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Resisting the standards agenda? Swedish subject teachers and special educators' discourses on teaching students with different needs

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an analysis of Swedish subject teachers and special educators' discourses on the teaching of students with different needs in order to study their enactment of inclusive education in relation to competing demands. Drawing on notions of policy enactment, policies are here not only understood as regulatory texts, but also as carriers of discourses with certain ideas of what is common sense or true. In particular, the analysis aims to explore local school actors' opportunities for resistance towards dominant standards policies that has been argued to constrain inclusive ambitions in schools by promoting competition and standardised goals of performance. Three discourses were discerned in the analysis: a standards discourse, a subject-teaching discourse, and a discourse of well-being, which are discussed in relation to each other and to the idea of inclusive education. While the standards discourse was dominant in the interviews, the analysis also shows how the interviewed teachers and special educators moved between different discourses, which provided some opportunities to challenge standards thinking. However, such resistance was not necessarily connected to a movement towards inclusion.

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Introduction

The idea of inclusive education is often associated with efforts to change school cultures and teaching practices to increase access, participation and achievement for all, as well as to uphold an acceptance for diversity (Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn & Christensen, 2006). Since inclusive education has been formulated as a contrasting alternative to exclusionary practices, researchers have found it important to make visible the underlying assumptions about education and difference that produce students and teachers as subjects with certain characteristics and capabilities, and that create conditions for exclusion to arise (Slee, 2008, 41–42). In this regard, researchers have illustrated how discourses on disability and special needs are constructed and reproduced in schools, which can contribute to a view that certain students are best taught in special educational settings (e.g. Gunnthórsdóttir &

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Jóhannesson, 2014, Reeves, Ng, Harris & Phelan, 2022). Researchers have also suggested an intersectional lens accounting for multiple forms of social difference (e.g. disability, ethnicity, class and gender) in order to study how historically produced injustices interact in the exclusion of student groups from social and material spaces (e.g. Edvina, 2020, Waitoller, Beasley, West & Randle, 2022, Waitoller & Lubienski, 2019).

However, this article focuses on a specific aspect of discourse by studying how dominant discourses in education policy influence local school actors' enactment of inclusive education. While a focus on policy discourses cannot shed light on all the different preconceptions and assumptions that create and maintain exclusionary practices, it can more closely illuminate the different policy demands that constrain practitioners' work by presenting certain ideas as common sense or true (Bacchi, 1999, 199). Therefore, the article draws on notions of policy enactment (e.g. Ball, 1993; Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012) in order to explore teachers and special educators' space for action while enacting inclusion in relation to conflicting policy demands.

In this regard, researchers have particularly highlighted how inclusive practices are constrained by policies promoting competition and attainment of standardised performance goals (e.g. Danforth, 2016, Slee, 2019), and by making teachers responsible for increasing students' results (e.g. Graham, 2016, Done & Murphy, 2018). Moreover, inclusive education can become reinterpreted and intertwined with the conception of standards, which transforms the idea of inclusion into a focus on curriculum access, performance and accountability (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). While empirical studies in various national contexts have illustrated how inclusive education becomes subordinated to the standards agenda in teaching practice (e.g. Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006, Molbaek, 2018, Paulsrud, 2023), they have also shown examples of teachers performing acts of resistance towards standards policies, for example by emphasising participation in order to challenge ableism and accountability (Alderton and Gifford 2018). In order to gain a better understanding of the conditions for inclusive education in relation to the influence of the dominant standards discourse, this space for resistance is an important subject for further study.

Resistance towards dominant discourses is understood here as requiring subjects to have access to alternative discourses in order to express other understandings and opinions (Hall, 1997; Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012). In this article, such processes are explored in the analysis of an interview study with Swedish teachers and special educators. In Sweden, the movement towards a standards-based curriculum during the last decades has been described as shaped by a technical-instrumental discourse emphasising measurable outcomes in accordance with a certain selection of knowledge and skills (Nordin & Sundberg, 2021), which has been argued to rationalise special support as an appropriate solution for students who fail to achieve passing grades (Isaksson & Lindqvist, 2015). The focus of the article is to explore whether and how the interviewed teachers and special educators exercise resistance towards such conceptions by moving between different discourses on their task to teach students with different needs. The aim of the article is therefore to contribute with knowledge to research on inclusive education by studying certain aspects of local school actors' opportunities to enact inclusion in practice. Moreover, the article aims to contribute to policy enactment research by exploring these

actors' space for resistance towards dominant policy discourses. These aims are addressed in the following three research questions:

(1) What discourses on *teaching students with different needs* can be identified in interviews with Swedish subject teachers and special educators?
(2) How do these discourses relate to the ideas of standards and inclusive education respectively?
(3) How can the participants' uses of different discourses be understood as representing resistance towards the standards agenda?

