inequalities and nationalism. Swedish nationalism builds on the idea of the ‘Swedish miracle’ of ‘gender success’, welfare system and one of the best democracies in the world (Carlson & Kanci, 2017). A facet of gender equality ideology illustrates the belief in *Swedish exceptionalism* and/or colour-blindness in equity as hiding structural and interpersonal racism, impacting teachers in higher education (Habel, 2012), and teacher education (Bayati, 2014), as well as impacting higher education and research more broadly (Hübinette & Mählick, 2015). Likewise, heteronormativity is discernible in teacher educators’ attempts to facilitate gender equality and integration in a highly feminized and segregated teacher education (Kreitz-Sandberg, 2013).

UNESCO (2018) advocates sexuality education which moves from pragmatism to empowerment and offers clear, age appropriate, gender sensitive and culturally relevant information about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality; opportunities to explore values, attitudes and social and cultural norms and rights; and opportunities to acquire communication and decision-making skills. Sex education has been present since the 1950s in Sweden. In connection with curriculum changes in 2022, the knowledge area, which long has been called “sex and cohabitation”, was renamed “sexuality, consent and relationships” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023). In the development of sex education, civil society has been central (Centerwall, 2005). However, Bredström (2008) and Bredström and Gruber (2015) have pointed out the ambivalent use of Swedish sex education in the context of education to newly arrived immigrants, where Swedish values are made desirable and universal through a process that Bredström (2008) conceptualizes as a neo-assimilation into Swedish values and Swedish culture through lectures on Swedish equality.

Educational ideals of equity and equality have varied over time and in relation to international bodies, academia, and civil society, e.g., in terms of tolerance pedagogy, inclusive education or intercultural education. The latter has, in Sweden, to some degree been substituted by ‘norm critical education’

(Mikander et al., 2018), to the extent that researchers speak about a ‘norm critical turn’ after 2010 among Swedish authorities, academia and civil society (Alm & Laskar, 2017). Building on feminist, critical, queer, and post structural theory and countering previous ideals of ‘tolerance-pedagogy’, norm critical education twists the gaze from ‘deviance’ to intersectional power structures of normalcy of e.g., sexuality, race, and gender, as well as identity (Bromseth, 2019). From an early stage, norm critical education has been adopted by the Swedish educational authority (Skolverket), responsible of governing and supporting the educational systems. After the implementation of a new anti-discriminatory law in 2008 it was supposed to meet a need of new pedagogies in authorities, schools, and civil society. In the wake of an increased juridification within the Swedish educational system, a simplified version of norm critical education became an answer to the duty of counteracting discrimination and harassment in schools (Björkman et al., 2021; Hill, 2021). For this to happen, Swedish National Agency for Education (2009) recommended norm critical education, and for it to be implemented as a degree objective in teacher education.

Furthermore, education has long been involved in issues regarding neurodivergence (Molloy & Vasil, 2002). Commonly a neurobiological discourse of neurodivergence is entangled with relational approaches to disability and inclusive education. Education has been subjected to what has been referred to as a ‘medicalization of education’ from which socialization and learning of students that are seen as ‘resistant to the education proposed by schools’ is understood through a neurobiological lens (de Cassia Fernandes Signor et al., 2017). Countries have, in some cases, been reacting to increased levels of diagnosing (Hinshaw & Scheffler, 2014), for example where Swedish teachers have been more hesitant towards stimulant medication, than their American counterparts (Carlson et al., 2006).

In parallel, relational approaches, and the concept of inclusive education for every student has, since the Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994), entered education and policy and Sweden is no exception. The notion of inclusion can be regarded an international movement (Danforth & Jones, 2015; Slee, 2014), and moreover, a ‘global agenda’ (Ferguson, 2008; Srivastava et al., 2015). This is in a time when Sweden has undergone drastic changes of neoliberalism and shifting education from public good and social justice towards private good, individualism and marketization, which has had an impact on the implementation of inclusion (Berhanu, 2011; Arduin, 2015).