Discourse and resistance

In this article, discourses are defined as groups of statements or assumptions that represent knowledge about a particular topic in a particular historical, cultural or institutional context (Hall, 1997, 44). Thus, a discourse on the teaching of students with different needs represents knowledge about different aspects of this topic, such as the purpose of teaching, the cause of school difficulties, what becomes the main problem in the classroom, and how this problem is best solved.

In educational systems, dominant discourses are conveyed by policies based on such assumptions about education. In other words, policies not only offer solutions to problems, but represent problems in specific ways, making certain solutions and practices appear rational and unproblematic (Bacchi, 1999, 199). A theoretical point of departure in this article is therefore that the standards agenda is promoted by policies that are understood not only as texts that can be interpreted, prioritised and translated to teaching practice, but also as carriers of discourses that constrain practitioners' available responses and possibilities for thinking in other ways (Ball, 1993). Following Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012, 2–6), policies are here understood as being enacted rather than implemented, which implies a complex process of re-contextualisation where policies both transform and are transformed while entering the context of practice. Thus, enactment involves different aspects that require different types of analyses (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012, 15). While important aspects of policy resistance can be analysed through a focus on practitioners' active negotiations and prioritisations of policy texts, resistance towards discourses conveyed by policies needs to be analysed by studying how practitioners draw on alternative discourses in order to challenge established meanings and conceptions of knowledge (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012, 62–63, 138–139). Such competing discourses can be understood as emerging from professional cultures or other spheres of social life, but they can also be competing policy discourses or historical discourses, reflecting past priorities and political agendas.

The opportunities for resistance towards dominant discourses can be further elaborated through the concept of subject positions. As discourses 'make available certain ways-of-seeing the world and certain ways-of-being in the world' (Willig, 2008, 113), they offer certain positions that the subject can occupy in different situations or in relation to different objects (Foucault, 1972, 55–61). Thus, subject positions are locations from which to speak and express opinions and statements

that align with the discourse, and which entail certain rights and obligations (Willig, p.116). By adopting a subject position in an alternative discourse, we get access to a place from which to challenge dominant understandings. However, Ball and Olmedo (2013) argue that such reconstructions of ourselves as subjects are not a matter of picking and choosing, but that resistance towards dominant discourses require deconstructions of our own understandings and practices and the ways in which we regulate ourselves.

Materials and methods

The empirical material in this study consists of individual interviews with eight subject teachers and six special educators at five lower secondary schools in two Swedish municipalities. In order to get access to a variety of perspectives, the sample consisted of participants from varying types of contexts (school size and location), teaching different school-subjects and with different experience. Through the use of open-ended questions, the interviews aimed to explore how the respondents constructed meaning in relation to their own and others' teaching of students with different needs. The interview themes covered the respondents' descriptions of their local schools and their regulations, lines of communication and the division of responsibilities among staff, as well as the respondents' experiences of teaching students with different needs, and their thoughts on opportunities and barriers in this work.

The data collection was carried out between October 2021 and March 2022. In accordance with the regulations of the Swedish Ethical Review Act (SFS 2003:460), ethical approval was not considered to be needed for the study. No sensitive personal data were collected (European Commission, 2016), and the research design was not considered to entail any apparent risks to affect or harm research participants. Prior to the interviews, all respondents gave their written consent to participate in the study. In accordance with the ethics principles of the Swedish Research Council (Swedish Research Council, 2002; 2017), they were also provided with information about the study and their rights to cancel their participation at any time. Interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants, and each lasted for about 45–60 minutes. The interview recordings were transcribed shortly after each interview. In this process, all information was removed that could be used to identify individuals, schools and/or locations. The audio recordings were then stored on an encrypted USB drive in a locked space inaccessible to unauthorised persons.

In order to study how the interviewed teachers and special educators drew upon different discourses, the analysis focused on how they represented knowledge in relation to different aspects of the teaching of students with different needs (Hall, 1997). The method for analysis drew upon Bacchi's (1999, 65–66, 199) method for discourse analysis, where discourses are identified by establishing links between certain representations of knowledge, representations of problems and the solutions to these problems. The analytical procedure was also inspired by Willig (2008, 112–131), who present different steps for discourse analysis, where representations of knowledge are first identified and categorised into broader discourses, which is followed by an analysis of the subject positions offered by these discourses. The present analysis consisted of four steps:

(1) *Representations of teaching and school difficulties*. The first step of the analysis consisted of a categorisation of text extracts from the interviews, based on the different ways in which the respondents talked about teaching and the causes of school difficulties, and thereby represented these objects as something. For example, descriptions of practice that included references to standardised goals of performance could be interpreted as representations of teaching as an activity focused on supporting the attainment of such goals. However, the categorisation was not limited to a search for keywords (Willig, 2008, 115), but also included more implicit ways of representing knowledge. For example, a statement referencing to categories of students with certain characteristics ties certain positive or negative traits to individuals, which can be interpreted as a representation of students' deficits as the cause to their school difficulties although it is not stated explicitly.
(2) *Representations of problems and solutions*. Focus was then directed on different ways of representing classroom problems and appropriate solutions to these problems (Bacchi, 1999). This procedure of interpretation and categorisation resembled the process in the previous step of the analysis. Moreover, the already identified representations of teaching and school difficulties facilitated the process of identifying and distinguishing between these new categories. For example, a representation of students' failures as the main problem in the classroom can be constructed in different ways depending on whether teaching is represented as a transfer of teachers' knowledge or as a matter of supporting students' attainment of standardised goals.
(3) *Discourses*. In the next step of the analysis, the different representations of teaching, school difficulties, classroom problems and solutions were categorised into larger discourses that provide certain ways of thinking and talking about the teaching of students with different needs. This included an analysis of how the different representations were linked to each other in the interviews by the respondents, but also a search for an inner logic, where particular representations of problems and solutions are the logic consequences of certain ways of representing teaching and school difficulties. Thereafter followed an analysis of how the identified discourses relate to the two ideas of standards and inclusive education.
(4) *Subject positions and resistance*. In the final step of the analysis, the focus was turned towards subject positions offered by the different discourses, from which the respondents can speak and express understandings in line with the discourse. For example, a standards discourse might offer a position for teachers as a deliverer of the curriculum, which entails power to interpret and speak about standardised goals, but which leaves little space to discuss own ideas about teaching or students' needs. In the analysis, subject positions were identified through a search for statements that challenged elements of the standards discourse. Thus, a discussion of the respondents' space for resistance towards the standards agenda was enabled by analysing how and in relation to what these subject positions were adopted by the respondents.

Throughout the different steps of the analysis, the process of interpreting and categorising text extracts involved critical reviews of my interpretations. In this effort, I have actively pursued alternative interpretations in order to avoid that the analysis became

Table 1. Discourses.

	A standards discourse	A subject-teaching discourse	A discourse of well-being
Representations of teaching	Supporting the attainment of knowledge goals	Transferring knowledge. Creating a meaningful learning environment	Supporting personal and social development
Representations of school difficulties as caused by:	Students' deficits. Insufficient teaching	Students' deficits Restricted or uninspiring teaching.	Too high demands. Inflexible teaching
Representations of classroom problems	Students failing to attain knowledge goals	Students losing interest. Disruptive student behaviour	Students becoming distressed
Solutions	Adaptations of teaching materials or methods in order to increase curriculum access and support goal attainment. Traditional special education	Adaptations of teaching content in order to increase students' interest and motivation. Traditional special education	Building personal relationships with students. Adaptations of teaching materials, methods and examination formats in order to reduce negative emotions. Traditional special education

overly influenced by my initial readings. In order to strengthen the credibility of the analysis, each interpretation of a text extract has also been examined in relation to the context of the interview as a whole and to the emerging pattern of interpretations (Larsson, 2005).