Unlike the centrality of Swedish civil society in the development of sex education and the emergence of norm critical education as closely aligned with the Swedish queer movement, notions of neurodiversity as a self-advocacy movement, or neurodivergence as identity, is until recently mostly absent within norm critical discourse (for an introduction of a neurodiversity perspective to norm critical education, see Österborg Wiklund & Bertilsdotter-Rosqvist, 2023).

Materials and Methods

Data

In 2021 new formulations of degree objectives in Swedish Teacher Education, added to the degree certificate for teachers came into force following a process of consultation with advocacy organizations and institutions (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020b). The change is a result of several years of debate and policy work of education in Sweden, stipulated through a change and an addition to the degree objectives in the teacher education programmes, which is an appendix to the Higher Education Ordinance (Swedish Code of Statutes 1993:100, 1993). Our empirical material primarily consists of the memorandum (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020a) proposed by the government with arguments for the implementations of the goals. It also includes a selection of the responding bodies to the proposal (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020b). Translations from Swedish to English of the empirical material are provided by the authors.

The main focus of the analysis is the Ministry of Education and Research (2020a) memorandum and its arguments for the two new additions to the degree objectives. The memorandum describes the background to changes and the additions, the need for them and the consequences they are to have. It was sent out to stakeholders and was open for the public community to respond to until 20th April, 2020.

One hundred and three referral bodies were identified by the Ministry of Education. Twenty-eight of these were representatives of higher education, twenty-six from municipalities and eighteen Non Governmental Agencies (NGOs). The rest were unions, student representations or rights or interest organizations of different kinds (Ministry of Education, 2020b). Sixty-eight of these responded to the memorandum and the government made its final decision (*Förordning om ändring i högskoleförordningen*, 2020).

To capture the interdiscursivity of civil society and state policy making we collected answers (excluding short answers such as “We refrain from responding”) from twelve different responding NGO’s and ten authorities. Among them there are four disability rights organizations: The Autism and Asperger Association, The Swedish Disability Rights Federation, The Swedish Brain Foundation and The National Association for People with Neuropsychiatric Disabilities. Two of them are NGO’s oriented to sexuality and cohabitation: Swedish Association for Sexuality Education and the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Rights. Two of them are NGO’s that represent students’ opinions: Swedish Student Councils, and the university students’ voices: Swedish National Union of Students. Also, The National Union of Teachers in Sweden responded as did the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, and The Swedish Women’s Lobby. Among the governmental agencies, four especially focus on human rights: The Equality Ombudsman and the Swedish Gender Equality Agency, working with gender equality, the Ombudsman for Children in Sweden working with children’s rights, the Swedish Agency for Participation working with disability policy. Three of the agencies are school agencies: the National Agency for Special Needs, Education and Schools, the National Agency for Education, and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. The final agencies are the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, the Public Health Agency of Sweden, and the National Board of Health and Welfare.

Analytical Process

Following Bacchi (2009) we depart from the assumption of policy as a situated expression of will, embedded in its historical and societal context. Policy is read in terms of discourse that determines what is possible to speak and think about a given phenomenon, and where different discourses have different status. Representations are in focus, not the real phenomena that precede policy or the intentions behind it. The starting point is that policy texts give problems their form, rather than the other way around. We thus see the degree objectives as normative documents that express cultural values and normality concerning both neurodiversity and sexuality. When studying the relationship between the responses from civil society and the problems presented by the state in the memorandum, we understand the travelling of discourses between institutions as a form of interdiscursivity, as interpreted by Fairclough (2010).

In the analysis, we have been inspired by some of Bacchi’s (2009) analytical questions. First, we read through the texts to then systematically pose the questions and document our analytical answers to them. Questions asked were “What is the represented ‘problem’ in each degree objective?”, “How should it be solved and why?”, “What implicit assumptions are there in the wording?”, “What is not addressed?”, “What dichotomies and categorizations are made?”, “What subject positions are made possible? For whom?”. After finishing the first step, we compared the analyses for each objective and asked ourselves the questions: In what way do they relate to each other? How can we understand the objectives in relation to dominant educational discourses? And, in dialogue with previous research, what are the possible effects of the respective representations?

After the comparison, we assembled three main discourses about neurodivergence illuminated by the contrast to the sex and cohabitation policy—a field we previously knew has had a strong attachment to norm criticism and issues of identity and power in Swedish value-based educational policy making. This contrasting enlightened the breach between discourses between respective field of policy and the influences of emancipatory social movements, creating an even clearer picture of the representations of neurodivergence in Swedish educational policy. To further visualize the analysis, we have emboldened words in the quotations that we find pivotal for our interpretation and results.

Discourses on Neurodivergence in the Degree Objectives

Both objectives have a mission of enhancing pupils' and children's educational rights in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The reasons for doing that, however, differ. In the memorandum, the degrees concerning the NPS aim of enhancing neurodivergent pupils' academic achievements and special educational needs in line with a neurobiological discourse of neurodivergence and educational approaches to learning disabilities. The degrees concerning SCE refer to a broader idea of fostering reflections and communication on identity, sexuality, norms, rights, and gender equality among *all pupils* in school, in order to counteract harassments and violations, which is in line with a discourse of norm critical education. In the dialogue with the responding bodies, those discourses are negotiated in various ways. In the following text quotations, some terms are emphasized in bold to highlight the analytical points.

Neurodivergence as a Neurobiological Impairment

Not unexpectedly, NPS is in the memorandum referred to against the background of neurodivergence as neurobiological ('neuropsychiatric' in the Swedish context) impairment, in line with a deficit approach to neurodivergence. When speaking about NPS, it refers to both pupils fulfilling the criteria for diagnoses, as well as pupils with 'similar developmental difficulties.' The argument for instituting the goal reads as follows:

Preschool teachers and teachers need to have an **understanding** of what different neuropsychiatric **impairments** and similar **difficulties entail** and be able to **identify** what types of special educational **needs** that children and pupils with such **difficulties** may have in preschool and school respectively. [...] it can also be important that the students are trained in **treatment** and **approach towards** the children and pupils [...]. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020a, pp. 29–30)

This contrasts with the arguments for the SCE goal:

[...] it is important that the students not only **possess factual knowledge** about sex and cohabitation, but can also demonstrate an **ability** to both **reflect** and **communicate** about the issues from **different perspectives**. In this way, the possibilities increase that the teaching in school is not only limited to learning about factual knowledge about sex and cohabitation, but that **pupils** are also **given the opportunity** to **discuss** and **reflect** on issues related to **identity, sexuality, and cohabitation**. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020a, p. 32)

In the objective, neurodivergence is seen in terms of individual and problematic difficulties, and special needs of a certain group of pupils for teachers to identify, manage and adapt the learning environment. SCE, on the other hand, is seen as a complex issue that requires the teachers' abilities to, in a nuanced way, reflect, communicate, and give opportunities to pupils in general to develop reflexive skills of thinking about identity, sexuality and cohabitation. Involvement of the pupils is highlighted in the SCE objective, whereas neurodivergent pupils' participation is left unmentioned in the NPS objective.

The problem represented to be in each objective, hence, emerges as *neurobiological* as well as *educational* when it comes to the NPS objective (see Molloy & Vasil, 2002) and as *norm critical* and reflexive when it comes to the SCE objective. SCE refers to a broader understanding of *sexuality*, implicated in norms and power, and as a dynamic process of identity formation for everyone to negotiate and relate to. Neurodivergence is, hence, not the corresponding dimension of neurodiversity that everybody must relate to. Instead, neurodivergent pupils are described as a rather static group and neurodiversity is presented as unnegotiable compared to the reflexivity and discussion-emphasized

sexuality. Neurodivergence is depicted as neurobiological deficits inherent in the neurodivergent individual—whereby neurodivergence, rather than the neurodivergent, becomes the subject (Yergeau, 2018)—an alien force to be managed and adapted by professionals.