Findings

Three discourses on the teaching of students with different needs were discerned in the analysis (see Table 1 below). In this section, these discourses are presented by describing their inner logic, how they were drawn upon in the interviews by the respondents, and how they relate to the ideas of inclusive education and standards. Thereafter, the respondents' uses of different discourses are related to their space for resistance by presenting and discussing examples of respondents adopting subject positions within different discourses, from which the standards agenda could be questioned. Thus, the presentation of findings serves to answer the three research questions of the article: 1) What discourses on *teaching students with different needs* can be identified in interviews with Swedish subject teachers and special educators?, 2) How do these discourses relate to the ideas of standards and inclusive education respectively?, and 3) How can the participants' uses of different discourses be understood as representing resistance towards the standards agenda?

In the subsequent discussion section, the findings are related to previous research in order to discuss the contribution of the article to the two fields of inclusive education and policy enactment research.

A standards discourse

When talking about the teaching of students with different needs, the interviewed subject teachers and special educators often tended to draw upon what can be called a standards discourse. In this discourse, focus was directed towards students' performance in relation to a certain selection of standardised knowledge and skills, and

teaching became represented as a matter of *supporting the attainment of knowledge goals*. For example, the respondents could refer to standardised goals of performance while talking about appropriate teaching content for students, or describe how they adapt their teaching methods or the level of difficulty for certain students in order for them to achieve short-term goals such as passing a test. The quote below illustrates how the standardised curriculum can permeate local school actors' views on teaching by presenting a special educators' answer when asked about the limits for adapting instruction:

> We have a basic course designed for all students with a greater subject area that we want the students to master, so we check the knowledge goals for that area. But if students work extremely slowly, for example, maybe they can just focus on the tasks at the easiest level in the math book. We are not supposed to reduce the number of segments, but the size of each segment must be adjustable (Special educator)

As a logical consequence of the focus on attainment, the main problem in the classroom within the standards discourse is *students failing to attain knowledge goals*. However, the preferred solutions to this problem depends on the understanding of what causes these difficulties. By problematising the 'how' rather than the 'what' of teaching, the language of standards produces both teachers and students as subjects that fail and succeed. When *students' deficits* are represented as the main cause of their school difficulties, *traditional special education* becomes the 'natural' solution. In the interviews, such understandings were identified in different statements about the need for special support in order for student to attain standardised goals. By referring to goal achievement, the interviewed teachers could thus rationalise referrals to special educational staff:

> Some of my students are at a very low level, maybe at the level of the fourth or fifth grade. Then it´s hard to know what to do. We are in the eighth grade working towards ninth grade goals. Well, those students will go to the small teaching group because I don´t know what to do. I don't have that competence. (Mathematics and science teacher)

When school difficulties were instead represented as the result of *insufficient teaching*, descriptions of solutions concerned how teaching can be improved through different adaptations aiming to increase curriculum access and support goal attainment. In the interviews, subject teachers described different classroom activities, in which they adapted *teaching methods and materials* for different students, but without differentiating teaching content or learning goals. The interviewed special educators mainly emphasised proactive designs of classroom teaching in order to increase accessibility for all students. For example, when asked about the school-wide approach to teaching students with different needs, a special educator primarily described different types of adaptations for the whole group that did not interfere with the standardised teaching content:

> We work a lot with this mind-set of making group adaptations first, which becomes the foundation of the teaching, because the more we work with the foundation, the more students we reach. We try to be one-step ahead - maybe to have a certain structure on the board, small micro breaks. If this does not work, we have to make extra adaptations on an individual level. (Special educator)

Thus, efforts to make teaching more accessible to all students could be integrated in the standards discourse, in which inclusive education becomes a matter of placement and adaptations of teaching with the aim of supporting student attainment of standardised performance goals (cf. Hardy & Woodcock, 2015, Danforth, 2016). Therefore, this version of inclusion is not a goal in itself, but a means to other ends that may also be achieved through traditional special education.