The distinction between neurobiological and one-way educational approaches, versus dialogical, reflective and norm critical approaches, is only partly transcended when looking at the responses. Discourses of neurodivergence mainly mirror the neurobiological and educational discourses, for example by adopting the term “neuropsychiatric impairment”, as well as addressing the issue in terms of solely support and needs in disabling environments. Many of the responding bodies, including for example the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions and the National Agency for Special Needs, Education and Schools, however, call for switching the gaze from a perception of the individual as a (inherent) bearer of difficulties to stressing the disabling environment, and explicitly object to the individual focus in the memorandum. Some also address discrimination as a risk for neurodivergent people. The notion of inclusion is only sparingly mentioned, for example by the above-named bodies, and by The Swedish Disability Rights Federation, largely conceptualizing neurodivergence as a matter of inclusion and diversity.

A few of the responding bodies, for example The Autism and Asperger Association, also call for norm critical perspectives, stating the risk of adults wanting to wrongly correct pupils’ behaviours if a norm critical approach is not undertaken. However, the norm criticism is mainly not addressed as concerning neurodivergence and neurodiversity in itself, but as a gendered aspect of it, for example, risks of sexual violence and gender inequalities in the case of neurodivergent girls.

The focus on girls and women in the NPS goal is generally very welcomed. The National Agency for Special Needs, Education and Schools cross couples SCE and NPS by suggesting an inclusion of knowledge about ‘norm-breaking functionality’ in the SCE goal. The LGBTQI+ organization RFSL, which also has an history of being an active agent in the Swedish norm critical and queer turn, explicitly does norm critical readings of the NPS objective. This involves firstly using the term ‘norm-breaking functionality’, and the term ‘variation’ instead of ‘impairment’. This relates to the term ‘functional variation’, which is a Swedish concept based on norm-critical ideas of functionality (Bylund, 2022). Secondly, it involves stressing the cooccurrence of autism and gender dysphoria, and by placing neurodivergence as a matter of power, transphobia and ‘funko’-phobia.

Neurobiological discourses are sometimes invoked in contrast to the educational approaches. Within these, the inclusion of more health professional competence, rather than educational competence, is stressed. For example, The National Association for People with Neuropsychiatric Disabilities challenges the educational discourses in favor of a neurobiological. They stress the insufficiency of educators and special educational competence, calling for collaboration with health professionals:

The perspective is also **too narrowly special educational**. What is meant by special educational needs? These children have the same needs as others, but **specific knowledge** may be required to meet their needs for **support and adaptations**. This requires **not only pedagogical / special pedagogical knowledge** but also **psychological and medical knowledge**. (The National Association for People with Neuropsychiatric Disabilities, 2020, p. 2)

This illustrates the intertwined neurobiological and educational discourses of neurodivergence, together with the subjectification of neurodivergent pupils as pupils with diagnoses or pupils with special needs. It generates a professional battle for epistemic authority in determining the nature of educational support for neurodivergent pupils (Molloy & Vasil, 2002). Epistemic authority is defined by Oikkonen (2013) as “the belief that the proposed account is the most accurate one” (p. 284).

To conclude, there are several discourses mirrored as a represented problem in the NPS and the SCE objectives. Those dominating regarding neurodivergence are the neurobiological and special educational, influenced to a very little extent by norm criticism. SCE, is, on the other hand, in a naturalized way understood in norm critical terms as an issue of identity, power and reflection, negotiable and dynamic.

Neurodivergence as School Failure

In the memorandum, the problem represented as the cause for establishing the two new goals differ according to the educational discourse of neurodivergence, respectively the norm critical discourse of SCE. The reason for the SCE objective is, in the memorandum, stated as the prevention of bullying and harassments:

Sexual harassment and other **abusive treatment** at school **prevent pupils** from having equal opportunities to **learn** and **develop**. The school has an important role in helping to **create a culture of consent**, where sex is based on **voluntariness** and **sexual harassments are not normalized**. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020a, p. 23)

The same is not seen in the NPS objective. Instead, the reason for adopting the NPS objective is described as enhancing neurodivergent pupils' study results in school.

The school is crucial for the **building of Swedish society**. The main priorities for the government's politics are to **raise the knowledge results** and **increase the equity** in school. [...] In order to increase equity and **remove obstacles** to children's and pupils' **learning**, **early** and **effective support measures** are required. It assumes that **teachers** have the **right skills**. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020a, p. 18)

As shown, neurodivergence is positioned as a risk for lower school achievements, unless the need of educational competences is met. In the case of SC, bullying and harassment is seen as a barrier to learning and development. Despite research specifying the risk of bullying and harassment of neurodivergent pupils, with the consequences of trauma for mental health, school results and later work life (Miodus et al., 2021; Wiener & Mak, 2008), this is not mentioned as a reason for school failure in the case of neurodivergence.

The memorandum stresses the importance of knowledge about not only NPS, but also the 'consequences' of neurobiological impairments: "Pupils who, as a result of an impairment, have difficulties fulfilling the knowledge requirements or requirement levels that exist, must be given support that aims to as far as possible counteract the consequences of the impairment" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020a, p. 19), as if the consequences derive from the impairments in itself, not necessarily from the clash with a disabling environment. Maltreatment as a consequence of intrinsic impairment is also depicted in the arguments from the NGO in the example below:

Pupils with autism can wrongly be **mistaken** for being challenging in their ways of being, by adults in school. It depends on a number of different factors, but for example the **shortcomings one has** in social communication and social interaction can be interpreted as something else when you do not have the right skills and thus there is **no understanding** of the pupils' ways of being and reactions. Such **deviations** and the fact that it is **not visible** on someone with autism **risk creating misunderstandings** and there is an increased risk of, for example, **bullying**. (The Autism and Asperger Association, 2020, p. 3)

As stated before, many of the responding bodies reject the memorandum's focus on individual impairment, stressing the importance of the learning environment, and to some extent explicitly underlining the role of discrimination, inclusion, and norm criticism. The discourse does, however, frame the NPS goal as a question of mainly educational needs and adaptations or in neurobiological terms. Bullying and minority stress as a risk factor of school failure for neurodivergent pupils is not brought up correspondingly.

The memorandum stresses both objectives as a matter of rights and equity in line with the CRC. Both arguments are based on the endeavor of removing barriers for learning and development. What the barriers are, however, differs. In the case of SCE, bullying and harassment are addressed as barriers. This can be connected to the Swedish National Agency for Education (2009) adopting norm criticism as a method for countering the problem of bullying and harassment, as well as the institution of the discrimination law 2008 (Swedish Code of Statutes 2008:567, 2008), where the implementation of norm criticism in the teacher education degree objective was suggested (Björkman et al., 2021; Hill, 2021). Bullying and harassment, thus, has an interdiscursive closeness to norm criticism on an educational policy level. NPS, on the other hand, has an interdiscursive closeness to an educational discourse, stressing the importance of meeting the special educational needs of pupils. Unlike the SCE objective, corresponding questions of neurodivergent identity formation, structural power relations of cognitive normality beyond that of equal access to education, are not represented as a problem for student teachers to address.

Neurodivergence as Passivity

Following Bacchi's (2009) question of what subject positions are made available in each degree objective, as well as what is left unsaid in the texts, the visible power awareness of SCE, and the lack of it regarding NPS, is further evident when it comes to how pupils are subjectified. In the NPS objective memorandum, neurodivergent pupils are described as having needs for teachers to manage:

[...] preschool teachers and teachers need to be able to **manage** these **needs**, in **collaboration** with, among others, **special teachers** and **special pedagogues**, in order to better **adapt** the **learning environment** and **teaching for** these children and pupils. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020a, p. 29)

This contrasts with the SCE objective, where the involvement of pupils is emphasized as an important outcome of the objective.