A subject-teaching discourse

When engaging in deeper reflections about the purpose of teaching, some of the interviewed subject teachers also drew upon a subject-teaching discourse that was less connected to standards policies, and more connected to themselves and their identities as teachers. The teachers described how they tried to arrange lessons in specific ways in order to make students interested and motivated, for example by connecting to their interests and experiences or by allowing them to engage in creative and exploratory work. In other words, the teachers represented teaching as a matter of *creating a meaningful learning environment*. This approach was described as a pedagogical ideal that could be a goal in itself, but also a means to teach students about subject matter, subject-specific concepts, principles or ways of thinking. Hence, the teachers also represented teaching as an activity with the main purpose of *transferring knowledge*. In many cases, this focus on subject-specific knowledge was legitimised by mentioning general or subject-specific skills that students will need in the future, but also through conceptualisations of knowledge more in line with concepts such as 'Bildung' or classical educational ideals by referring to the value of knowledge in itself:

> Is it wrong not to teach a certain student the history of literature to the extent that it should be done? Probably not. But the risk is that you think that 'this is not relevant, so we don't need to do it' or that 'this student will not study more advanced German language anyway so it's better to focus on math in the German language lessons'. It becomes a routine adaptation - and then you take away the opportunity, the right, for students to broaden their views. (Swedish and German language teacher)

Within a discourse where teaching is not primarily understood as being connected to predefined targets of performance but as an activity of more undefined forms of knowledge transfer or arrangements of learning, failure of goal attainment is not represented as the main problem. While reflecting upon teaching within a subject-teaching discourse, the interviewed teachers instead tended to represent classroom problems as a matter of *students losing interest*. In the interviews, there were several examples of teachers describing how they dealt with this problem by adapting teaching, and especially *teaching content*, to students' interests and needs. In this way, the teachers described how they could gain control over the classroom, but also create opportunities for students to express themselves in different ways and enrich their learning beyond what is formulated in the knowledge requirements. When asked about what adaptations can look like in the classroom, a teacher described how the unrestricted character of the art subject entailed many such opportunities:

> You can find an artistry that connects to the student's areas of interest. And then you try to find something there. Then you might work with photo paintings or make a sculpture. It´s fun

> because it´s so open. Often the students who have difficulty concentrating find super focus in art, so they can sit there and work for a long time. (Art and English language teacher)

Thus, the problem of students losing interest was associated with teaching being too *restricted* or *uninspiring* rather than being insufficient for supporting student achievement. However, the problem was also connected to *students' deficits*. In these cases, the problem was described as manifested through *disruptive student behaviour*. For example, teachers referred to different categories of students that could be difficult to handle in class in different ways. These categories included students with neurodevelopmental disorders or groups of unmotivated, fragile or low-performing students acting in different norm-breaking ways, thus causing problems in the classroom:

> Students who chill and are a bit lazy, they are not the problem. And not those with language difficulties. It´s this thing when I give instructions to one student and someone else starts messing around. Sometimes you have groups like that, and it can ruin an entire lesson. (Crafts teacher)

As in the case of the standards discourse, the understanding of school difficulties as being tied to students' deficits calls for *traditional special education* as a solution. Both subject teachers and special educators described how the smaller settings could provide a peaceful learning environment in which students with difficulties could concentrate in class:

> I would prefer there to be a group for these students with low motivation. They may need a different way of learning. Maybe more movement – to be able to work for shorter periods and then take a break. (Mathematics and physical education teacher)

In summary, the identified subject-teaching discourse on teaching students with different needs differed from the standards discourse in crucial aspects by not placing the standardised knowledge goals in the centre of teaching. However, its relation to the idea of inclusive education can be described as complex. On the one hand, the focus on inspirational and meaningful learning encouraged adaptations of teaching to students' interests and needs in order to increase their interest and motivation, which can be argued to harmonise with inclusive ideals and an acceptance of difference (Artiles et al, 2006). On the other, the representations of classroom problems could also be associated with individual students' failures and disruptive behaviours, which could serve as an argument for special educational solutions.

A discourse of well-being

The interviewed subject teachers and special educators also emphasised broader purposes of education than subject-specific learning, which included the development of certain characteristics and skills, such as responsibility, self-esteem, independence and social skills. Teaching was therefore also represented as *supporting personal and social development*. In the interviews, this way of representing teaching was connected to a discourse of *well-being*, where focus was turned towards social relations, emotions and notions of health and belonging. Special educators in particular drew on this discourse in order to emphasise students' rights in relation to different aspects of education. In this discourse, the main problem in the

classroom was not described as a matter of low attainment, low motivation or disruptive behaviour, but of *students becoming distressed*. This problem was primarily emphasised in relation to the focus on performance and tests that puts pressure on students:

> I wonder if this focus on the individual is good. It can probably create performance anxiety in many students. I believe in focusing a little more on the collective. That we do this together. That I am important in this group. Then I think that more students would feel confident, and maybe we would avoid a lot of anxiety. (Special educator)

By emphasising other dimensions of teaching, the focus on knowledge development could thus be problematised, and school difficulties were represented as being the result of *too high demands*, rather than individual students' deficits. In the interviews, such representations consisted of direct references to curricular demands, but also of more vague descriptions of norms that framed what students and teachers should be, what they should do, and what they should master:

> I used to think, before I had insight into the whole apparatus, that - it is very easy to blame the individual. And of course you can get annoyed with students, but it is not necessarily the student who is at fault. There are narrow frames limiting how to be as a student. And we have a system where the teacher in turn is overwhelmed by the number of students and the number of demands. (English and German language teacher)

As the problem was understood as being connected to external demands in this discourse, the most obvious solution was to get rid of those demands. In the interviews, there were several examples of special educators emphasising students' rights to certain adapted *teaching materials, methods or examination formats*. In this way, school difficulties were associated to *inflexible teaching* that does not take students' needs and well-being into account. Other solutions to the problem included *building personal relationships* with students in order to reduce their feelings of stress and anxiety, but also *traditional special education*. This type of solution was instead understood to offer an alternative better suited to support students' well-being. This is illustrated in the quote below, where a special educator answers the question of whether there can be different opinions among staff regarding how support to students should be organised.

> One can sometimes feel that a student just can´t handle whole-class teaching. The student suffers - everyone suffer - so the student excludes himself. Now this is starting to change a bit. People are starting to talk about the fact that students sometimes feel better in smaller groups. (Special educator)

In summary, this discourse differs from the other two identified discourses since it does not emphasise students' learning of certain subject-related skills or knowledge. Thus, such demands can more easily be questioned in relation to their consequences for individual students' well-being. By not focusing on the individual student as the cause to school difficulties, but instead focusing on environmental factors, the discourse align with important aspects of inclusive education. However, the solutions to the problem of excessive demands did not always cohere with practices in line with the idea of inclusion.

Subject positions and resistance

Although the standards discourse was dominant in the interviewed subject teachers and special educators' descriptions, statements and anecdotes about teaching students with different needs, all respondents moved between different discourses in relation to different topics of conversation. By subjecting themselves to the meanings of alternative discourses, they adopted certain subject positions offered by these discourses, from which they could question the meanings of the standards discourse (Foucault, 1972, Hall, 1997, Ball & Olmedo, 2013). In the interviews, two such positions of resistance could be distinguished: The first position; *the defender of the academic/school subject* was found within the subject-teaching discourse. This position was mainly used by teachers in order to exercise resistance towards standards policies when they were understood as a threat to the academic subject or the pedagogical ideals of the teacher. In the quote below, one of the interviewed teachers adopts this position in order to question local regulations standardising teaching with the aim of increasing curriculum access:

> I think more and more often that it is fun for students to have teachers who are different. They go to different classes and get to know their teachers. There will be variety, which is good. There is a risk that it becomes too static - you should do this every lesson. As a teacher, you can then lose a bit of your thing, your energy, your way of teaching. (Art and Swedish language teacher)

However, the interviewed teachers mainly used this position to engage in moderate criticism, and did not tend to describe concrete acts of resistance towards standards policies based on these arguments. Similar findings of 'murmurings and discontents' towards standards discourses, rather than systematic forms of resistance, have for example been described by Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012, 143–144; 149–150). The other identified position of resistance: *the defender of the student* was found in the discourse of well-being. This position entails a focus on students' rights, and was used by special educators in order to challenge standards policies and teachers' interpretations of such policies when they were understood as threatening students' well-being. This is illustrated in quote below, in which a special educator questions the format of standardised tests by emphasising students' rights to adapted examinations:

> We have had discussions about the right to oral exams. If you are to insist on using written exams, you also have to admit that not everyone may be able to perform at their maximum when it comes to demonstrating their knowledge. Here, me and some of my teacher colleagues have gotten into a bit of a clinch a couple of times. (Special educator)

Besides from the quote above, there were several examples of special educators describing how they engaged in acts of resistance, which often involved discussions with teachers. However, this position also seemed to have some influence on local school policy, which was highlighted by a special educator when asked about opportunities and barriers in the teaching of students with different needs:

> There are so many tests. We have a policy that there should be a maximum of two tests a week. And to get around it, they call them quizzes instead. So then a class can suddenly have two tests and two homework quizzes in one week. [. . .] You may be so stressed that you may not take the time to stop and think about making teaching enjoyable - that students should think it's fun to learn, and not feel stressed. (Special educator)

Thus, the position as the defender of the student seemed to entail greater opportunities for resistance towards standards policies than position as the defender of the academic/school subject. At least to some extent, this can be explained by the strength of the discourses from which resistance is expressed. Whereas the subject-teaching discourse might be strong in certain aspects of teaching, the opportunities to challenge standards policies with arguments based on notions of professional identity and identification with subject-specific ways of thinking seemed to be small. Since the arguments expressed from the position as the defender of the student were instead focused on students' rights, they also derive their strength from legal texts on students' rights and anti-discrimination, which can explain why they seemed to be more successfully used in acts of resistance.

Discussion

This article aimed to contribute with knowledge on local school actors' opportunities to enact inclusive education in relation to competing demands by studying how they use different discourses in the teaching of student with different needs. Whereas the analysis of underlying representations of knowledge, problems and appropriate solutions in this article took its point of departure in the discursive aspect of enactment, other studies have emphasised other aspects, for example by highlighting local school actors' experiences of dilemmas when enacting inclusion in their local school contexts (Molbaek, 2018, Paulsrud, 2023). In comparison with such approaches, the analysis presented here entailed less room to emphasise the voices of participants. Nevertheless, a central ambition in the analysis was to highlight the agency of local school actors by exploring their space for resistance towards the standards discourse, which has been argued to conflict with inclusive ideals (e.g. Danforth, 2016, Slee, 2019).

In line with previous research (e.g. Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006, Alderton and Gifford 2018), the analysis shows that the conception of standards was highly visible in the respondents' ways of talking about the teaching of students with different needs, and seemed to shape teaching into a narrow focus on goal attainment. Nevertheless, respondents also expressed concerns and alternative understandings by adopting subject positions offered by the alternative discourses. However, these positions seemed to entail different opportunities for resistance towards the standards discourse. Whereas resistance from the position as the defender of the school/academic subject mainly consisted of expressions of discontent, the position as the defender of the student seemed to be more successful in concrete acts of resistance towards the standards agenda, based on notions of students' rights. Hence, the analysis illustrates how the opportunities for resistance relate to the strength of alternative discourses, where a language of law and rights provides a better tool for resistance than broader pedagogical ideals. However, the identified forms of resistance were focused on particular aspects of standards but were not aimed towards the idea of standards in itself. Thus, the analysis did not show any extensive deconstructions of its underlying ideas, such as the importance of standardised performance goals.

In this regard, it can be argued that the relations between the standards discourse and the two alternative discourses are not only filled with conflict – for example, the constructions of school difficulties within the standards discourse can coincide with any of the other two discourses by focusing on either the student or the teacher as being the

problem. The standards and subject teaching discourses both expect students to adapt to the classroom situation and to learn and master certain forms of knowledge. Thus, students' deficits are easily interpreted as being the cause of school difficulties. In a similar vein, the discourses of standards and well-being both focus on the rights of individual students by focusing on the right to learn or the right to well-being. School difficulties are therefore more easily related to the work of teachers.

While this article takes its point of departure in the conflict between standards and inclusive education, the standards discourse is not the only conception of schooling that promote exclusionary practices. Although such discourses were not focused in the article, this became evident in the analysis of the identified discourses. In contrast with Alderton and Gifford's (2018) findings, the alternative discourses found in the analysis did not include a discourse of inclusion. Thus, the analysis illustrates how resistance towards the standards discourse does not necessarily imply a movement towards inclusive education, but that traditional special education can be rationalised as the appropriate solution to several different ways of constructing school difficulties and classroom problems. A movement towards inclusive education would require a greater recognition of the value of diversity and the importance of participation (Artiles et al, 2006), which calls for more extensive problematisations of standards thinking (c.f. Slee, 2019), but also other discourses that construct and reconstruct exclusion. Future research could explore further how such problematisations can take shape in schools, but also how resistance in mind can translate into resistance in action, and how alternative discourses can be used in the practice of teaching.

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