A high-quality sex and cohabitation education requires the **illumination** of **different perspectives**, where **pupils are made to participate**, and teachers have the right competence to teach in the **knowledge area**. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020a, p. 23)

As seen in the SCE objective, pupils are specifically highlighted as active agents whose participation teachers are supposed to ensure. The SCE-subject is described as a complex area of knowledge which requires the ability to present different perspectives and make the pupils involved. In NPS, on the other hand, pupils' participation is not mentioned. But, in contrast to perspectives dominated by health professional expertise, the memorandum stresses educational professional expertise, such as the importance of teachers' adequate knowledge about NPS for them to make a referral and undertake adequate management strategies (e.g., Elhoweris et al., 2020). Other ways of expressing the relationships between pupils and teachers are the teacher's understandings and treatments of, or attitudes towards, the pupils and children. In such expressions, the teachers are positioned as active subjects and pupils with special needs are represented as passive receivers of help and support. Pupils become problems to be solved through professional collaboration between the teachers and special educational teachers, while the pupils are not mentioned as active participants in their education. Thus, the interventions suggested are described as being carried out one-way, *for* or *towards* the pupils, not together *with*.

The perception of pupils as cases to be 'managed' are rejected by some of the responding bodies. The importance of pupils' participation is sometimes highlighted. However, there is no corresponding reaction towards the discrepancy of pupils' agency between the two goals described in the memorandum. Only some of the responses mention the involvement of the pupils in identifying needs and support.

More commonly, like the theme of neurodivergence as school failure, there are bodies calling for collaboration with other professionals. The National Association for People with Neuropsychiatric Disabilities (2020), for example advocate for a more developed medicalization of education, where educators need psychic health expertise. The NGO does not mention the involvement of, or cooperation with, pupils and children in the desired educational outcome of the goal. Instead, when wondering what ‘cooperation with others’ really means, neurodivergence is underlined as a question to be managed by educators in collaboration with psychic health institutions and professionals:

Cooperation with “**others**” needs to be **specified**. **Above all**, it is about collaboration with a functioning **student health** with both **psychological** and **medical** and **special educational competence**, but also with **specialist institutions** such as BUP and BUM (Psychiatric and medical healthcare for children and youth). (The National Association for People with Neuropsychiatric Disabilities, 2020, p. 2)

In line with research showing that both children and disabled people tend to be made into passive objects of care and protection (Starke et al., 2016), and along with a neurobiological discourse of neurodivergence as neurobiological deficits inherent in the neurodivergent individual (Bröer & Heerings, 2013), neurodivergent pupils are left unmentioned as collaborators in fulfilling the NPS objective. They therefore appear to be reproduced as passive objects, in line with notions of children as objects of protection and care, in this case as waiting for teacher discovery and support. This contrasts with the norm critical discourses of SCE, where pupils, in line with a children rights-approach, are stressed as having agency and rights to participate in removing discriminating barriers for learning and development.

Discussion

In this study we have explored and contrasted understandings of neurodivergence with norm critical discourses about sex and cohabitation education in two simultaneously launched degree objectives for Swedish teacher education. This is against the background of ideas of Swedish value-based education policy. In our analyses, we have shown how neurodivergence is viewed through a combined educational and neurobiological lens, neurodivergent pupils are constructed as passive objects of support and intervention, and neurodivergence is seen as a risk for school failure.

The teachers’ task of collaborating regarding NPS is, in the memorandum, described as detecting and managing needs, in collaboration with education and health professionals, leaving out the involvement of pupils. This opposes the intention of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which since January 2020 has been incorporated into national law (Swedish Code of Statutes 2018:1197, 2018). Unlike the discourses of neurodivergence and neurodivergent pupils, sexuality, cohabitation, and gender in the SCE objective is depicted as a matter of a dialogue that should be performed between teachers and pupils, placing the pupils in a position of being active, involved agents regarding the negotiation of sexuality, power and identity. This is in line with the intention of the CRC. Critical disability studies have long researched public constructions of disabled people as passive and incapable, as a problem for professionals to solve (Starke et al., 2016). Passivity and incapacity are also historically ascribed to the very idea of the child (Burman, 1994). Compared to the objective on sexuality and cohabitation, the imaginary of the passive, supportable, and detectable pupil with difficulties, and as a subject of protection and care, is largely reproduced in the memorandum regarding neurodivergent pupils. This illustrates how the NPS and SCE objectives derive from different ideological traditions of education, but also engage with ideas of citizen rights in general and children’s rights in particular.

A discernable goal of the SCE objective is described as reducing bullying and harassment regarding sexuality and gender in schools, relating to e.g., sexism, trans- and homophobia, and other forms of structural discrimination. Bullying and harassment are strongly connected to the use of norm critical education on a policy level, dating back to its appropriation of Skolverket in 2009, as a response to the

new anti-discrimination law (Björkman et al., 2021; Hill, 2021). Hence, anti-discrimination has a discursive belonging to norm critical policymaking. Furthermore, the legacies of emancipatory, social justice and anti-oppressive education, pivotal to the idea of norm critical education (Björkman et al., 2021; Bromseth, 2019; Hill, 2021; Kalonaityté, 2014; Mikander et al., 2018), which is traced to the Swedish ‘queer turn’ of the millennium (Björkman et al., 2021), are visible in the approach to SCE. The norm critical touch in the SCE objective can be viewed as facilitated by the historical implementation of gender in Swedish policymaking as well as higher and teacher education, where Sweden is portrayed as exceptional in gender equality and democracy (Bayati, 2014; Bredström, 2008; Bredström & Gruber, 2015; Carlson & Kanci, 2017; Forbes et al., 2011; Habel, 2012; Hübinette & Mählick, 2015; Kreitz-Sandberg, 2013).

In contrast, the purpose of increasing student teachers’ knowledge about NPS is stated as to increase neurodivergent pupils’ knowledge outcomes and study results. Unlike the SCE objective, the NPS objective is not taking the social aspects and discriminatory and ideological structures of school failure into account when it comes to neurodivergence. Some responding bodies do stress the issue of bullying and harassment as a crucial factor for school’s failures towards neurodivergent pupils. This is in line with research stressing high risk of neurodivergent student being victims of bullying at school (Wiener & Mak, 2008), as well as increased risk of mental illness, such as PTSD and depression due to trauma—having negative impact on the academic performance of neurodivergent people (Miodus et al., 2021). In comparison with other Swedish disability rights movements and the Swedish queer movement, Swedish neurodivergent self-advocacy, outside of parent and professional dominated movements, has only recently started to emerge (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2015). It is therefore not surprising that responding bodies from the neurodivergent rights movements, consisting of parent and professional dominated advocacy organizations, are mainly building upon the deficit approach to neurodivergence as point of departure for rights advocacy. The public understanding of neurodivergence, as an object of educational or neurobiological discourses, has, unlike public understanding of genders and sexualities outside of heteronormativity, mainly been developed outside of the Swedish ‘norm critical turn’. Rather, it is represented as a problem for educators and of interprofessional collaboration (Molloy & Vasil, 2002).

The depiction in Swedish education policy of neurodivergent pupils as impaired, passive, and waiting to be discovered and supported by professionals, is concerning. The reproduction of passivizing imaginaries of neurodivergent people, we argue, hampers the recognition of neurodivergence and disability as a social category, subjected to discriminatory attitudes, structures and practices, as well as neurodivergent pupils as political subjects. In line with the efforts of the growing international Neurodiversity movement, embracing neurodivergence as social category, and neurodivergent people as agents, we call for a further examination of neurodivergence in education policy from such perspectives.

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